

The background of the cover is a painting of a woman in a purple dress standing in the rain, looking back over her shoulder at a large, ornate building with a clock tower. The rain is depicted as white streaks falling diagonally across the scene. The woman's dress is a light purple color, and the building is a detailed, multi-story structure with a prominent clock tower and a spire. The overall mood is romantic and mysterious.

KAYLIN LEE

TORN

PREQUEL TO FATED

TORN

Novelette Prequel to Cinderella

Prequel to Book 1 of the Destined Series

KAYLIN LEE

TORN: NOVELETTE PREQUEL TO CINDERELLA

Copyright © 2017 by Kaylin Lee

First Edition

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

For information contact:

Kaylin Lee

<http://www.kaylinleewrites.com>

Editing by Kathrese McKee of Word Marker Edits

Cover design by Victoria Cooper Designs

Contents

[Weslan](#)

[Ella](#)

[Weslan](#)

[Ella](#)

[Weslan](#)

[Ella](#)

[Weslan](#)

[Ella](#)

[Weslan](#)

[Ella](#)

[Weslan](#)

[Ella](#)

[Fated: Cinderella's Story.](#)

DESCRIPTION

Cook, clean, study, repeat. Cinderella is exhausted.

After years of misery thanks to the plague, her city is recovering at last. But recovery has a price, and it may be more than Cinderella's willing to pay. She thought winning a scholarship to the best school in the city would lift her family out of poverty. She never expected it to ruin her life. Now she has to make an impossible choice – support her family or protect herself?

Commoners are replaceable. Mages aren't. That's just the way of things.

Weslan's not the best mage student in the city, so when his old friend convinces him to skip school, he's happy to oblige. Too bad his friend has something far more sinister in mind. A mysterious threat is brewing in their city and it seems that some mages now think nothing of endangering commoners. As one of the city's elite mages, Weslan shouldn't care. So why can't he stop thinking about that beautiful common girl with light-green eyes?

—

This **12,000-word novelette** is the prequel to *Fated: Cinderella's Story*. Read it before or after *Fated*, the first book in the *Destined* series, to catch a glimpse of the intersecting lives of Cinderella and Weslan two years before Cinderella's story begins.

Weslan

“Weslan, get your feet off the couch! Calla could be here with our breakfast at any moment. She’ll see you.”

I groaned, keeping my eyes shut. Why was our chandelier so bright this morning? I shifted on the couch. Perhaps I should get up and turn the dial down. *Never mind. Too much work.* “What does it matter if she sees me?”

A moment passed before my mother knocked my feet off the couch with a sharp whack. “It matters to me. We are guests in this home. We must show that we appreciate the privilege by treating their belongings with respect.”

I dragged myself upright and sighed, squinting against the overly bright luminous chandelier. “We’ve lived here for almost ten years, Ma. At what point do we stop being guests?”

“Never. And don’t you forget that.” She eyed my stockinged feet. “Shoes on. You must be decent when the maid comes.”

“Fine, fine.” I slid my shoes on. “It won’t make a bit of difference. You know it won’t.”

But she only tightened her lips and sat at the small breakfast table by the window. “Pour us some coffee, Weslan. And come look at this.”

I should have known better than to bring it up. She never spoke openly about our maid’s rudeness or about anything else, for that matter, besides working for her patron.

I poured two mugs of coffee from the pot on the sideboard and set them on the table, avoiding my mother’s narrowed eyes as one of them sloshed onto the white tablecloth. Even spilling the coffee was an affront to our

patron. There was nothing quite like living in a grand Procus villa on sufferance.

But she didn't say anything, only shook her head. "See this? A little something new Lord Falconus has me working on." She held out two sparkling gold crystals, each one the size of her fist. Then she pressed them together and they emitted a soft, musical noise.

I sat across from her and leaned closer. "Is that a violin?"

She beamed and lifted them higher. "More than one. It's a quartet! Playing the 'Dance of the Wasps,' Lord Falconus's favorite waltz."

I raised my eyebrows. My mother was a powerful mage, that was for sure. But I'd never seen a creator mage do anything quite like that. "That's pretty amazing, Ma."

"Oh, this is only the beginning," she said, smiling wider and running her fingers over the crystals. "I've got so many ideas. I've wanted to do this for ages, but Lord Falconus was only recently able to procure the crystals." Her smile faded, and she bit her lip. "Imported, you know."

I nearly laughed aloud at the guilty expression on her face. "I thought the old man said imports were akin to treason."

She sniffed. "Well, he was willing to make an exception for this particular work of art."

I held back a snort. No doubt Lord Falconus would make all kinds of exceptions for his own luxuries. The expensive foreign furnishings in *his* villas hadn't been burned in the plague bonfires eleven years ago.

My mother pulled the crystals apart, and the music ceased. "I have much more work to do, of course. I want to make it louder, with a richer sound. But I know what I need to do. It's going to be beautiful."

I couldn't help but smile at her obvious pride. My mother was a stickler for rules and proper comportment, but no one could deny that she loved her work. Lord Falconus was lucky to be her patron, and I didn't doubt he knew it. We lived in the grandest suite in the whole mage-designated villa on the Falconus compound, and my mother never lacked for fine things.

Today, she wore a long, sparkling black dress with gold beading at the edges and a shimmering gold headband that sat on her forehead, pushing down her blonde hair. The appearance mage in me couldn't help noticing that the gold details on her dress and headband matched her gold service armband perfectly.

I averted my eyes from the armband and took a gulp of coffee, but the taste only soured my stomach even more. If only I could embrace the symbol of our status as readily as she did.

The door to our suite swung open and the maid assigned to us strode into the room without knocking, a breakfast tray tilting sloppily to one side in her hands. From the scowl twisting her face, Calla hadn't yet found a new placement. She'd tried to get out of serving us for weeks now, with no success. Poor, poor Calla.

Most commoners didn't know what to do with us mages. They were jealous. Who wouldn't be? We lived like Procus lords even though we weren't technically members of the Procus families, while commoners scraped by with nothing but crumbs by comparison.

Some commoners, like Calla, passed from jealousy to outright abhorrence. They hated us because we were descended from ancient Kireth invaders, yet we lived lives of luxury and comfort as we served the city's government and Procus families.

We should have been pariahs because of our heritage, but the city needed our magic for everything—healing, fuel, construction, food, clean water, and even my mother's specialty, art. Commoners were replaceable. Mages were not. That was the way of things.

Too bad Calla was too jealous and angry to accept it. I couldn't prevent her from hating us, but that didn't stop me from wanting to reach out with my fine, linen napkin to wipe that ugly scowl right off her face.

Calla stopped beside the breakfast table and gave my mother a mockingly abrupt curtsy. "Adra, would you like breakfast?"

My mother's cheeks turned pink at the rude address. "Yes, thank you," she whispered.

My stomach twisted at the sight of my mother's embarrassment. Ma wouldn't even rebuke the maid for using her first name, a clear and deliberate insult. Because it wasn't our house, was it?

Calla thumped the breakfast tray down and left, not even bothering to dish out the food the way she was supposed to.

It took a concentrated effort to hold my tongue, but I managed it. Instead, I reached for the covered dishes and smiled at my mother as I knocked my coffee over in the process. "Whoops."

I served my mother a heaping spoonful of shirred eggs, two strips of smoked bacon, and a roseberry biscuit. Then I helped myself to twice the amount of each. If some spilled on the tablecloth, that wasn't my problem.

Next, I drizzled both of our biscuits with a large spoonful of honey, the latest guilt-inducing import to grace our breakfast table, and let a healthy portion dribble onto the table between our plates.

And finally, I went back for another helping of eggs and dumped it on the white tablecloth next to the coffee stain and honey. "Oh, dear me. Not again."

My mother closed her eyes and shook her head. "Please. Not this morning. I can't, Weslan. Not right now."

I hunched over my eggs, shoveling them down and ignoring the guilt that spiked in my chest.

"Have you read the *Herald*?"

"Not yet," I grumbled. I'd snuck out last night with Argus and some pretty, blonde mages from the Argentarius compound. I'd enjoyed their secret stash of Dracian sweet wines a bit too much, and then I'd overslept. I'd had to spend the time before breakfast preparing for today's exam.

We were supposed to analyze the types of luxury fabrics used in the Golden Age of Dracian fashion, back before their whole city collapsed. I'd played with those fabrics and many more since I was a child. Growing up on a Procus estate had its benefits. But for the exam, I needed to know all the proper terms and magical properties, and that meant memorization. Not my finest ability.

My mother stood and went to the sideboard, grabbed the morning's *Herald*, and laid it out on the table in front of her. She sipped her coffee and perused the front page while I reviewed my nearly illegible notes on Dracian fabrics.

"Strike me!" She gasped and dropped the paper, knocking over her mug and sending coffee all over the table.

I snorted. "I thought we weren't supposed to say that. Or do that."

"Weslan." She waved her hand at me. "Did you hear? I can't believe..."

"What? What are you talking about? I haven't heard anything."

She shoved the paper across the table to me, and I read what was visible around the coffee stain.

“Strike me,” I echoed as I read about the attack at Theros Street Market. She didn’t even rebuke my language. “This is horrible, Ma.”

She pressed her hands to her chest as tears welled in her eyes. “Twenty dead? Nothing so awful has happened since the plague ended. Who would do such a thing?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know.”

The morning bell rang, jolting my mom out of her tears. She dashed at her eyes and cleared her throat. “I have to be at the studio in a moment, and you need to get to the academy.”

She stood and appraised the breakfast table which was covered with eggs, coffee, and biscuit crumbs. “Just leave it.” The corner of her mouth tilted up as she spoke, and I grinned.

So she wasn’t completely immune to taking petty digs at Calla after all. At least I wasn’t alone. I grabbed my book bag and threw on my blazer, shooting a touch of my pent-up magic into it to straighten out the wrinkles, then headed out the door.

The mage quarters on the Falconus family compound were huge, an entire stone villa with ten luxurious suites, one for each mage family who won the coveted Falconus family patronage.

I sped through the hallway outside our suite, then swung around the column by the grand central staircase, skipping the first few steps with a leap. I was halfway down the staircase when Calla started up the bottom.

I groaned. I’d hoped not to see her again until tomorrow.

Her gaze dipped to my arm, and her expression went from shocked to downright gleeful.

My stomach sank as I noticed the plain, un-banded navy fabric of my blazer. Oh, no.

She opened her mouth, but before she could speak, I sprinted back up the stairs, throwing open the door to our suite just as my mom collided into me, my gold service armband clutched in her white-knuckled grip.

“Put it on. Right now. Now! Did anyone see you?” She wrapped it around my arm, fingers fumbling, and had just managed to fasten it when Calla came in the open door behind me.

Calla smirked. I forced myself to look away from her, as though I didn’t care that she’d seen.

“It’s fine, Ma. I have it now.”

“Don't forget it again.” My mother's voice was tight and wobbly. “You hear me?” She grabbed my arm and shook it. “Never forget it again.”

I kept my gaze on the carpet, annoyed at how I could feel my cheeks flushing. “I know, Ma,” I ground out. “I won't.”

I pulled my arm from her grasp and left without a backward glance, avoiding Calla's eyes as I pushed past her.

“Yeah, don't forget it again, Weslan.” Calla's soft, mocking whisper followed me into the hallway.

Ella

“Victus again, Ella?” My stepsister Alba threw herself into a chair at the kitchen table and leaned on her elbows. “When can we have some real food?”

I laughed as I set four small bowls on the table and filled each one with a hefty spoonful of victus. The cold, gray mixture was thick, grainy, and nearly unpalatable, but it was free. Hard to argue with that when we had barely a mark to spare.

Before I could answer, my other stepsister, Bri, spoke up. “You don’t even know what real food is. Besides, it keeps us alive. You should be more grateful, Alba.” Bri sat beside her twin sister and glared at her.

Alba made a face. “I *am* grateful,” she said. “I was only wondering when we might get a chance to eat something besides stale bread and victus, that’s all.”

“Stop arguing, girls.” My stepmother, Zel, bustled into the kitchen and joined us at the table. “Sorry I’m late, Ella. I was working in the garden, harvesting the last few squashes of the season.” She nudged Alba. “We might eat them for dinner. How about that?”

“Mmm, vegetables.” Alba rolled her eyes. “Not exactly what I had in mind, Mama. But I’ll take it.”

I grinned at Alba’s expression. “Be careful what you wish for.”

Alba smiled back, her cheeks dimpled and still adorably childish, even at eleven years old. “Speaking of wishing, have you talked to Milos lately?”

Heat flared across my face, and I kicked her under the table.

“Milos?” Zel’s head shot up.

“It’s nothing. Alba was only kidding.”

Bri looked between me and Alba, who was grinning from ear to ear. “Are you sure about that?” Bri raised her eyebrows practically to her hairline.

Oh, Bri. Always so serious. I could never count on her to conspire with me the way I could count on Alba.

Zel fixed her stare on me, and I shrank in my seat.

“It's nothing, I promise. It's ... He's been ...” I stumbled over my words and fell silent. It was one thing to gush with Alba about the dreamy, dark-haired young guard newly assigned to our precinct, and quite another to spill the words in front of my stepmother. “It's nothing.”

“It doesn't look like nothing from the way your cheeks are turning pink,” Zel said, her eyes narrowing.

I slouched. “Well, he's been talking to me more lately, and—”

A knock at the door cut me off, and I sighed in relief as Zel stood and raced upstairs to hide.

I went to the door. “Who is it?”

“It's me, Gregor,” came a familiar, deep voice.

Immediately, I opened the door and gave my elderly friend a quick hug before pulling him inside. “Gregor, how are you? I've missed you.”

He clapped me on the back. “Got a little something for you.” He waved to my stepsisters, who huddled together as they peered at him from the table. They'd known him since they were babies, but they were understandably nervous around anyone other than family. Then he pulled a small, golden jar from his pocket and held it out to me.

“Gregor...” Was that what it looked like? It couldn't be...

“The gates are open,” he said. “My first Lerenian shipment just came in this morning.”

I couldn't look away from the jar.

“Go on.” He nudged my hand with the jar.

“Are you sure it's safe?”

“As safe as anything from Asydia,” he said, spreading his arms wide as though to encompass the whole city. “They've got healers, trackers, and purifiers inspecting every single shipment that enters the city. The plague won't happen again. We know better now. Trust me, it's safe.”

I took the jar and cradled it with both hands. I didn't dare drop something so precious. It was cool and smooth and, even with the lid on, a sweet,

citrusy scent emanated from it. I held it up to my nose and drew in a deep breath. I hadn't smelled anything so good since I was a small child.

"Go on," Gregor said. "It's for you. Don't know what I would have done without you, Ella girl. Had to thank you. For everything."

I leaned forward and hugged him with one arm, gripping the jar with the other and pressing the side of my face against his chest. His clothes were moist from the heavy rain outside, but I didn't care. I'd never have survived the plague years without him. None of us would have. "It's fine, Gregor. You don't have to bring me anything. I was happy to help. Always will be."

I released him and stepped back.

Gregor blinked rapidly, his tan, heavily-lined face in an uncharacteristic frown. He cleared his throat. "Got another something for you too, Ella. I know you've been using Asylian wheat ever since the gates closed."

We both glanced toward the kitchen shelves where this morning's loaves sat cooling, awaiting delivery on my way to school. The scent of warm yeast and burnt cinderslick, our cooking fuel, filled the bakery's kitchen.

"I've got a shipment of Lerenian wheat coming in any day now. I'll cut you a special price."

I chewed on my lip. It was one thing for our family to use imports in our own food. It was quite another to use imported ingredients for our bakery. "I don't know, Gregor..."

He just smiled kindly. "Only consider it, my dear. Better price than Asylian wheat, and better flavor too. You're too young to remember, but we old folks know the difference. You can try a couple of pounds and see what you think." He leaned closer and winked. "One mark per pound."

Nerves tingled in my stomach at his words. One mark per pound? We paid five marks per pound for flour made from Asylian wheat. But what would happen if our customers found out we used imports? Prince Estevan insisted that his system of inspections was safe, but how could we be certain?

The prince had given the order to unseal the city gates two weeks ago. We'd gone eleven, long years without trade with the West or the other walled cities of Theros. No one wanted to risk being the merchant responsible for another contaminated shipment of plague-ridden imports like the one that had brought the city to its knees when I was five.

"I'll think about it," I said after a long pause.

He rocked back on his heels and nodded. “That’s all I ask.”

When he left, I called up the stairs, “Zel! It was just Gregor. He’s gone. You can come back.”

She slipped into the kitchen a few moments later and sat beside her daughters, her shoulders tense and her hands gripping the table’s edge. Every time we had an unannounced visitor, Zel would hide on the roof and spend the rest of the day in a jumpy, nervous state. The trackers nearly caught her once, years ago, and they’d combed the streets around our bakery for weeks afterward, searching for her. We couldn’t risk Zel being found again.

I set the small jar in the center of the table, and Zel’s mouth dropped open. “Is that...?”

“What?” Alba poked at the jar. “What is it? Is it something to eat?”

I sat at the table and cracked the lid open, grinning like a fool. “It’s honey, Alba.”

Bri eyed the jar like it might poison her. “Honey? Never heard of it.”

Zel leaned forward. “Bees make it, girls. They only have it in Lerenia. But now... Oh, girls, you’re going to love it. We can put it on the victus and make it taste better!”

I dipped a spoon into the jar and grabbed Alba’s bowl, drizzling a long stream of thick, golden liquid over her victus as she practically drooled. “Smells like oranges,” she said.

Her mother nodded. “Orange blossom honey. The best kind.”

We devoured our bowls of victus and honey in record time, and then we passed around sections of the *Herald* while I waited for the fresh loaves of bread to finish cooling.

“Mama, what does ‘crimson’ mean?” Alba peered at the front page of the *Herald* with her eyes narrowed.

“Red,” Zel said without looking up, her gaze still fixed on an inside section.

“Oh, like blood.”

“What did you say, sweetheart?”

Alba rustled the paper with a flourish. “Crimson streams stained the cobblestones of the Theros Street Market,” she read proudly, “and bodies lay limp and lifeless beside stalls that had been crushed in the—”

Zel reached out and yanked the newspaper away. “What exactly are you reading?” She studied the section for a moment, sucked in a sharp gasp, and pressed a hand to her mouth.

“Zel, what is it?” I asked.

“There was some sort of attack, it says. Someone used suffio to destroy Theros Street Market. They...” She trailed off and glanced at Alba and Bri. “Some people were hurt.”

She handed the paper to me, and I scanned the article. Twenty dead and at least thirty more wounded. The paper speculated that it might be tied to other, smaller, unexplained attacks in the past three years. I swallowed back nausea at the horrifying description of bodies in the article. Who would do such a thing?

“It’s...well, I’m sure they’ll catch whoever did it.” I folded the paper and returned it to Zel, who folded it again and slid it into her dress pocket.

Alba scowled.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “Theros Street is in the Common Quarter. Nowhere near the Royal Academy or any of our customers.”

We were less than twenty minutes’ walk from Theros Street, but our bakery was in the Merchant Quarter and so were all our customers. My morning delivery route took me through the Merchant Quarter and then onto a trolley to reach the Procus Quarter for school.

I’d be safe. We’d all be safe.

My stepmother took the girls upstairs for their lessons while I cleaned up after breakfast and changed into my uniform.

The crisp, white blouse and pleated, navy-blue skirt were a brand-new uniform, my third this school term. I’d had to sell another of my mother’s old dresses to buy this one, and I couldn’t bear to part with any more of her things. This uniform would have to last.

With the cost of flour so high, our bakery didn’t make nearly enough money to pay for my uniforms. And we didn’t have anything left to sell to buy a replacement.

Now, if only I could convince Felix and his friends to leave my uniform alone. I scowled in the mirror as I twisted my hair into a loose bun. Those foolish, lazy Procus boys only wanted one thing—Belle’s attention. And someone must have decided that playing pranks on me, the sole common

girl in our year, would win our beautiful classmate's regard. I'd never understand young Procus lords.

I pushed thoughts of my Procus classmates away and fixed my imagination on Milos instead. Would I see him again today? Perhaps if I left early for my deliveries, I could linger on the street until I ran into him.

But what could I even say to begin a real conversation with him? I pinched my cheeks and bit my lips to add a bit of color before slipping out the front door into the cold, rainy street.

Perfect timing. Milos was passing by the bakery in his crisp navy Quarter Guard uniform. Beads of rainwater dripped over his brow, and the cords of his tanned, muscled arms showed where he'd rolled up the sleeves of his uniform.

"Ella," he called. He shook his head and a few drenched strands of dark hair moved away from his eyes. "Morning!"

Butterflies stormed without mercy in my stomach. "Hello." My voice was too soft. Why couldn't I be bolder, more confident?

He bent over to pick something up off the ground.

I walked over with hesitant steps, trying and failing to think of something charming and flirtatious to say.

He stood as I approached him and I realized he was holding a large chunk of a broken cobblestone from the street. He winked. "Watch this." Then he flung it with expert precision, sending it crashing through Gregor's shop window.

Weslan

I loosened the gold armband as I hurried back down the stairs. No one other than Calla had seen me. That was something, right? All the other mages in our villa knew she hated our kind. They'd back me up if she told anyone.

But if someone else *had* seen my lapse? Someone besides a mage?

We'd be kicked out and put on probation. My mother would be lucky to get another placement, and I'd certainly never win a patronage.

Wearing the mage armband was only an external show. The Asylian rulers had other, more powerful ways of controlling mages. But it was that outward expression of submission that showed we wouldn't fight back, that we wouldn't repeat the evil of our ancestors. To refuse to wear it meant we couldn't be trusted, and the city barely trusted mages to begin with.

Rushing down the stairs and out of the villa's wide, arched entrance, I scowled as the humid, fall air hit my face. It just had to be raining today, on top of everything. At least I could dry most of it with my magic once I made it to school. One of the few benefits of being a low-level appearance mage.

I made my way through the Falconus compound, cutting through their fomecoach fleet and exiting through the servants' side entrance rather than passing through the opulent garden that led to the front compound gate. Best not to take any more chances today.

On the footpath, I stayed as far from the passing fomecoaches as I could to avoid splashes. Then I caught sight of two familiar blue blazers ahead of me on the footpath.

"Strike me," I muttered under my breath, but I quickened my pace to catch up. That greasy-haired, fifth-year mage, Silas, was always hovering around my friend Argus these days. Now, he'd convinced Argus to head off

to the Mage Academy without me instead of walking together like we'd done for years. What was next? Would he try to steal girls from me too? As if he could.

The pounding rain must have drowned out my footsteps, because they didn't notice my arrival behind them.

"—too good, though. C'mon, Argus. You honestly want to spend the rest of your life building tenements in the River Quarter slums?" Silas' voice was gravelly and low. According to Argus, his vocal cords had been damaged from a close bout with the plague as a child.

Well, I still didn't like him or pity him, for that matter. The rough sound of his voice always grated on my nerves. And just what were they talking about, anyway?

Argus was a powerful mover mage. There was no question they'd place him in government service, building tenements and other buildings as soon as he graduated. They couldn't afford to waste talent like his on a frivolous Procus patronage. The dirt-poor commoners who crowded into the River Quarter had to live somewhere, didn't they?

"I know, Si. 'Course I don't. But..." Argus trailed off.

Silas threw an arm around Argus's shoulders and gave him a shake. "I'm telling you, he's a visionary. Just come once. Listen to what he has to say and decide for yourself. What have you got to lose, anyway?"

Argus guffawed and shoved a smirking Silas in the shoulder.

Nothing to lose? What was so funny about that? If he was up to something stupid, he probably had a lot to lose, like all mages did. I shook my head. Whatever. If Argus wanted to hang around greasy Silas and his weird friends, that was his choice. Not mine.

"Hey, losers," I announced, striding between them and throwing each of them into a headlock. Moments like this were a nice benefit of being taller and stronger than most guys.

Silas shrugged out of my headlock with a little too much force, and I held back a grin. So predictable. Argus pretended to choke, tapping my arm helplessly, and I let him go.

"Hey, Wes," Argus said, offering me a half smile.

Was it my imagination, or did he look sad? What had I interrupted?

"So, Wes," Silas said, emphasizing my nickname like it was an insult. "You ready for some excitement today? Or are you too busy being your

mama's good boy to have fun with the men?"

Anger simmered in my chest at his words. Bring up my mother, would he? That rat-faced piece of—

"Come with us, Wes," Argus said, his voice a little too eager.

I forced my temper under control as I took in his desperate, nervous face. What was going on here?

"We're skipping today." Argus shifted on his feet. "We're going to go see that market that got hit in the Common Quarter last night. It'll be cleaned up before long, and we'll miss our chance to see it."

Why would he ever want to see that? The last thing I wanted was to experience such a gruesome scene in person.

On the other hand, it wasn't like I wanted to go take that exam on Draician fabrics. I'd missed several days of class since the beginning of this term. Probably too many days. But then again, what was one more day when I'd already missed so many?

Besides, I didn't want Argus going off by himself with Silas. Who knew what kind of trouble my oldest friend would get into?

I fiddled with the loosened gold service armband as the two of them watched me with strangely hungry expressions. Why did that gold band always feel so tight? "Yeah. Whatever. I'll come."

Ella

“Milos! Why did you—”

Milos folded his arms. “I heard that slimy importer is already bringing in food from outside the city. The gate’s only been open two weeks, and he can’t wait any longer to bring the plague back? Unbelievable.” He curled his lip as he spoke.

A lump formed in my throat. Perhaps Milos had family members who had died in the plague. That had to have been hard. But I’d lost my father, and Gregor had lost his wife. None of us had gone untouched. If Prince Estevan said it was safe, was it so wrong for Gregor to sell imports again? And besides, what did throwing rocks solve? He could have hurt Gregor!

Milos raised an eyebrow when I didn’t answer. “So, I guess I’ll see you later?”

I cleared my throat. “Um ... maybe.”

He frowned.

Before he could ask any more questions, I waved good-bye and hurried away down the rainy street.

I should have said something. I should have stood up for Gregor’s decision, or told Milos that Gregor was my friend. I should have told him we’d eaten imported honey for breakfast that very morning. The heavy weight of the victus sank further into my stomach. Why was I such a coward?

In my rush to get outside and see Milos before school, I’d forgotten to grab an umbrella. Now I couldn’t stand the thought of going back to our street to pick up my umbrella if it meant facing him again. I ducked under shop awnings as often as I could while I made my bread deliveries to our regular customers.

But I couldn't stop thinking about the way Milos's face had twisted as he spoke about Gregor. I'd always thought Milos was handsome, but now every time I imagined his face, guilt ate at me.

What would my father have thought of Milos? What would Gregor think?

Then again, what if Milos did like me? I couldn't reject him. That would be foolish! He was the first boy to ever pay attention to me. I couldn't imagine simply throwing that away.

And yet, could I truly pursue an attachment with a boy who hated Gregor? A boy who would throw a rock through Gregor's window just because he didn't agree with him?

I dodged a large puddle on the footpath and leapt back under the awning of the next shop. My uniform was nearly soaked, but the rain seemed to be lessening. At least something was going well.

Then a fomecoach sped past, rolling right through the puddle I'd dodged and splashing me from head to toe. I groaned. Even if the rain stopped, I'd be soaked when I got to school.

I jumped on an approaching trolley, still agonizing over my loyalty to Gregor and the thrill of Milos's attention. It should have been an easy choice, right? What kind of girl was willing to betray the man who'd been like a father to her for some nice-looking boy?

Gregor had offered us an impossibly good deal on imported wheat. But what would Milos do if he knew? Would a rock be coming through the bakery window next? He certainly wouldn't like me anymore.

I shook my head at my own confusion, drawing amused stares from the trolley passengers around me. I ignored them and leaned against the cold, hard latticed iron of the trolley walls.

I didn't know what to do. I only hoped today would provide some sort of direction. Because right now, I was being torn right down the middle, and it didn't feel good.

Weslan

We left Grand Procus Avenue and turned down a series of side streets, working our way through the Procus Quarter toward the Common Quarter at Silas's direction.

I followed behind Argus and Silas, partly to keep Silas from making any more digs at my mother and partly because they seemed to have a strange partnership today—one that didn't include me at all.

I didn't quite know what to make of today's uncomfortable dynamic. I'd often gotten the feeling that Silas didn't want me there when he was with Argus. In fact, I'd had a suspicion he only kept me around to help them get girls. Speaking of girls ...

"Hello, ladies," I said, grinning at three blushing mage girls as they passed us in the narrow alley, no doubt on their way to the academy where we were supposed to be going. Second-years, if I had to guess. Two years below me and Argus.

They giggled and sent me shy smiles, but they flicked disinterested glances toward Silas and Argus before continuing their walk.

"Uppity," Silas muttered under his breath as he watched the girls walk away. "And a little on the chubby side. Aren't they too old for baby fat?"

Argus chuckled, but it sounded forced.

I grimaced but held my tongue. The sooner this day ended, the better.

Silas nudged Argus. "You should do that thing again."

Argus flicked an uncomfortable glance at me.

"What, you lose your sense of humor now?" Silas punched him in the shoulder. "What happened to that crazy guy I hung out with last week?"

"Yeah," said Argus. "I got it, don't worry."

A rush of air swept past me, and the girls at the end of the alley let out a chorus of squeals as their Mage Academy uniform skirts swept up in the air. They held their skirts in place with their hands and raced around the corner.

Really, Argus? Classy.

Red splotches stood out on Argus' cheeks, and he wouldn't meet my eyes.

"That's your thing, huh?" I couldn't keep the disgust from my voice. "Great trick. Girls love it when you mess with their clothes. I'm surprised they didn't come back and flirt with you."

Silas shoved me in the chest, and I stumbled backward. What was going on with him? Why would he strike out at me with such aggression after avoiding me for months?

I held my ground and glared at him from my height advantage.

His hair hung over his forehead in thick, black strands, standing out against his pale skin in the gray morning light.

He was skinny and weak. I could take him in a physical fight—no question. But the malevolence in his eyes sent real chills down my spine.

What kind of mage was he, anyway? Funny how that had never come up in conversation before. Not that it mattered if he decided to turn his magic against me. Nearly every mage classification was more powerful than mine.

Argus stepped between us, forcing Silas back. "Hey, forget it. All in fun, Wes. That's what we want, right?" His voice took on a pleading tone. "To have fun? C'mon, let's keep moving."

Silas leaned closer, and I clenched my fists, wondering what would come next.

Then he spat at my feet, smirked, and turned around, clasping his hands at the back of his head as he sauntered away like he hadn't a care in the world.

Argus patted my shoulder. "Wes. Forget about it. Come on. He's a good guy. He's watching out for me, just like you used to. Can you let it go?"

Like I used to? Huh. I ran a hand through my rain-soaked hair. If this was the kind of fun they'd had in mind, I shouldn't have come. But if I weren't along to hold them back, would they do something even worse?

I blew out a breath and rolled my shoulders. Argus and I had grown up together on the same compound for the first few years of our lives. After my mother won the Falconus patronage, we still lived right down the street in

adjacent Procus compounds. Argus was my oldest friend. My closest friend.
And now I hardly knew him.

Ella

“Students, settle down.” Professor Silvanus stood at the front of the classroom, holding a thick stack of papers. They had to be our exams from last week.

I huddled in my seat, my wet, cold clothes putting a damper on my excitement over finally seeing my score.

I’d worried my mud-stained uniform would get me kicked out of class today, but I’d gotten lucky. The professor had simply looked me up and down with a smirk and let me enter the classroom without a word.

He passed out the exams while a chorus of complaints followed him around the classroom. It had been our most difficult exam so far for this term, and I doubted many of my lazy Procus classmates had fared well.

Professor Silvanus reached me and set the exam face down on my desk with a thump. He watched me for a moment with an oddly amused look on his face. I shrank in my seat. Was my uniform too muddy after all? Would he force me out of the room?

After a long pause, he moved on without saying anything, but the look on his face stayed with me. What was wrong with him? It was almost as though he’d been leering at me. But a teacher would never do something like that. Would he?

I shook my head at the thought before flipping my exam over. A perfect score! I ran my fingers over the red-inked number, then moved my hand away from it so it would be visible to someone else. Would anyone notice? If just one of my classmates could see that I truly belonged at the academy —

Professor Silvanus cleared his throat from the front of the room. “We have a new student who earned the honor of top score in last week’s exam.

Ella Stone—she’s the one with the odor. I believe you call her Cinderella?”

That would be me.

The class burst into titters of laughter, and my face grew hot.

Professor Silvanus gave me a mocking bow, and I fixed my eyes on my desk.

“Let’s all congratulate her,” the professor said. “It can’t be easy to earn high marks as a kitchen girl.”

I gripped my seat to stop myself from getting up and running out. I had to do this. I couldn’t give up and leave. Without the Royal Academy, I had no future in government and no way to provide for Zel and the twins. We couldn’t live off victus forever.

My classmates and professors could make whatever jokes they wanted. I wasn’t going anywhere. At least, not if I had a say in the matter.

Somehow, I survived all the way to the end of the class. When the bell rang, I sat for a moment in my seat, gathering my composure as Professor Silvanus and the rest of my classmates filed out.

Then a shadow blocked the light from the luminous lamp above me. Felix stood over me, smiling sheepishly. “Sorry, Ella. About those pranks last week. It was all in fun. You get that, right?”

He and his friends had caused me to slip on the stairs in front of the whole class. I’d gotten a horrible bruise on my thigh and ripped my uniform. I’d had to sell one of my mother’s dresses to buy a new one. All in fun? Right.

“I know. I get it.”

The corner of his mouth turned up, and he leaned a little closer, his eyes darting over me with a quick look that had me confused. “Well, congratulations on your exam score. That’s amazing, Ella. I didn’t know you were so smart.”

I didn’t quite know what to say to that, so I simply nodded.

“Well ...” He smiled again. “I’ll see you around?”

“Yes.” My voice came out a hoarse whisper.

He joined his pack of friends at the door where they waited, all grinning like mad. What was that all about? Another prank?

Then a new face appeared in front of me—one of Belle’s friends. Estella? Alyssa? Something like that.

“Umm, Ella?” The girl twirled a lock of her dark, wavy hair as she spoke. “A little piece of advice. A Procus lord like Felix Falconus will never ever be interested in a common girl. Ever. Especially a girl with such a smell.”

I blinked at her. What was she talking about?

The girl watched Felix as he left the room with his friends, then returned her gaze to me. She smiled, her upper lip curling as though her face objected to the expression. Then she leaned closer and whispered in my ear, “He only talked to you because your shirt is soaked through and completely transparent right now. Professor Silvanus should’ve sent you home for being indecently dressed, but he’s too nice.”

I gaped at her. I’d never— How had I not known? Had I suspected, I would have gone home for an umbrella.

“Just thought you should know.” The girl straightened and coughed, waving her hand in front of her nose. “That cinderslick smell ... I don’t know how you stand it,” she murmured. Then she left me alone in the classroom.

Weslan

The Common Quarter was wetter than the Procus Quarter. That was the first thing I noticed. Huge puddles took up whole sections of the footpath, and every time a fomecoach sped past, dirty rainwater from the street soaked us again.

Silas hadn't spoken to me since we'd left the alley where we had met the three mage girls. Fine by me. I wasn't exactly itching for more conversation with him anyway. He'd led us down side streets through the Procus Quarter and across the border into the Common Quarter, and now we were walking toward the site of this morning's attack.

The commoners who roamed the street wore threadbare garments that more closely resembled Calla's cleaning rags than the shirts and slacks we wore to the Mage Academy. They avoided us, leaving a wide buffer, making sure not to brush against us. The gold armbands spoke for themselves, didn't they? We were clearly marked as mages—too rich to threaten, too dangerous to fight. We were pariahs here.

Did they envy us or hate us? Or were we simply too strange to merit a reaction? Perhaps it was just another sign that we didn't belong and weren't wanted here, never mind the fact that mages had been in Theros for a thousand years.

I was staring at a frail, elderly woman as she poked through the gutter, picking up what I assumed must be salvageable pieces of trash, when I ran into Silas's back.

He shoved me away, and I stumbled.

"Watch it, Wes," Argus said, grinning. "We're here."

The words sent off a wave of nervous energy in my limbs. Why had they wanted to come here, anyway?

Against my better judgment, I looked around at the scene, taking in the destruction.

We stood at the mouth of a narrow alley just outside a rope bearing the Quarter Guards' insignia. The alley was lined on both sides by piles of rubble, with not a single upright, intact market stall in sight. Dust coated the visible cobblestones down the center of the alley, along with something dark. I peered closer.

Blood. The cobblestones were stained with blood.

My stomach twisted like I'd taken a punch to the gut. What a mess. I angled my head away from the scene in the market alley, took a deep breath, and tried to focus on the small patch of grass that served as a park across the street.

"What's the matter, Wes?" Silas acknowledged me at last. "Too much for your delicate stomach? Think you'll lose your fancy breakfast?"

I could have done without his attention. "Alright, you saw the market," I said, eyeing Silas. "Feeling great now, huh? Too bad they already cared for the dead and wounded, or you could have gotten a real eyeful. Can we go? I thought you guys wanted to have fun."

Silas's answering smile was accompanied by a nod, as though he'd been satisfied by something I'd said. He nudged Argus before spinning around to face the alley without answering me.

What was that supposed to mean?

Argus searched my face, that sad smile of his appearing once again. "Yeah, Wes. We'll go soon. Go have some fun. We'll be ready to go in a minute." He turned back to the alley too.

I rolled my eyes and stepped into the street, leaving them at the alley. The small park across the street was dank and dirty, but a battered food cart was parked beside the muddy path into the park. Whatever it sold, it made the air on the street smell of cinderslick, grease, spice, and sugar.

I walked to the end of the line, ignoring uneasy glances from the other customers.

The old man running the cart gave me a sideways smile, and when it was my turn to order, he grinned outright. "A mage, huh? Right here at my cart. Wife won't believe me."

I gave him my most charming smile and patted the food cart between us. "What do you have here, sir?"

“Spiceberry balls,” he said, waving a proud hand over his steaming cart. “Best in the Quarter. Five for a mark.”

I inspected the tiny bits of fried dough dipped in what looked like ground spiceberries and sugar. Five for a mark? Cheap. But not as cheap as I would’ve expected. No wonder he didn’t have much of a line, even with all the commoners bustling past us on the footpath.

“I’ll take five, then,” I said.

He nodded, took the crisp mark I handed over, and set it in a jar beside him. The marks in the jar seemed weathered. His hand brushed mine as he took it, and I fought the urge to wipe my hand on my slacks afterward. This Quarter had me on edge—the attack, the blood-stained alley, the faded, thin paper marks that they handled with such reverence. I didn’t like it here. More than that, I didn’t belong here. I couldn’t wait to get back to the Procus Quarter.

I wrapped both hands around the small bundle of wax paper and spiceberry balls. It was so hot it nearly burned my hand, but the warmth was nice in the blustery weather. I thanked the old man and inhaled the spicy-sweet scent as I crossed the street back to Argus and Silas. Perhaps they’d stop needling me if I brought a peace offering.

They faced me when I was halfway across the street, dodging puddles and fomecoaches. Silas sent another weird smile my direction, then leaned over and said something to Argus. What was it this time? I was stepping onto the footpath beside them when a man’s strangled cry sounded from the other side of the street.

I whirled around. The spiceberry cart rolled into the street, barreling toward the fomecoaches like someone had shoved it. What had happened?

The old man who owned the spiceberry cart screamed. “Out of the way! Out of the way!”

The fomewagon’s driver must not have heard. The large vehicle plowed straight into the cart, pushing it ahead and veering into the small park. The fomewagon crashed against the park’s only tree, crushing the spiceberry cart.

Children who’d been playing in the park huddled together with dozens of commoners on the footpath. The crash hadn’t killed anyone, but a few of those closest to the accident clutched their legs and arms. The old man was sobbing, holding his hands out toward the cart’s remains.

A hard cuff against my shoulder finally pulled my attention away from the scene. What had just happened? Argus hit me again. Silas was already gone, and Argus and I were the only ones across the street from the wreck.

“Let’s get out of here, Wes,” Argus said. “Before they realize—” Instead of finishing the sentence, he hurried away from me.

I followed him down the street and into an alley where we caught up with Silas. We’d made two more turns before it hit me. Argus wanted to get away but not because he was frightened by the accident. “Before they realize,” he’d said. Because he was a mover mage. Because he’d caused the accident.

Ella

I made it through the rest of the school day in a daze. My shirt had mostly dried by the third class of the day, but I kept my arms crossed just in case. Every time a classmate or professor glanced my way, heat spread across my cheeks.

When the closing bell rang, I shivered and tightened my arms across my chest as I hurried down the staircase. I needed to get out of here. And soon. Before I ran into Felix or any of his friends.

I stumbled on the last step, and in the entryway, I slammed into a boy's back. "My apologies, my lord," I mumbled as I tried to brush past him.

No luck. He stuck his arm out and stopped me.

I groaned. Of course, it had to be Felix.

He smiled, and his eyes crinkled at the edges. After all those pranks and jokes at my expense, it seemed like he genuinely wanted to see me today. Had something changed?

His tan, well-muscled arms strained at the white fabric of his uniform shirt, and his black hair was slicked back against his head. Not a single hair was out of place. He was everything a young Procus lord should be—my better in every way, right? This made no sense. What did he want with me?

Felix folded his arms across his chest and stepped closer. Was it my imagination, or were his arm muscles straining against his shirt even more than before? "You always rush off after school," he said. "You should stick around and chat with us sometime, you know? Get to know your classmates."

I froze, trapped by the blatant, tantalizing interest in his eyes as he smiled at me. Was he serious?

Then his eyes flicked to my chest.

That again? Ridiculous! I found my voice. “Yes. Got to get home.”

I shoved my way past him with more force than I had any right to use against a Procus lord, hurrying down the slippery steps before he could stop me again. I didn’t slow until I was past the border into the River Quarter. I hazarded a glance over my shoulder. He hadn’t followed me. No Procus would ever come here. My breathing calmed as I slowed my pace.

I didn’t know what to make of Felix. Was he interested in me, truly? And what about that smell—the cinderslick scent that clung to my skin, hair, and clothes, the odor that everyone always complained about?

No, he wasn’t interested in me. It wasn’t possible. I couldn’t claim to understand the workings of the male mind, but I did know one thing that always proved true for the Procus set—nothing was more important to them than entertainment. So I was simply the latest joke for Felix and his friends. That was all.

An ugly voice whispered in my head. *He would never look at Belle’s chest so rudely.*

Tears sprang to my eyes at the utter truthfulness of that thought. To a boy like Felix, I would never be worthy of true respect or admiration. I’d never be anything more than a diversion, a bit of fun on a boring school day.

Not that I cared what he thought of me anyway.

I huffed out a breath as I walked further into the River Quarter, keeping an eye peeled for a trolley going my direction. I found none. Just my luck today.

It took nearly an hour to reach the Merchant Quarter when normally I was only a short trolley ride from home. I wove through the slick cobblestone streets of the Merchant Quarter, sliding on the worn stones. Everything would feel better once I got home and kicked the sodden shoes off my aching feet.

What would I say if I saw Milos on the way home? Should I just ignore him? But what if he tried to talk to me?

My rich Procus classmates at the Royal Academy would never accept me. It was time to admit that. So shouldn’t I be grateful that a friendly, handsome boy like Milos, a fellow commoner, was showing me favor? Or was it better to be alone than to form an attachment with a boy who hated Gregor? A boy who would break Gregor’s shop windows for the sake of a pointless grudge? That wasn’t exactly handsome behavior.

I was so caught up in worrying about Milos that I nearly plowed into three boys in navy blazers and gold armbands as they came toward me on the footpath.

Mages. What were they doing here? I dodged to the side at the last moment but brushed against one of them, the tall, well-built, blond one.

“Sorry,” I muttered as I kept walking, turning my face away to avoid his eyes. I’d had just about enough of fine-looking boys today.

Not five steps later, I slipped on the cobblestones and landed hard on my back. The breath whooshed from my lungs at the impact. I lay there for several moments, fighting to get my breath back, the back of my head smarting where it had struck the cobblestones.

Then the sour smell of crushed vineberries reached my nose, and I groaned. Unbelievable.

I sat up, my back aching, and inspected what I could see of my shoulder. I’d fallen on a pile of rotten vineberries likely tossed from the dilapidated coffee house across the street. Apparently, the lane’s sanitation canister was too far to walk. The berries’ sour, reddish-purple flesh was pressed into my white uniform shirt and navy skirt, spanning my entire back and behind. I didn’t need to ask Zel to know that a vineberry’s stain was permanent. A neighbor had once shared a bowl of them with me, and it had taken two weeks for the stains to come off my fingers. The dress I’d been wearing that day had never come clean. No, my white shirt and navy skirt were beyond repair. Again. Even better, now I smelled like rotting food.

Another uniform, ruined. Another of my mother’s dresses would have to be sold to replace this uniform.

A keening sob broke free at the thought. I forced it into silence and hunched over where I sat, fighting with all my strength to keep the rest of the tears and sobs locked inside.

People passed me on both sides, but not one person extended a hand to help me up. They simply kept their eyes averted and walked right by. Typical. Everyone in Asyilia thought they were better than me.

Well, I was grateful. I didn’t want to speak to or look at another soul in this stricken, nasty, nightmare city. Not today. Maybe not ever.

Weslan

She was beautiful. Impossibly, perfectly beautiful. The angry scowl on her face as she strode toward us made me smile. Clearly, the petite girl would sooner bowl us over than step out of the way. But then she met my gaze for the briefest of moments, and her stunning, light-green eyes nearly knocked me over. She was perfect. Beautiful, angry, and perfect. I couldn't stop staring.

I paused as she brushed past me, her tan skin warm through her white school uniform shirt as her arm brushed my hand. I reached out to... do what? I didn't know.

"Sorry," she said, her voice tight. And before I could respond, she had already moved past us.

I couldn't help it. Like a lovesick fool, I spun around to watch her walk away. Her dark hair was pulled into a haphazard bun, and long, thick tendrils had fallen out to twine around her shoulders. Her build was slight but strong, as if she were made to fit beside me, tucked beneath my arm. I shook my head at the thought. I needed to get my imagination under control.

I took a step toward her and opened my mouth to call out something, anything, to make her stay a moment longer.

But then she slipped and fell backward. There was an excruciating crack as her head hit the ground. I lunged forward even though it was too late to catch her. Something restrained me but I kept fighting, trying to move forward. Silas and Argus held me back.

"What are you doing?" Silas hissed in my ear. "She dared to shove you out of her way. A stinking commoner like that? Argus only gave her what she deserved."

He'd ... Wait, what? He'd done that to her? On purpose? But what if she'd—

“Come on, Wes. We need to go. School got out an hour ago. They'll be expecting us home soon.”

I glared at Argus's nervous face. “Unbelievable. You actually—”

“Hey, idiot.” Silas shoved me hard. “You going to let your buddy get in trouble over this, or are you going to come with us now? Her or us?”

Argus scowled at me from my other side. “Seriously, Wes. Some random, common girl who reeks of cinderslick? I know you go for anything with long hair and a pretty face, but I think you can do better than a common laborer. And besides, we're your friends. Her or us, huh?”

Her or them? He didn't want to know my answer to that question at the moment. What rats. Both of them. How had I stayed friends with Argus for so long? I kept my mouth shut, too furious for words, and focused on the girl.

She sat up. So she wasn't hurt too badly, then. She twisted to inspect the back of her uniform, which seemed to be stained with some red, ugly fruit now. She hadn't noticed us yet.

Silas watched her with a sick venom in his eyes, his fists balled at his sides. Was he truly so offended that she hadn't gotten out of the way on the footpath? What did he expect? We were in the Merchant Quarter, not the Mage Division at the center of the city. She had no reason to show us special reverence.

But the darkness on his face helped me decide. Whatever was going through his head, I didn't want him anywhere near that poor girl. “Fine,” I said. “Let's go. What a fun day, guys,” I couldn't help muttering under my breath.

They didn't answer, but at least they followed me and left her alone. At last, something had gone right today.

I was already back in the Falconus compound, having left Argus and Silas in the street without a good-bye, when I stopped in my tracks on the stairs. Why hadn't I at least offered to get the stain out of her uniform? My power wasn't good for much, but as an appearance mage, I could have done that. I was as much of an idiot as Argus.

Ella

Each step on the way back to the bakery made my back throb with pain. Whispers and snickers followed me as people caught sight of the stinky, vineberry-stained back of my uniform, but I refused to acknowledge them. Surely, I wasn't the first person in the city to slip on damp cobblestones. They could laugh all they wanted.

My foot slid on the slick stones with my next step, and I jolted forward to keep from falling back again, throwing out my arms at my sides to stabilize myself. Another wave of giggles came from the pack of children behind me. I kept my face straight and unresponsive like a stone, like my last name. A cold, unfeeling stone. That was what I was. What I needed to be.

When I made it back to the bakery, I didn't bother to go upstairs and greet Zel and my stepsisters. I couldn't have faced the pity and apologies I knew I'd see on their faces.

Besides, I knew what I needed. I didn't need a hug, a warm bath, or a pitying smile. I needed money, and nothing was going to change that.

I went to my room and stripped off my damp, disgusting uniform, crumpled it into a ball, and stuffed it into the trash. I dried off my body as best I could and opened the heavy, ornately carved chest at the foot of my bed.

My mother's dresses. Zel wore a few, but she had little need for dresses since she never left the bakery these days for fear of the tracker mages. The rest of the dresses were here. Or they had been until I won the first commoner scholarship to the Royal Academy and sold off my mother's fine dresses one by one to buy my school uniforms.

I fingered the rich, colorful fabrics of the dresses that remained in the chest. They were impossibly soft, clean dresses from before the plague, a

time when Asyilia was so wealthy and the bakery's profits so abundant that the lady of the house didn't even need to work in the kitchen. At least, that was what Zel speculated. I could barely remember those years.

I pulled out my favorite dress. It was made of gauzy, pale-violet fabric with a slim belt at the waist. When I wore it, I could pretend I was a girl in one of Zel's novels—pretty, feminine, and carefree. Like I could smile and laugh and flirt with a boy without worrying that he would hate me if he truly knew me. Like I was a real, live girl instead of a stone.

I shook my head. Frivolous, foolish thoughts. No matter what happened, I could never let my guard down. Not in this forsaken city. I'd always be a stone, that was for sure. But I'd sell my own bed out from under me before I'd sell one more of my mother's dresses.

I slid the dress over my head and tied the belt at my waist. I spread my hands over the fabric and smoothed it around my hips. Then I reached behind my head and shoved a few of my wayward locks back into my bun.

Money. All I needed was money. I couldn't worry about what anyone else thought, not anymore. They didn't matter. None of them did. All that mattered was my family, and I needed more money if I was ever going to escape this bakery and win a real government position that paid a stipend big enough to care for all four of us.

I slipped through the front door of the bakery and strode down the lane toward Gregor's, shivering as the cold, misty wind whipped through the fabric of the lovely violet dress.

I was dimly aware of faces turning my way to stare, but I didn't bother to glance around. They could look all they wanted. If Milos saw me, all the better. Then I wouldn't have to worry about him anymore.

I reached Gregor's shop and knocked. The door swung open, and Gregor's familiar face greeted me with a wide smile. "Ella! What—"

"I'll take that Lerenian flour you offered," I said, cutting him off. Gregor raised his eyebrows, and I cleared my throat to stop my voice from shaking. "Ten pounds. As soon as you can get it."

Weslan

Our suite in the Falconus mage villa was frigid and dead quiet. Calla hadn't brought new suffio embers for the hearth, of course.

I sat on the small couch in my bedroom, crinkling and straightening the scribbled notes for the test I had missed. Maybe if it looked like I was studying, my mother wouldn't ask any questions about the academy today.

The girl's lovely face and striking green eyes haunted me. Why was she so angry and so sad at the very same time? Why hadn't I spoken to her or offered to help her? Silas wasn't that much of a threat to a common girl. I'd overreacted earlier. Would I ever see her again? Short of lurking on that same street every day, I wasn't sure how.

I was halfway through a fantasy where I'd found her in the Merchant Quarter and won her regard by fixing her uniform when my mother stormed into my room.

"Weslan Fortis. You—" She stopped short, glaring at me, her arms folded across her chest.

"Hey, Ma. Done at the studio, huh?" My attempt at a calming tone seemed to enrage her further.

"You!" She paced out of the room and then marched back in, but this time, she shook her finger at me. What was that supposed to mean? "Your father would never have behaved this way."

"Ma..." All at once, my lingering fantasies about the girl evaporated.

"Never! He would never, ever—" She blinked rapidly. "He was studious, smart, hardworking. He could always be trusted to take care of his responsibilities. But you..." She shook her head and pressed her lips together.

I wanted to sink into the floor and never reappear. “I’m sorry, Ma. Is this about—”

“You’re sorry? Sorry! Yes, in fact it is indeed about you missing your fourteenth day of school this term. It’s also about the fact that you’re failing Luxury Fabrics Level 3, and your professor wants to hold you back another year. And that you enticed two other students to skip with you as well today.”

“That’s not—”

“I’m not finished!” But she didn’t speak. She only crossed her arms again.

It was all I could do to meet her angry eyes with a hopefully penitent expression.

Finally, after several uncomfortable moments of silence, she spoke, her voice significantly calmer ... and deadlier. “If you don’t start taking school seriously, you will never win a patronage. Don’t doubt me, Weslan. I know this city. I know the Procus families. And I’m telling you, if you want to keep living like we do, you’ll keep your head down and do what you’re told. Or you’ll be lucky to get a position in the Sanitation Ministry when you graduate, and you’ll spend your life in the government barracks. And...”

A single tear stole down her cheek, and my insides seemed to twist into knots at the sight.

“And please, even if you don’t care about anything else, think of your father. He would never—” Her voice broke, and she cleared her throat. “He would never have behaved like this. You’re his son, aren’t you?”

I nodded.

“Then act like it. Please.” Her voice broke again on the last word. She left the room, slamming the door behind her.

I slouched back against the couch and let my crumpled notes drop to the carpet.

My father would never have behaved like this, huh? How nice for him. Not that I’d ever truly gotten the chance to know him. He’d died when I was six, one of the first healers lost to the plague. I had only vague memories of a stern, bearded face. He had occasionally appeared at family meals, but otherwise, he had always been busy with important healer work. I couldn’t remember ever seeing him embrace my mother, much less me.

But he took care of his responsibilities, did he, Ma? What about his family? His kid? Those responsibilities didn't matter?

I shook my head and pressed my palms against my eyes. What a striking awful day. And Argus and Silas had sold me out when they were the ones to drag me off in the first place. Well, maybe they hadn't exactly dragged me off, but...

I shook my head again. I was done thinking about them. Done thinking about school and Procus families and patronages. Done thinking about perfect, furious green eyes that made me want to run straight to the Merchant Quarter and fix everything that had that gorgeous girl so upset.

I was a failure, anyway. Irresponsible. Lazy. Right? Nothing like my hardworking father.

No. I was done with all of it.

When night fell, I threw open the window and scaled down the outside of the villa. Those three blonde mage girls had wanted to see me again tonight. That would be exactly the right way to end this miserable day—by forgetting it.

I had planned on inviting Argus to come too, but there was no chance I'd include him now. I wasn't the perfect Mage Academy student my mother wanted, but at least I didn't go around using my powers to torment people like he did.

There was no question about it—my friendship with Argus was over, and I wanted nothing to do with him and Silas. Perhaps our friendship had been over for some time, but I'd been too idiotic to see it. Not anymore.

Ella

I lay in bed, my teeth chattering from the cold even with my sweater layered on top of my nightgown.

We'd sold our suffio rations the day we got them, as usual. Perhaps if our bakery's profitability increased after we got that Lerenian flour, we could keep the suffio rations for ourselves. Perhaps. Not likely, though. We needed too many things, and there would never be enough money. Why did it always come down to money?

I curled as small as I could under my blanket and buried the side of my face in my pillow.

At least we'd saved forty marks on flour this week. I'd wake early and go to the market to buy a new school uniform with the extra money. I'd get a perfect score on the next test, and the next one, and the one after that. Because nothing and no one was going to stop me from graduating from the Royal Academy. Not an obnoxious boy. Not a smirking professor. No one.

No, from now on, I'd be Ella Stone—unmovable, unfeeling, unstoppable. And no one would get in my way.

AFTERWORD

I hope you liked this little window into Ella and Weslan's lives. Their story continues two years later in *Fated: Cinderella's Story*, Book 1 of the *Destined* series, a collection of overlapping fairy tale retellings. [Get it here](#).

Can't wait? Read on for a sneak peek...



KAYLIN LEE

FATED

CINDERELLA'S
STORY

THE DESTINED SERIES - BOOK ONE

Fated: Cinderella's Story

"Ella, they've set a date for Prince Estevan's selection ball. It's this summer!" Alba spread the Procus Society pages of the *Herald* across the breakfast table.

I dragged my attention away from my exam notes. "Already? Didn't he just have one of those?"

My stepsister ran her finger under the words. "It's right here. 'Crown Prince Estevan is set to welcome all the young ladies of good Procus families in a summer selection ball, sure to be an extravagant affair, if last year's selection is any indicator.'"

I sat at a rusty table with my family on the rooftop terrace above our bakery. Honey scones and coffee cups crowded together on the old white tablecloth, sharing the small space with inky pages of today's *Herald*.

My stepmother Zel and my other stepsister Bri ate their scones and ignored Alba. They had both been quiet all morning, so I answered Alba again. "But I thought the whole point of a selection ball was that he's supposed to choose a wife and be done with it. He's not supposed to have a ball every year."

"You can't force true love, Ella! The prince just didn't meet the right lady last year." My twin stepsisters were not quite thirteen, but to hear Alba talk, she was an expert on love. "He needs another ball so he can have a chance at true love. Even you wouldn't begrudge him that, would you?"

I bit back a smile. "Even me, hmm?"

The gossips at the Royal Academy whispered that the prince had found true love with at least six beautiful Procus ladies since last year's ball. I didn't want to wipe that sweet smile off Alba's face, so I didn't elaborate. She went back to drooling over the paper, and I returned to my notes.

I made it through a few more minutes of studying before I dropped my notes on the table and leaned back in my chair and groaned.

“What’s wrong, El?” Zel nudged me.

I rubbed at my tired, burning eyes. “What’s the point? It doesn’t matter how well I do on the final exam. I’ll never belong at the Royal Academy, much less in a government apprenticeship. I don’t know why I’m trying so hard.”

Zel squeezed my hand. “Never say never. Besides, it’ll be that much sweeter to prove them all wrong, won’t it?”

I had to laugh. “True.” Zel had been the one to encourage me to apply for the scholarship when they first opened the Royal Academy to commoners. But it was one thing for my own stepmother to believe in me. It was quite another to convince my professors and classmates that I was worthy of a government position. “Even so, I wouldn’t mind being descended from a Procus line. Or at least looking like a true Fenra.”

Zel snorted. “There’s no such thing as a true Fenra. Ignore them, El. I’m serious. You’re beautiful. I wouldn’t change a single thing about you.”

Heat spread across my cheeks. “Not even these green eyes?” I kept my tone light, but from Zel’s gentle smile, she saw right through me.

“Definitely not the green eyes.”

I was fortunate to have the dark hair and bronze skin of the Fenra ruling class who had founded Asyilia centuries ago, but I’d also been cursed with the light-green eyes of a Kireth descendant—the eyes of a mage. I was well past the age when any magical tendency might manifest itself. Without doubt, I was not and never would be a mage. But my green eyes suggested a different story to everyone who saw me.

Zel must have guessed my thoughts. “Even if you looked full Kireth like me, you still might not have inherited mage powers. Those Procus fools at the Royal Academy need to learn not to base everything on appearance. Besides, if you truly were a mage, you’d already be in the Mage Division, and they all know it.”

I nodded and leaned back in my chair. She was right. Anyone who did have mage powers—a natural tendency to either absorb or expel magic—was required to enter government service or Procus patronage. It was a public safety issue, as every Royal Academy student knew. The city

government wouldn't to risk letting mages roam free. I had to stop letting my classmates get to me.

Zel sipped her coffee and went back to her section of the *Herald*. I listened to Alba with half an ear as she rambled on about Prince Estevan and his ball.

"The article talks all about last year's ball—who was there, what they wore, and which beautiful ladies the prince favored. Oh, I would give anything to be there!"

And I would do anything to avoid such a spectacle. Good thing neither of us would ever attend a royal ball.

I stretched in my chair, tired from studying for the final exam all morning and most of last night. Fragrant herbs and raised, wooden vegetable beds filled the rooftop so tightly we barely had room for a table, but it was warm and breezy in the late spring sunshine. The scent of lemonburst and mint nearly blocked out the smell of rotting garbage in the street below.

"The gowns, the music, the food ... Did you know that last year they invented a new drink, just for Prince Estevan's first selection ball? It's called chry ... chro ... chrysos, I think. Sparkling liquid gold that tastes like sweetened frostberries. Can you imagine?" Alba feigned a swoon in her seat.

I made a face at Alba, and she giggled. Then I shuffled my notes together and shoved them to the side to make room for a second honey scone on my plate.

"Oh, Ella, do you mind that I borrowed your ribbon?"

"Ribbon?"

Alba fingered her long, wavy black hair and bit her lip.

Ah, that one. She'd tied a glossy red ribbon around her head, and it was quite pretty, setting off her rosy cheeks and lips and highlighting her soft, pale skin. I thought about saying so but kept quiet. Her pale skin was the only thing that kept her from looking Fenra, and she read enough of the Procus Society pages to know that everyone who was anyone wanted to have bronze-colored skin. "That's not my ribbon," I said instead.

"But I found it in your room. It was right there on your bed this morning when I went to put away your washing."

I raised my eyebrows and gave the ribbon a closer look. "Definitely not mine. I don't have anything like that." All of my possessions were either

serviceable, stain-hiding brown or part of the Royal Academy uniform. There was no place for a red ribbon in my life.

Alba looked confused. “But it was right there, on your—”

“Don’t worry about it, Alba. Wear it if you want to.” I stood and picked up my plate. “I have to make a few deliveries before school, so I’m going to go get ready now. Have a good day.”

“Be careful!” Alba waved the newspaper at me. “There was another Crimson Blight attack yesterday.”

“On a trolley?”

She shook her head. “A market in the River Quarter.”

“Well, in that case, I’ll be fine.” I blew her a kiss and smiled to reassure her. Alba gave me a troubled smile. Zel waved to me but didn’t speak, and Bri only glanced at me before returning to her breakfast. Everyone was feeling off today. Maybe they’d feel better by the time I came home after school to open the bakery shop.

~

Back in my cramped bedroom, I changed out of my house dress and put on my worn school uniform. The shirt was as white and crisp as I could make it, and the navy skirt, let out too many times to count, hung just below my knees. The length was barely within dress code regulations. Good thing I hadn’t grown much in the last two years, and that I only had to wear it a few more days.

I splashed water on my face and hands for a makeshift bath and twisted my hair back into the neatest bun I could manage, then paused for a moment in front of the small mirror above my sink. A tired, green-eyed girl stared back at me, her dark hair already sticking out from her bun. I grimaced.

At least my hands and face were clean of cinderslick’s telling golden glimmer. Who had time for the three hot water washings it would take to remove the sweet, fiery odor of cinderslick from my hair? I rolled my eyes at my reflection. Certainly not me. My time was better spent studying and working.

I slung my battered book bag over my shoulder, walked into the kitchen, and shoved my school texts and pencils out of the way on the big wooden

work table. The loaves were ready to go, neatly wrapped and waiting for me on the kitchen shelves, but the scones still needed wrapping now that they'd cooled.

I took a long whiff of the fresh, buttery scones, but then the distinct scent of burnt cinderslick made me cough. Cheap, government-made cooking fuel. As I baked and studied in the early hours of the morning, the smell of cinderslick would cover me, clinging to my hair, skin, and clothes the rest of the day.

My Procus classmates at school hated the smell. After all, I doubted any of them had ever set foot in a kitchen, and their families certainly had no need for cheap cinderslick rations. Quality cinderslick didn't have such an overpowering smell.

They claimed my stepmother hated me so much, she refused to heat my bedroom and forced me to sleep in front of the kitchen oven to soak in warmth from the cinderslick. Cinderella, they called me. As if I cared.

I shouldered the canvas delivery bag, careful not to squash the wrapped loaves inside, and stepped into the front shop, only to stumble to a halt. A young man stood by the door with Zel. My stepmother never spoke to strangers. Had we been discovered?

I surged forward to rescue her, forcing myself to take slow breaths and trying not to appear as tense and terrified as I felt. "Stepmother, Alba has been asking for you upstairs," I said. It was the script we'd planned years ago, but my voice wavered as I pushed the words out. I kept my eyes downcast subserviently like I was the defeated, weak-willed stepdaughter everyone assumed me to be. "Please allow me to help this gentleman with whatever he may need."

Instead of leaving me to deal with him, Zel said, "Ella, I'd like you to meet someone."

I dragged my gaze from her to the man. Disaster.

He had to be a mage. He appeared to be a little older than me, and was tall and broad-shouldered, with blond hair hanging over his forehead and nearly reaching his gray eyes. No one with such clear Kireth heritage and fine, rich garments could be anything other than a mage. But where was his gold mage service armband? His brown slacks and plain white shirt were crisp and clean, and he wore the latest fashionable cut. His head had an arrogant tilt as he looked me up and down.

A mage, right here in our bakery. We were in trouble. I nodded a greeting as he took my small hand in his large one. Something about his gaze had my cheeks growing hot, as though he liked what he saw and wanted to keep looking. What was wrong with him?

“Weslan, this is my stepdaughter, Ariella. Ella, this is Weslan Fortis,” Zel cast him a smile and looked back to me. “He’s going to be staying here and helping you with the bakery now.”

He was— Wait, what?

I dropped his hand like a hot stone and glared at my stepmother. “I don’t need any help.”

“You’re about to graduate from the academy, and who knows what your apprenticeship will be like? Don’t you think it will be nice to have someone to help with the baking and deliveries so you don’t have to do it all yourself?”

I willed Zel to understand, so I wouldn’t have to say anything that might give us away. “But that’s beside the point, Zel! Do you really think that someone like ... him ... should be here with us?”

Zel only smiled at me and placed a calming hand on my bare arm.

Weslan took a reflexive step backward. Did that mean what I thought it did?

“Weslan is exactly the right person to be here with us.”

I stared at her, silently begging her not to speak the words I had dreaded hearing for so many years.

“He knows.”

[Click here](#) to get *Fated: Cinderella’s Story*, Book 1 of the *Destined* series.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Kaylin Lee](#) lives in the Pacific Northwest with her real-life hero husband and sweet toddler girl. After a lifetime of staying up too late reading stories, she now wakes up too early writing them. It was probably inevitable. She loves to connect with readers on social media (find her on [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#), and [Twitter](#)), so come say hey!