

A Tempo – Amelie, Year 10, NSW

The candle flickered against the sombre depth of the wooden room bringing forth an incandescent glow. Petrichor overwhelmed all senses and droplets of water barged through the timber defences above our heads. The downpour became our bubble, a world in which it was only me and her, shielding us from the cruel inevitability of the world. My life was an ostinato– repeating and repeating until it became monotonous and I lost track of where I was.

That was until I got swept away in a hurricane of madness that was Elena Castelle.

My fingers slide up and down the strings of my cello, creating a wave-like string of melody that travels all around me– the only sound breaching the silence of the bustling plaza. Many people walk by: men with top-hats, tuxedos and polished shoes, women with skin tight corsets and bustles hiding beneath their gowns, men with torn rags draped over their forms and children with scraped skin peeking through their unkempt clothes and hair, all minding their own in blissful ignorance.

Loud whispers of gossip filled the air: “The princess was born out of wedlock,” “a mine thief’s been running loose stealing thousands from the royals.” “Sarah’s husband got locked up for stealing!”

My eyes flit around the plaza, trying to catch anyone who would throw a coin into the tattered hat at my feet, then our eyes meet. Pools of gold send my brown ones into a trance, trailing down her figure as I trace her long, golden hair that cascaded down to just below the waist. As I bring my eyes back up, I notice the ironed, crimson skirt sitting under her white coat and I hear the small clinking of her shoes as they approach me.

A gust of wind blows my skirt out around me and drags my mahogany hair across my face, obstructing my view of the lean figure that now stood in front of me.

“Quite the necklace you have. An heirloom perhaps?”

Her voice was soft and sang sweeter than any melody I had ever played. I follow her eyes down to where my necklace sits between my collarbones.

“Yes, my mother’s,” I reply, bringing a hand to touch the vermilion crystal struck hanging onto a string of twine.

“It’s not any day you see a fine crystal like that sitting on the neck of a pretty lady who does not belong to nobility,” she remarked, dragging her eyes away from my necklace to meet mine. “Would you, perhaps, consider parting ways with it? Of course, for a hefty sum of money– Amerite isn’t cheap– you could buy yourself a new instrument!” she continued, following me as I packed my cello and bow into its case.

“No,” I paused, “this is the last remaining piece of my mother I have left. It is worth more to me than any riches you could possibly offer.”

“Fair enough,” she grinned, looking into my eyes. “It would be hard to part with such a beautiful gem like that!”

She paused to look around before bending down and bringing her lips to my ear. “I hear, there’s been someone runnin’ around stealing Amerite from the mines. You should watch out. For all we know, you could be next,” she whispered.

Her breath felt hot against my ears and blood rushed to my face from the proximity. There was no denying the mysterious woman was beautiful. Long golden hair, sharp eyes and plump lips. Tall and lean, she could easily get any man or woman she wanted.

“...I’ll be sure to keep that in mind” I murmured. My voice came out quieter than I had thought. My heart was racing as I tried to think of a snarky remark to distract myself from the heat pooling in my cheeks. “I didn’t take a noble like yourself to be one for gossip,” I laughed, hoping to ease the drumming in my chest.

“You could hardly call this gossiping,” she replied, “more like a warning.”

“A warning?”

“A warning. I said you could be next, didn’t I?”

“So you did. Are all nobility as laid back as you, Miss...?”

“Castelle, Elena Castelle.” she answered nonchalantly, my eyes widening in realisation.

My shoulders tensed and my grip on my case tightened. The Castelle family, second to none other than the royal family. Neither had a particularly respectable reputation, especially among common folk. Years of mutual prejudice and hatred have since divided the Kingdom of Vicaea into two separate worlds, one for the rich; one for the poor.

My thoughts hopped on a treadmill and began running— *how* could she claim her identity so confidently? *How* does she speak of her name so carelessly? Perhaps, is she unaware of the oppression and ostracisation of her people? *Why* is she different from the rest?

I looked up and the sun had begun to set, leaving bursts of pink and orange in its departure. She must have noticed too because she took my hand in hers and brought her lips to gently kiss my knuckles.

“It looks like I shall be leaving now” she sighed.

“Sera Ryn,” I blurted. She cocked her head and let out a quiet hum of confusion.

“Come again?”

“My name, Sera Ryn,” I spoke, a bit slower this time. I noticed her eyes began to crinkle at the sides as a small smile swept across her face. Sure enough, the thumping in my chest started again— loud enough for me to hear it; she had probably heard it too.

“Well then, *Sera*. Until we meet again.” she smiled, bringing my hand to her lips once again, before darting off into the crowds and disappearing. And there I was, standing in the middle of the plaza blushing from head to toe, thinking of how perfectly my name rolled off her tongue.

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Clouds washed over the empty sky, stealing the sun away and creating a sea of grey above my head.

Three days had passed since our fateful encounter and I had since returned to my normal routine, however the euphoric high of our afternoon encounter had yet to fade. As I turn my back on the setting sun, cello case in hand, and begin walking home, the familiar clinking of shoes causes me to turn around.

I'm met with the sight of Elena rushing towards me, calling out my name and my heart starts fluttering again as the sun peeks out from behind the clouds. We talk the whole way towards my house and I gradually forget our societal positions, unlearning years of prejudice in the process. My days with her rush by so quickly as we discover new things about each other, as we confide in each other and learn to grow.

"Sera," she whispers one day, "I'm the Mine Thief."

Perhaps that was when I knew our time was limited, perhaps if I had stopped her then we could be happy, perhaps none of that truly mattered and luck had just slipped through our fingertips.

Instead of that, I asked her "Why?"

"I want to create a better world for you and I."

"Then live for me!" I cried desperately.

"Those with power should help those without," and a sorry smile were all I received.

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Another sunset had fallen behind a light drizzle and I had been walking home, this time without Elena's company. Some small talk had caught my ear and all I could hear was "Vicaea's Mine Thief: Caught and dead" over the sound of my heart thudding in my chest and the now pelting rain.

My mind whispered only one thing as I took off in the pouring rain, repeating her name over and over like a mantra, *Elena*. We had both known we were simply living in sweet, stolen bliss and that our time would soon come to an end. However, now that the end was truly nearing, I can't help but beg for more. I arrived back at the plaza and sat and waited—willing for her to come, just as we had done everyday.

The rain pounds incessantly on the canopy above my head. I return home to be greeted by the ghost of my lover and slump against the wooden walls as I'm lurched back into the monotonous, dreary world I had once survived through. The world that had once been painted over in the most vibrant of colours had been washed away, stranding me in a life I no longer wanted. Eventually, whispers of our sweet promises and clandestine confessions cloud my mind as I finally lull myself to sleep with the comfort of the countless memories that live around me.