

A coming-of-age story set in a vividly real, fantasy world, in which a young man must choose to embrace cruel tradition, walk away from it, or risk his life changing it for the better.

Elantra: Song of Tears, Lady of the Dawn

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**Elantra:
Song of Tears,
Lady of the Dawn**

A Novel by

Christine E. Schulze

Elantra: Song of Tears, Lady of the Dawn

ELANTRA: SONG OF TEARS, LADY OF THE DAWN
CHRISTINE E. SCHULZE

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PROLOGUE

"Crispin! Crispin!" the wind seemed howled in his ears, a cruel reminder of the girl he abandoned. Its cry raged so lifelike, so real, its strains even stronger than the crash of the thunder, the cold wind whipping the trees. He stumbled on, the maddening realness of the cry nearly consuming him.

"Crispin!"

This time it echoed so loud, so close, so desperate. She pleaded: Why did he not help her, come for her, rescue her..?

A dark chill pierced him, its intensity so great it knocked his breath away, his vision blackening.

Then, the inky nothingness formed into color and shape once again, but the immense cold and dread did not vanish from his heart, his entire being.

He turned.

The Dusk pursued.

No normal rain chased him now. The great evil she warned of spread, following as if mocking him, he who held the power to stop it yet had done nothing. He, a *coward*...

He freezes as it rushes towards him, eyes widening with the horror of his stark, sudden weakness. He is too late. Now, nothing remains in his realm of possibility. Why take another step? All directions lead to destruction...

The horror shimmers in his eyes, and not because of the black veil of shadow-rain steadily creeping towards him. No, something else rushes forward, *someone*, the Dusk trailing on her heels. The Elantra. Lea. A swift, poignant moment seeming to last forever.

She stretches her hand towards him, her perfect white skin and golden waves of hair emitting a softness and a glow even in that engulfing darkness. An angel painted against a canvas of endless, hopeless emptiness. A lovely yet terrible picture, one which his memory ensnares as an eternal, tormented, tormenting captive. Lil Gail's head poking from the silky folds of the Elantra's white dress. In both their eyes reflects the greatest fear and pleading he has ever seen. He darts towards them, feet suddenly unfrozen, hand outstretched. The Elantra's fingers ripple like faltering sunbeams towards his, but just as his skin brushes against the wavering light of her warm flesh—

He finds himself thrown to the ground, hard, as though slamming into a brick wall. Though stunned for a moment, the heart-wrenching cry vividly pierces, the cry of his name as she screams it one, last, desperate time, Lil Gail crying out like the frightened child she is—

When he looks up, the Dusk has stopped. Like a wall made of glass, clear yet tainted black, a barrier between them. Right on the other side stands the Elantra. No, curse the twisted gift of the name granted her. Lea. She was his Lea. Yet her eyes tell him she is no longer his own.

There is only hurt. Deep, profound, unfathomable hurt. Because he failed her

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once again. He failed both her and Lil Gail. And soon they will come, and the Dusk will take her.

The Dusk will take her.

CHAPTER I THE LIE OF ADELAR

"The Elantra, the queen of our people, dwells high in the clouds alongside the Moragon, her king and husband.

"Daily, the laughter of the Elantra fills the sky, causing a magical rain to drizzle down. Its spell provides Adelar with all it needs for success, happiness, and prosperity."

Lies. Children's fairy tales.

He hugs his knees close, as if realizing he shivers violently, as if comprehending the snow falling thickly, beginning to coat his hair and clothes, as if he actually senses the intense iciness piercing him. But he does not. Because the truth pierces harshest of all. The truth that his entire life has been a lie up until this point. The point when he had revealed to him the lie, the children's fairy tale. The day he was inducted to become a "knight" of Adelar, a true "man", the next potential Moragon of the land. Well, if that's what being a man means, if that's what defines noble, he will remain a cowardly boy the rest of his life.

But then again, isn't he a coward already? No, not by the Walkers' standards. That's what they are called, those like himself who flee from the truth, unable to face its horror. Yet perhaps there is a way for him to do something more, a way to breach the borders of Moragon's domain. But where, how even to find those borders? One chance. The riskiest of all. Yet such choices comprise his life from this point on. Flee from the truth, or risk his life trying to change it.

He stands, some of the snow tumbling from his golden-red curls and the thin cloak draping his shoulders. His deep blue eyes flash set, determined, harsh as the cold surrounding him, the cold he still refuses to feel. He trudges forward.

Each step is made with a force which crunches through the thick layer of snow and ice blanketing the Wood. Fueled by a before unknown rage, he plunges on, recalling the events of the past week...

He had just turned seventeen, the coming of age for men and women alike in Adelar, the age when they could legally marry, own property, join the knight-hood, and engage in other such adult responsibilities.

The boys and girls were always taken separately into the Wood for the ceremony, each of the two groups led by a male elder, a respected authority figure.

Crispin remembered when his sister, Joellen, had been inducted. She returned so...different, so changed. Quiet, reserved, afraid, it almost seemed. Afraid of what? Crispin could not tell, and she never would.

Thus, Crispin made his way a bit nervously, along with the other teenage boys, into the deep and seemingly endless Wood. But his curiosity far surpassed his fear. They all marched and chatted excitedly, at the top of an adrenalin high. This was the farthest any of them ever traveled from the high city of Adelar, the closest they had ever been to Adelar's outer borders. Which wasn't very far, actually. But to them, the whole thing seemed so daring, dangerous, exciting. The orangish tints and gray cast of the twilight sky added to the effect of this mood, as did the increasing dark as they delved deeper into the Woods.

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"Excited, Crispin?" Tytonn asked, eyes gleaming as he bounded up next to him. Tytonn was one of Crispin's closest friends. Though that wasn't necessarily saying much.

"Guess so," Crispin said. He really was, more about the whole experience than the actual ceremony itself. He hadn't given too much thought—or care—to what it meant to become a man.

"You *guess*?" Tytonn sniffed. "Is that the best you can do? Well, as for *me*, I can't *wait* for the whole thing to be done and over with!"

One of the boys elbowed him jokingly. "You just want to marry Johanna, that's why."

"Hush Snip," Tytonn snorted.

The boy laughed. "Nothing to be ashamed of. She's a mighty pretty girl, smart too. As for me, I can't wait to settle down with a shop of me own. Finally be able to display as much of my furniture and other carvings as I please, without having to share the profit with Father."

"What about you, Crispin?" Tytonn asked. He bounced as he walked. Crispin held back a laugh, walking along calmly, concealing his own excitement.

"Must be a girl you have your eye on or something?"

Crispin shook his head. "Afraid not."

"Awe, Crispin. You can be such a bore."

Crispin smiled and said nothing, thinking there *was* something he wanted. Freedom. Freedom to travel and explore beyond the world of Adelar. Why not? He had no family left, save his sister who was happy in her marriage. He could always return to visit his friends. He possessed no real roots. He would miss his home, yet perhaps he could establish ties elsewhere...

"Halt!" the deep, commanding voice of the elder boomed. The boys came to a stand-still, and a hush fell over them.

"We have arrived at the glen where the ceremony shall take place."

The boys glanced all about the seemingly ordinary, tree-shaded glen, eyes darting about swiftly. Except for Crispin, whose eyes studied the elder.

He was tall, and though the lines of his tanned face and balding, tanned head showed he was aging, his body still held an evident strength, just as his eyes always held that stern glint, even when he smiled. It was there as he smiled at the boys. It was there as he met Crispin's staring gaze.

"Crispin," he said, "why don't you start a fire for us? Tytonn, Snippet, you help him out."

It did not take them long to gather enough twigs and branches and set a good fire blazing in the midst of the clearing. When all the boys were seated, encircling the fire at the elder's command, the elder stood and said, "Welcome to the coming-of-age ceremony, one of the most important of ceremonies held in Adelar, and, I am sure, in your lives. The ceremony will last one week, during which we shall all sleep under the stars together, learning the most important strategies for survival, hunting, any important skills that you can use to best serve your kingdom, your future families, and yourselves. Your wit and brains shall be tested. Most importantly, I shall teach you all of the most important aspects of our kingdom's history and laws. But for

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now, we feast. And after the feast, you shall each get your first taste of root tea. And after that, I've prepared a special surprise for you all."

Whispers of excitement coursed throughout the glen. They looked up as the trees rustled, branches snapping. Then the young maidens appeared, bearing baskets of freshly-prepared foods. The boys knew the rules. They were prohibited from touching or even speaking to any of the girls during the coming-of-age rituals. Tytonn always thought of it as 'a male-bonding type of experience'. But no one could prevent them from looking. They looked on longingly, especially Tytonn as Johanna set a basket next to him. She winked, smiling without any sign of timidity, before flouncing from the clearing.

Even after the girls disappeared, he kept staring at the same place she'd stood, until Snip knocked him back into reality, "Hey, fasting's not a necessary part of the ceremony, you know, but if you're not going to eat that—" Tytonn then proceeded to defend his roasted chicken and grapes.

After the meal was finished, the elder stood once more and announced, "And now, the root tea shall go around. This is a rare drink, offered only at the most special occasions. Each of you take a sip and pass it on to the next person."

The boys' eyes gleamed as the golden goblet was passed around, and they each received their first taste of root tea.

"Isn't this brilliantly exciting?" Tytonn whispered to Crispin as he passed the cup on.

"Oh, yes," Crispin muttered, too enthusiastically to sound sincere, inwardly thinking the root tea tasted a good deal like...well, things he'd rather not say, even to himself.

Finally, the goblet returned to the elder.

"Well, boys, you have just taken place in your first ceremonial feast and root tea drinking. More of that to come in the following nights. But now, for your surprise..."

A few of the boys were still finishing their grapes, but most stopped in mid-chew. Crispin didn't, but he studied the elder carefully, chewing slowly. Crispin narrowed his eyes habitually, wondering what the elder could be up to. He'd never liked the elder, perhaps because the elder never liked him. But he listened respectfully as the elder continued:

"You're in for a treat tonight, boys. Tonight, we head for the clouds to see the Moragon himself."

The most complete silence ensued. Crispin's head shot up as he stopped in mid-chew, eyes gleaming with thrilled curiosity.

The elder glanced at each face in turn, casting a slight nod and smile at Crispin's enthusiasm, before saying, "Well come on. What's with all the long faces? Not excited about getting to see your king? You should all be honored!"

Crispin glanced around. Worry, skepticism, fear flooded each face. What were they all scared of? Were they all just nervous? But no excitement seemed to linger in any of their expressions. None whatsoever. Even the fearless Tytonn looked grave. Worry passed over Crispin's face as well as he finished chewing and swallowed.

Then again, why be worried? The elder's expression quickly grew annoyed. True, Crispin could care less about the elder's so-called "feelings", but he didn't want

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this to spoil the other boys' first ceremonial night, so he jumped up and volunteered, "I'm ready, my lord. Let's get going."

The boys' eyes pierced like icy knives. Were they angry? Did they really not want to go *that badly*? He was feeling awkward, though he managed to keep calm, even with the elder smiling a forced smile, making a lousy attempt to conceal his surprised disgust. Crispin wondered about the elder's reaction but didn't worry about it. The elder was often disgusted with Crispin, whether he had cause to be or not, or, in this case, even if Crispin was reacting exactly the way he seemed to want them all to react.

"Very well then, you all heard the boy. Everyone stand, and we shall make for the Moragon's domain, Thunder Castle."

The boys stood, reluctantly glancing at one another. Several moved to put out the fire, but with a swipe of one of the elder's arms, the fire extinguished.

A few of the boys showed mild interest through their worry, and the elder explained, "Magic. More of that to come as well, in the following days. Alright now, everyone form a circle and hold hands—tight."

As Tytonn took Crispin's left hand, he squeezed it unnecessarily tightly, hissing beneath his breath, "Good going, Crispin."

The boy who took Crispin's right hand held it as loosely as he could. Apparently, he'd rather ignore the elder's warning than hold something as disgusting as Crispin's hand, would rather risk having his hand explode or whatever could happen if the spell went wrong. Crispin was use to being disliked, but this was just ridiculous, and he was the verge of telling Tytonn so when the elder's voice boomed:

"Everyone ready? Hold very still..."

"Fyre Claudia!"

In a whoosh of wind, fire, and smoke, they surged upward. Pressure, force, and warmth encompassed them, yet they remained unharmed. It felt uncomfortably unnerving though, surrounded by so much fire, its heat pulsing so close, glowing with constant flares that reminded them of its imminent power to destroy, if it so chose. So they were all glad it came to a end in only a few seconds.

But relief proved a short comfort. Looking down, they saw their feet resting upon semi-transparent, white wisps—clouds. Above, dark clouds billowed in the night sky, shielding their view of the stars, robbing them of their last visible points of light. Until a burst of light shot out, and they all jumped, for even this light provided no comfort. Its jagged edges grappled swiftly and sharply. And again, it came—the lightning—not far from them. As the lightning continued, it illuminated great, billowing clouds formed into the shape of a great castle. Points of faint, orange light shone within the windows; these too offered no comfort.

Crispin now understood the boys' fear in coming to such a place. Even he had difficulty blocking the fear from his eyes. But how could they have known what sort of a place the Moragon, the high king over all Adelar, lived in? How could they have known about—?

"The Thunder Castle," the elder announced proudly. The lightning cast an unfriendly pallor upon his already-unfriendly face, enhancing the glint gleaming hungrily in his eyes, a glint focused upon—

"It's the Moragon," Tytonn gasped, squeezing Crispin's hand even more tightly.

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Crispin looked. At the top of the steps leading to the castle, two great doors had opened, and before them stood a man. Crispin could not see him well, but as the lightning cast its cruel illumination, he could make out dark hair, clothes, and eyes. Eyes dark in more than one way. Dark like the elder's, now glistening with an almost maddening thirst.

"Do you see now what mess you've gotten us into?" Tytonn hissed. Finally realizing he still gripped Crispin's hand, he jerked away.

Crispin saw. And he wished very much he'd held silent when the elder asked who wanted to come and see the Moragon. But it was too late to turn back now.

The Moragon swept in long, flowing strides down the steps, throwing his arms open wide, and his voice echoed with the same authority booming in the clouds' announcing thunder, "Well, well. Welcome to the Thunder Castle, my boys! And you, Gernaldo, so good to see you again."

"My lord." The elder bowed as the Moragon stopped before him. The boys stood clustered behind the elder, as if standing too near the Moragon might somehow poison them.

"Well, come in, all. No need to be shy. I've much to show you."

They followed him up the cloud steps, but not before he took the chance to glance at each of their faces. He did it so quickly, and yet his stare grazed like frostbite, a burning sensation not easily shaken off. Crispin felt the Moragon's eyes lingered upon his longest of all. Crispin tried to not look afraid but found this hard to do without looking defiant. But the Moragon only smiled, if but for a half-second, before his eyes roamed to the next boy.

They climbed the steps and entered the double doors which closed with a thunderous clap, echoing ominously, sealing them within and their freedom without.

They stood in a great hall. The walls, floor, and ceiling were all made of cloud smoothed as much as it is possible to smooth cloud. A great chandelier hung from the ceiling. Furniture and pictures unsuccessfully tried to offer comfort.

"Welcome," the Moragon's voice sounded even larger in the vastness of the hall, "to my abode. I am honored to have you all with me this evening. The elder and I are old friends, so I arranged this special meeting."

"And the boys are quite grateful, I am sure." The elder's eye was sharp. They all bowed and pretended to be quite grateful.

"What shall I show them first?" the Moragon asked.

"It is your castle, my lord," the elder replied.

"And you are my guests."

"Yes, my lord. The Elantra then?"

The Moragon looked surprised. No, amused. But not surprised. Crispin wondered if anything actually surprised the Moragon.

"You think they are ready?" he asked.

"May as well cut right to it, eh?" The elder's eyes gleamed greedily.

Moragon nodded and smiled. "I usually save the best for last, but if my guest so wishes, that is what tonight's lesson shall be. Come, boys. Tonight I take you to meet your queen, the Elantra."

As they followed him to the far side of the dimly-lit hall, Crispin wondered who would marry such an ominous man. Unless she too was just as frightful. Tytonn

looked both grave and even more terrified than before, as if contemplating the same thing.

They were led out of the hall, into a corridor, and down a flight of winding steps. Distant thunder echoed outside. This sound became muffled, then altogether disappeared as they descended deeper and deeper. Torches lit the way, though their eerie light offered no more comfort than the lightning.

Finally, they reached the bottom of the stairs and another door, which the Moragon opened.

They stepped into a narrow hall with many doors on either side, all of them closed and secured with heavy locks. But the Moragon focused on a singular door at the far end of the hallway. It was plain, its ebony smoothness gleaming faintly in the torchlight. A strange place for a queen.

“Alright, boys.” The Moragon slipped a key into the lock, turning it. “Meet your lovely future queen...”

The door swung open. They peered inside, Crispin pushing forward.

All he could see was a small form cowering in the shadows. The outline of her delicate, huddled body. Thick, wild waves of hair draping over her shoulder. And, very clearly, her eyes. He stared. They were the most beautiful eyes he ever beheld, a wondrous, bright blue, like a million suns rising on a million sapphire skies. Such beautiful eyes should have been shimmering. He felt they once were, for she must be a Scintillate. No other race possessed such blue eyes. But they shimmered no more. They held only wide-eyed fear as they passed from one face to the next. So completely hopeless. As if she could not help but be frightened, knowing she must feel that way the rest of her life. He had never seen such an utter hopelessness. It broke his heart.

Her eyes lingered on his a bit, and he thought he saw a trace of the glimmer which once shone in them. At first, he thought he returned a small bit of that hope. But she looked slightly dazed, as if she thought she was dreaming; kind faces were surely an impossible gift...

“Who is she?” he asked.

“Why,” said the Moragon, “this is your future queen, the Elantra.”

Crispin started. *This is a joke*. He didn’t speak the words aloud. But he felt them. Vividly, potently. And he thought them over and over in his mind. Instead, a different question slipped from his lips, “What is her name?”

There was a pause, then laughter. The Moragon was laughing. The Moragon was laughing *at him*. Then the elder laughed, and all the other boys. Crispin finally tore his eyes from the poor girl to stare at them all sharply, but he found himself caught off-guard yet again. He was the only one who had been shocked. He was the only one who ogled in horror. They all laughed the same, nonchalant laugh, as if this was all okay. As if it was normal.

“Ahh, you amuse me, my boy.” The Moragon slapped Crispin casually on the back. Crispin cringed as though something very dirty touched him, glowering. “Does it look like she’s *worth* having a name?”

“But she’s your wife—she’s our queen!”

“She is our queen, yes. She still has a few months left before she’s old enough to be made my wife though.”

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“Queen, wife, what does it matter? She’s a human being! What is she doing locked up in that cell!?”

“Calm the boy’s curiosity and show him, won’t you, Tytonn?”

The Moragon held up his hand. A whip materialized in clutched fingers. He handed the whip to Tytonn who blankly returned the knowing smile. Crispin glanced at both faces, the overwhelmingly gleeful yet cold masks stunning him. It was not til Tytonn was in the cell, whip raised over the girl, that Crispin’s senses returned and he shouted, “No!”

He lunged forward, but the elder held him back. He squirmed away, but the Moragon pinned him to the ground, forcing his head up. Crispin watched, he *had* to. As though the Moragon placed some spell on his eyelids so they would not shut. The strokes lurched, *one, two, three...four...five...*and with each, a small whimper. He stopped counting after ten and tried to shut out the cries culminating into blood-curdling screams. But they echoed in his mind, and she writhed as Tytonn beat her mercilessly, and finally—

“Enough,” the Moragon commanded, casually, as though bored. Tytonn returned, breathing heavily, as though he just received the greatest adrenalin rush of his life. The Moragon let Crispin up, and he raced towards the girl but was bounced back by some invisible barrier.

He could only look around wildly into the faces of each man. No—boys. They were all foolish, hateful boys, unworthy to be called men. He breathed heavily. His eyes passed over the Moragon, who smirked. Then he quickly let his eyes dart away, lest the temptation to throw himself at the Moragon overcome. His eyes locked on the elders’, as cool and resolute as all the rest. Crispin growled lowly, “*What was that?* What did that girl do to deserve that? No, never mind...

“Nothing could warrant such a terrible punishment.”

“Punishment?” the Moragon mused coolly, still smirking. “Why, tis not a punishment, but an honor to be the Elantra.”

Crispin continued to glare, not sure where he was going with the conversation.

“Why,” the Moragon added, “where did you think the rain of Adelar came from? That daily, silver rain which keeps us all healthy, prosperous, happy? You didn’t really believe all those stories of ‘laughter filling the sky with rain’, did you? No, my boy. Our happiness takes sacrifice. Someone must make a sacrifice, so we can live the best life possible. And after all, she’s just a girl. And she’s just *one* girl. You don’t even know her. Why should it concern you?”

Again, Crispin stood speechless. This was the most absurd thing he ever heard of, something he expected of some pagan, uncivilized tribe, not from an Amielian, civilized kingdom. If that’s what they could be called anymore.

“The boy had no parents,” the elder said flatly.

“Ahh, of course.” The Moragon turned his focus back to Crispin, who still stood in an angry daze. “Our laws state the secret of Adelar can be revealed only by a person’s parents before they come of age, if those parents so choose. So I understand if all this is a bit of a shock to you.”

Crispin’s eyes flashed up as if to say, “Shock? That’s not even the half of it.”

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But then the elder was saying, “I think we’d best get back to our ceremony.” His voice echoed foggily, surreal in Crispin's mind. It was *all* surreal, *unreal*, it *had* to be...

“Of course, of course. It was so nice to have you all over. Great fun. Allow me to escort you out...”

He led the way through the winding castle. Walking like an incomprehensible zombie, Crispin glanced at the faces of those he thought he knew, thought were his friends. But all the boys looked calm as ever; some even looked amused. So they had known. They knew the whole time and thought nothing of it. They pretended to be terrified to come here, but really, they couldn't be more elated...

“Til tomorrow night then?” the Moragon asked, once they stood safely outside the castle.

“Til tomorrow night, my lord,” the elder replied.

With that, the Moragon nodded at each of them, his sharp eyes meeting theirs. Crispin caught the slight smirk once more as they fell upon him but a moment longer. Then he slipped up the steps and disappeared into the castle.

The elder merely said, “Hold hands, boys.”

They all did so. And again the uncomfortable whoosh took them, this time back to Adelar. But Crispin was too sick with horror to feel its uncomfortableness.

Back on firm ground, the elder said, “It’s been a long night. Tomorrow shall be a long day. Let several gather wood for a fire, and let all make ready for bed.”

All marched solemnly to obey. Crispin still couldn’t judge their faces. They no longer seemed so ecstatic. Nor did they seem upset...

“My lord,” Crispin struggled to keep a patient, steady tone, “May I speak to you in private a moment?”

The elder’s eyes narrowed, as if weighing whether it was worth his time. But he said, “Of course, Crispin. Come.”

They moved to the edge of the clearing.

“What is, Crispin?”

“My lord, I mean no disrespect. But what went on tonight—I think you know it was entirely unacceptable. It was just wrong.”

“What are you talking about, Crispin?”

Crispin blinked. And stared. And blinked again. And fought the urge to throttle some sense into this man they were supposed to be looking up to for council and guidance.

“What am I talking about?!” he shouted, for once abandoning the thought of holding back.

“Crispin Rachendorf, if you would kindly lower your voice...” the elder seethed between gritted teeth, eyes not bothering to conceal their loathing gleam.

“*I will not!*” he yelled even louder, just to spite the old fool. A fire already burned, and the boys paused to watch and listen.

“I will not! I just learned *everything* I’ve ever known, *ever*, in my entire life is a lie! And the worst part is how disgusting the truth really is!”

“Crispin—”

“We claim to be an Amielian kingdom. Bull-feathers! Amiel tells us in the White Scrolls to honor women and respect them, to treat them like treasures. And

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how does telling us we all live in some perfect, fantasy world, then crushing our spirits at seventeen, do us any good?" Crispin half-yelled, half-cried. His mind was still half trying to deny, half trying to accept and cope with the horrified truth. He caught his breath and he continued, "When my sister came back from her ceremony, she was so changed, and now I know why. Because when she learned the truth, she was scared out of her wits about becoming the next Elantra. That was years ago, and she's *still* never really been the same!"

"But your sister was not the Elantra. Nor my wife. Nor anyone we love or hold dear. So what does it matter?"

Crispin blinked and stared. The man's tone was so cold, so completely and unfathomably heartless, that he could do naught but blink and stare. His eyes passed the other boys'. The fire added to their vacant expressions a dark, unearthly glow. They too seemed resolute. Crispin could hardly believe it. His breathing quickened as he glanced frantically at each face. Certainly there must be one other who questioned. How could they all just accept the truth as right, just because some man's law told them it was just how things were? *How?*

"Do you mean to tell me," he said finally in a quiet tone, struggling to steady his voice, on the brink of another outburst. He dare not let his eyes meet those of the elder, wanting to poke those cold eyes right out of the man's head, "do you mean to tell me you think it's right or just that one person's happiness should be sacrificed for that of all others?"

The elder pondered for what seemed a very short moment, then replied, "I do not care for the happiness of all others, Mr. Rachendorf, only my own and my family's. And so long as the magic of Adelar protects that, I voice no complaint. You would be wise to do the same. Content yourself. You are in no danger. Why, you could end up being the next Moragon yourself—"

That was the breaking point. Crispin's smoldering eyes blazed at the elder, the fire reflecting in them a burning, blood-crimson glow.

"I will NOT be the next Moragon! I would *never* be charged with such a filthy crime—!"

"You'd do best to quell that temper of yours, Mr. Rachendorf. Sit down and re-join the ceremony—"

"No, my ceremony is *over*! I'm more of a man than any of you will ever be. You're all cowards!" His eyes flashed into each of their blank, blinking faces, then back to the elder's incensed eyes.

"Most of all, *you*," he growled lowly. "For getting them to believe in something you *know* is wrong."

He stormed off, brushing past the elder who called, "I'm giving you one, last warning, Mr. Rachendorf. I don't think this is something you want to take so lightly. Come back, join us, let us talk."

"No, thank you!" he shouted bitterly, sprinting into the shadows of the Wood.

The elder's vacant eyes turned upon his new clan of loyal, unsuspecting allies.

"Kill him."

Some looked at each other questioningly, some jumped to obey. In the end, none would refuse the stare of the elder and rushed into the Wood after their prey.

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Crispin ran faster than he'd known he ever could, and it seemed, for a time, the others lagged behind. Sounds of feet crunching upon fallen branches and snow melted into the distance.

"Crispin."

Crispin nearly tumbled, stopping short at the sudden command.

He looked up. Tytonn glowered, holding a branch, the end blazing.

"Crispin, turn back now, while you still have the chance."

"I could say the same for you," Crispin said between gasps. "You can come with me, Tytonn. You don't have to stay and be subjected to—"

"It's over, Crispin, don't you see?" he snapped bitterly. "The Moragons grow in power with each succession. Even if we wanted to fix things...by our generation, they've gone too far. It's too late.

"Go, Crispin. I'm giving you a chance."

"And I'm trying to give *you* one as well, Tytonn."

One of the boys shouted, "Over here! I see him!"

Footsteps echoed nearer.

"Go!" hissed Tytonn.

Crispin hesitated for a moment, but seeing his friend wasn't going to budge, bolted for the trees.

"Crispin, wait."

Crispin skidded to a halt and faced Tytonn, who said, "If you *do* come back, don't expect me to be able to defend you again. This is truly your only chance."

Crispin nodded. Then he disappeared into the shadows of the forest. The sky stretched its onyx blanket over him, starless, as if the evil reigning in the heavens had suffocated those bright, twinkling beings' very souls, snuffing their innocent glow. He embraced that dark, merging into the blackness of the night.



And that had been the end of it, his parting with the world of Adelar. The world he once thought he knew. The world of lies and false happiness.

Now he was going back to meet that lie, his home...

His greatest enemy.

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