

The events in this book are real.

Names and places have been changed to protect
the Lorien Six, who remain in hiding.

Other civilizations do exist.

Some of them seek to destroy you.

Also by Pittacus Lore

I Am Number Four

The Power of Six

PITTACUS LORE

MICHAEL JOSEPH

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I

My name is Marina, as of the sea, but I wasn't called that until much later. In the beginning I was known merely as Seven, one of the nine surviving Garde from the planet Lorien, the fate of which was, and still is, left in our hands. Those of us who aren't lost. Those of us still alive.

I was six when we landed. When the ship jolted to a halt on Earth, even at my young age I sensed how much was at stake for us – nine Cêpan, nine Garde – and that our only chance waited for us here. We had entered the planet's atmosphere in the midst of a storm of our own creation, and as our feet found Earth for the very first time, I remember the wisps of steam that rolled off the ship and the goose bumps that covered my arms. I hadn't felt the wind in a year, and it was freezing outside. Somebody was there waiting for us. I don't know who he was, only that he handed each Cêpan two sets of clothes and a large envelope. I still don't know what was in it.

As a group we huddled together, knowing we might never see one another again. Words were spoken, hugs were given, and then we split up, as we knew we must, walking in pairs in nine different directions. I kept peering over my shoulder as the others receded in the distance until, very slowly, one by one, they all disappeared. And then it was just Adelina and I, trudging alone in a world we knew next to nothing about. I realize now just how scared Adelina must have been.

I remember boarding a ship headed to some unknown destination. I remember two or three different trains after that. Adelina and I kept to ourselves, huddled against each other in obscure corners, away from whoever might be around. We hiked from town to town, over mountains and across fields, knocking on doors that were quickly slammed in our faces. We were hungry, tired, and scared. I remember sitting on a sidewalk begging for change. I remember crying instead of sleeping. I'm certain that Adelina gave away some of our precious gems from Lorien for nothing more than warm meals, so great was our need. Perhaps she gave them all away. And then we found this place in Spain.

A stern-looking woman I would come to know as Sister Lucia answered the heavy oak door. She squinted at Adelina, taking in her desperation, the way her shoulders drooped.

'Do you believe in the word of God?' the woman asked in Spanish, pursing her lips and narrowing her eyes in scrutiny.

'The word of God is my vow,' Adelina replied with a solemn nod. I don't know how she knew this response – perhaps she learned it when we stayed in a church basement weeks ago – but it was the right one. Sister Lucia opened the door.

We've been here ever since, eleven years in this stone convent with its musty rooms, drafty hallways, and hard floors like slabs of ice. Aside from the few visitors, the internet is my only source to the world outside our small town; and I search it constantly, looking for some indication that the others are out there, that they're searching, maybe fighting. Some sign that I'm not alone, because at this point I can't say that Adelina still believes, that she's

still with me. Her attitude changed somewhere over the mountains. Maybe it was with the slam of one of the doors that shut a starving woman and her child out in the cold for another night. Whatever it was, Adelina seems to have lost the urgency of staying on the move, and her faith in the resurgence of Lorien seems to have been replaced by the faith shared by the convent's Sisters. I remember a distinct shift in Adelina's eyes, her sudden speeches on the need for guidance and structure if we were to survive.

My faith in Lorien remains intact. In India, a year and a half ago, four different people witnessed a boy move objects with his mind. While the significance behind the event was small at first, the boy's abrupt disappearance shortly thereafter created much buzz in the region, and a hunt for him began. As far as I know, he hasn't been found.

A few months ago there was news of a girl in Argentina who, in the wake of an earthquake, lifted a five-ton slab of concrete to save a man trapped beneath it; and when news of this heroic act spread, she disappeared. Like the boy in India, she's still missing.

And then there's the father-son duo making all the news now in America, in Ohio, who the police are hunting after the two allegedly demolished an entire school by themselves, killing five people in the process. They left no trace behind other than mysterious heaps of ash.

'It looks like a battle took place here. I don't know how else to explain it,' the head investigator was quoted as saying. 'But make no mistake, we will get to the bottom of this, and we will find Henri Smith and his son, John.'

Perhaps John Smith, if that's his real name, is merely a boy with a grudge who was pushed too far. But I don't

think that's the case. My heart races whenever his picture appears on my screen. I'm gripped with a profound desperation that I can't quite explain. I can feel it in my bones that he's one of us. And I know, somehow, that I must find him.

I perch my arms on the cold windowsill and watch the snowflakes fall from the dark sky and settle on the side of the mountain, which is dotted with pine, cork oak, and beech trees, with patches of craggy rock mixed throughout.

The snow hasn't let up all day, and they say it will continue through the night. I can barely see beyond the edge of town to the north – the world lost in a white haze. During the day, when the sky is clear, it's possible to see the watery blue smudge of the Bay of Biscay. But not in this weather, and I can't help but wonder what might lurk in all that white beyond my line of sight.

I look behind me. In the high-ceilinged, drafty room, there are two computers. To use one we must add our name to a list and wait our turn. At night there's a ten-minute time limit if somebody is waiting, twenty minutes if there isn't. The two girls using them now have been on for a half hour each, and my patience is thin. I haven't checked the news since this morning when I snuck in before breakfast. At that time nothing new about John Smith had been reported, but I'm almost shaking in anticipation over what might have sprung up since then. Some new discovery has been uncovered each day since the story first broke.

Santa Teresa is a convent that doubles as an orphanage for girls. I'm now the oldest out of thirty-seven, a distinction I've held for six months, after the last girl who turned

eighteen left. At eighteen we must all make the choice to strike out on our own or to forge a life within the Church. Of all who've reached eighteen, not a single girl has stayed. I can't blame them. The birthday Adelina and I created for me when we arrived is less than five months away, and that's when I'll turn eighteen, too. Like the others, I have every intention of leaving this prison behind, whether or not Adelina comes with me. And it's hard to imagine she will.

The convent itself was built entirely of stone in 1510 and is much too large for the small number who live here. Most of the rooms stand empty; and those that aren't are imbued with a damp, earthy feel, and our voices echo to the ceiling and back. The convent rests atop the highest hill overlooking the village that shares the same name, nestled deep within the Picos de Europa Mountains of northern Spain. The village, like the convent, is made of rock, with many structures built straight into the mountainside. Walking down the town's main road, Calle Principal, it's impossible not to be inundated by the disrepair. It's as though this place was forgotten by time, and the passing centuries have turned most everything to shades of mossy green and brown, while the pervasive smell of mildew hangs in the air.

It's been five years since I started begging Adelina to leave, to keep moving like we were instructed to. 'I'm going to be getting my Legacies soon, and I don't want to discover them here, with all of these girls and nuns around,' I'd said. She had refused, quoting *La Biblia Reina Valera* that we must stand still for salvation. I've begged every year since, and every year she looks at me with blank eyes

and talks me down with a different religious quote. But I know my salvation does not lie here.

Past the church gates and down the gently sloping hill, I can see the faint dimness of the town lights. In the midst of this blizzard, they look like floating halos. Though I can't hear the music from either of the two cantinas, I'm sure both of them are packed. Aside from those, there is a restaurant, a café, a market, a bodega, and various vendors that line Calle Principal most mornings and afternoons. Towards the bottom of the hill, on the southern edge of town, is the brick school we all attend.

My head snaps around when the bell dings: prayers are five minutes away, followed directly by bed. Panic sweeps through me. I have to know if anything new has been reported. Perhaps John's been caught. Perhaps the police have found something else at the demolished school, something originally overlooked. Even if there's nothing new at all, I have to know. I'll never get to sleep otherwise.

I fix a hard stare on Gabriela García – Gabby for short – who sits at one of the computers. Gabby's sixteen and very pretty, with long dark hair and brown eyes; and she always dresses slutty when she's outside the convent, wearing tight shirts that show off her pierced navel. Every morning she dresses in loose, baggy clothes, but the second we're out of sight of the Sisters she removes them, revealing a tight, skimpy outfit underneath.

Then she spends the rest of the walk to school applying makeup and redoing her hair. It's the same with her four friends, three of whom also live here. And when the day ends, they wipe their faces clean during the walk back and re-dress in their original clothes.

‘What?’ Gabby asks in a snotty voice, glaring at me. ‘I’m writing an email.’

‘I’ve been waiting longer than ten minutes,’ I say. ‘And you’re not writing an email. You’re looking at guys with their shirts off.’

‘So what? Are you gonna tell on me, tattletale?’ she asks mockingly, as though talking to a child.

The girl beside her, whose name is Hilda but who most kids in school call La Gorda – ‘the fat one’ – (behind her back, never to her face) laughs.

They’re an inseparable pair, Gabby and La Gorda. I bite my tongue and turn back to the window, folding my arms across my chest. I’m seething inside, partly because I need to get on the computer and partly because I never know how to respond when Gabby mocks me. There are four minutes left. My impatience segues to full-on desperation. There could be news right now – breaking news! – but I have no way of knowing because these selfish jerks won’t give up one of the computers.

Three minutes left. I’m nearly shaking with anger. And then an idea pops into my head, and a grin plays across my lips. It’s risky, but worth it if it works.

I pivot just enough to see Gabby’s chair in my periphery. I take a deep breath and, focusing all my energy on her chair, use my telekinesis to jerk it to the left. Then I quickly thrust it right so hard it nearly topples over. Gabby jumps up and yelps. I look at her in mock surprise.

‘What?’ La Gorda asks.

‘I don’t know; it felt like somebody just kicked my chair or something. Did you feel anything?’

‘No,’ La Gorda says; and as soon as the word is uttered, I move her chair a few centimeters backwards, then jerk it to the right, all the while remaining at my spot by the window. Both of the girls scream this time. I thrust Gabby’s chair, then La Gorda’s again; and without giving their computer screens a second glance, they flee the room, screaming as they go.

‘Yes!’ I say, rushing to the computer Gabby was using and quickly typing the web address of the news site I’ve deemed most reliable. Then I wait impatiently for the page to load. The old computers, combined with the slow internet here, are the bane of my existence.

The browser goes white and, line by line, the page forms. When a quarter of it has loaded, the final bell rings. One minute until prayers. I’m inclined to ignore the bell, even at the risk of being punished. At this point I don’t really care. ‘Five more months,’ I whisper to myself.

Half of the page is now up, revealing the top of John Smith’s face, his upturned eyes, which are dark and confident, though within them there’s a sense of discomfort that seems almost out of place. I lean on the edge of my seat, waiting, the excitement bubbling up inside me, causing my hands to tremble.

‘Come on,’ I say to the screen, trying in vain to hurry it. ‘Come on come on come on.’

‘Marina!’ a voice barks from the open doorway. I jerk around and see Sister Dora, a portly woman who’s the head cook in the kitchen, staring daggers at me. This is nothing new. She stares daggers at everyone who walks through the lunch line holding a tray, as though our needing sustenance

is a personal affront. She presses her lips together in a perfect straight line, then narrows her eyes. 'Come! Now! And I mean *right* now!'

I sigh, knowing I have no choice but to go. I clear the browser's history and close it, then follow Sister Dora down the dark hallway. There was something new on that screen; I just know it. Why else would John's face have taken up the entire page? A week and a half is long enough for any news to turn stale, so for him to command so much of the screen means there's some significant new piece of information.

We walk to Santa Teresa's nave, which is huge, with towering pillars leading to a high, vaulted ceiling and stained glass windows lining the walls. Wooden pews run the length of the open room and can seat nearly three hundred people. Sister Dora and I are the last to enter. I sit alone in one of the center pews. Sister Lucia, who opened the door to Adelina and me when we first arrived and who still runs the convent, stands at the pulpit, closes her eyes, lowers her head, and presses her hands together in front of her. Everyone else does the same.

'*Padre divino,*' the prayer begins in somber unison. '*Que nos bendiga y nos proteja en su amor. . .*'

I tune it out and look at the back of the heads before me, all of which are bowed in concentration. Or just bowed. My eyes find Adelina, sitting in the very first row six pews in front of me and slightly to the right. She is on her knees, deeply meditative, her brown hair pulled into a tight braid that falls to the middle of her back. She doesn't look up once, doesn't try to find me at the back of the room like she used to during our first few years here, a covert smile on

each of our faces as our eyes met, acknowledging our shared secret. We still share that secret, but somewhere along the way Adelina has stopped acknowledging it. Somewhere along the way the plan to bide our time until we felt strong enough and safe enough to leave has been replaced with Adelina's desire – or fear – to simply stay.

Before the news of John Smith, which I'd told Adelina about when it broke, it had been months since we last talked about our mission. In September I had shown her my third scar, the third warning that said another Garde has died and that she and I are one step closer to being hunted and killed by the Mogadorians, and she had acted like it didn't exist. Like it didn't mean what we both know it means. Upon hearing the news about John, she merely rolled her eyes and told me to stop believing in fairy tales.

'En el nombre del Padre, y del Hijo, y del Espíritu Santo. Amén,' they say, and everyone in the room makes the sign of the cross in unison with this last sentence, myself included to keep up appearances: forehead, navel, left shoulder, right shoulder.

I had been asleep, dreaming of running down a mountain with my arms out at my sides as if I was about to take flight, when I had been awoken by the pain and glow of the third scar wrapping itself around my lower leg.

The light had woken several girls in the room, but thankfully not the attending Sister. The girls thought I had a flashlight and a magazine under the covers and that I was breaking the rules of curfew. On the bed next to mine, Elena, a quiet sixteen-year-old with jet-black hair she often sticks in her mouth when speaking, had thrown a pillow at me. My flesh had begun to bubble, and the pain had been

so intense I had to bite on the edge of my blanket to remain quiet. I couldn't help but cry, because somewhere Number Three had lost his or her life. There were six of us left now.

Tonight I file out of the nave with the rest of the girls and head to our sleeping quarters filled with creaky twin beds evenly spaced apart, but in my mind I'm hatching a plan. To compensate for the hard beds and the concrete chill of every room, the linens are soft and the blankets heavy, the only real luxury we're afforded. My bed is in the back corner, farthest from the door, which is the most sought after spot; it's the quietest, and it took me a long time to get it, moving one bed closer as each girl left.

The lights are shut off once everyone is settled in. I lie on my back and stare at the faint, jagged outline of the high ceiling. An occasional whisper breaks the silence, followed immediately by the attending Sister shushing whoever it came from. I keep my eyes open, waiting impatiently for everyone to fall asleep. After a half hour the whispers fade, replaced by the soft sounds of sleep, but I don't dare risk it yet. Too soon. Another fifteen minutes and still no sounds. Then I can't stand it any longer.

I hold my breath and inch my legs over the edge of the bed, listening to the rhythm of Elena's breathing beside me. My feet find the icy floor, and turn cold instantly. I stand slowly to keep the bed from creaking and then tiptoe across the room and towards the door, taking my time, being careful not to bump any beds. I reach the open doorway and rush out into the hall and down to the computer room. I pull out the chair and push the computer's power button.

I fidget waiting for the computer to boot up and keep peering towards the hallway to see if anyone has followed. I'm finally able to type in the web address and the screen goes white, then two pictures take shape in the center of the page, surrounded by text with a top headline in bold black letters too blurry to read. Two images now – I wonder what changed since I tried to check earlier. And then, at last, they come into focus:

INTERNATIONAL TERRORISTS?

John Smith, with his square jaw, shaggy dark blond hair, and blue eyes, fills the left side of the screen, while his father – or more likely Cêpan – Henri takes up the right. What's there isn't a photo but a black-and-white artist's sketch done in pencil. I skim the details I already know – demolished school, five deaths, abrupt disappearance – and then come to the breaking news only now being reported:

In a bizarre twist, FBI investigators today uncovered what is believed to be the tools of a professional counterfeiter. Several machines typically used for the creation of documents were found in the Paradise, Ohio, home rented by Henri and John Smith in a hatch beneath the floorboards of the master bedroom, leading investigators to consider possible links to terrorism. Creating local uproar within the Paradise community, Henri and John Smith are now considered a threat to national security, fugitives; and investigators are asking for any and all information that might lead to their whereabouts.

I scroll back to John's image, and when my gaze meets his, my hands begin to shake. His eyes – even in this sketch there's something familiar about them. How could I know them if not from the yearlong journey that brought us here? Nobody can convince me now that he isn't one of the six remaining Garde, still alive in this foreign world.

I lean back and blow my bangs out of my eyes, wishing I could go in search of John myself. Of course Henri and John Smith are able to elude police; they've kept hidden for eleven years now, just as Adelina and I have. But how can I possibly hope to be the one to find him when the whole world is looking? How can any of us hope to come together?

The eyes of the Mogadorians are everywhere. I have no idea how One or Three were found, but I believe they located Two because of a blog post he or she had written. I had found it, and then I'd sat there for fifteen minutes thinking how best to respond without giving myself away. Though the message itself had been obscure, it was very obvious to those of us looking: Nine, now eight. Are the rest of you out there? It had been posted by an account called Two. My fingers found the keyboard and I'd typed a quick response, and just before I hit the Post button, the page refreshed – somebody else had responded first.

We are here, it read.

My mouth had dropped open, and I'd stared in utter shock. Hope flooded through me from those two brief messages, but just as my fingers had typed a different reply, a bright glow appeared at my feet and the sizzling sound of burning flesh reached my ears, followed closely by a searing pain so great that I'd dropped to the floor and

writhed in agony, screaming at the top of my lungs for Adelina, holding my hands over my ankle so no one else would see. When Adelina arrived and realized what was happening, I'd pointed at the screen, but it was blank; both posts had been deleted.

I look away from John Smith's familiar eyes on the screen. Beside the computer sits a small flower that's been forgotten. It's wilted and tired, shrunken down to half its normal height, a brown, crispy tinge at the edge of its leaves. Several petals have dropped, now dry and crinkled on the desk around the pot. The flower isn't dead yet, but it's not far off. I lean forward and cup my hands around it, move my face near enough so that my lips brush against the edge of its leaves, and then I blow hot air over it. An icy feeling shoots down my spine and, in response, life bursts through the small flower. It springs upward and a verdant green floods the leaves and stalk and new petals bloom, colorless at first, then turning a brilliant purple. A mischievous grin sprouts on my face, and I can't help but think of how the Sisters would react if they were to see such a thing. But I'll never let them. It would be misinterpreted, and I don't want to be cast out into the cold. I'm not ready for that. Soon, but not just yet.

I turn off the computer and hurry back to bed while thoughts of John Smith, somewhere out there, swim in my head.

Be safe and stay hidden, I think. We'll find each other yet.