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ORACLE

ASHLYN DAUBE

THE BLOOD LEGION: ORACLE

In a world that doesn't forgive, Rem Lumes has found a way to survive. A self-taught thief and swordsman bound by an honor code, Rem is a mercenary up for grabs to the highest bidder. His specialty is returning stolen items to their original owners. One bad job lands Rem on the wrong side of the Legion, a clan of sorcerers, and the only way to repay the debt is to return Luca, a Legion runaway.

Rem would do almost anything to not be in the Legion's debt. Even take Luca back, someone too entangled in the Legion's web to know better. When Luca's power starts to unravel and his life becomes endangered, Rem promises to do anything to protect him. Anything except betraying the Legion. But what will Rem do when he realizes the Legion may be what's endangering Luca's life the most?

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

THE BLOOD LEGION: ORACLE

By Ashlyn Daube

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

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THE BLOOD LEGION: ORACLE

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Photo Description

A blond swordsman in a red cloak holds a young man with reddish-brown hair and shackles around his body, arms and legs, close to him. He holds a sword in front of them protectively, while the chains start to break with the color of blood.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

In my younger days, I was a rogue. I stole things for money, or simply for thrills, and I was very good at what I did. Throughout the underground I became legendary. But as the years wore on, the luster wore off, and I found myself at an impasse. My life felt empty. So I embarked on a career change, learning all I could about the ways of a warrior. Now my skill with a blade is nearly equal to my skills as a thief; I work for whoever hires me, returning objects to their rightful owners and battling whatever human or creatures stand in my way.

This job is different. A rescue mission. Simple, or so I think. When I meet the man whose clan wishes for his safe return, I find many surprises... The magical prowess he has. His claim that his clan has dark plans for him. The fact that our destinies are intertwined more deeply than I ever expected...

Sincerely,

Julia

Story Info

Genre: fantasy, young adult

Tags: magic users, adventure, mythical creatures, oracle, sweet/no sex, reformed thief

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THE BLOOD LEGION: ORACLE

By Ashlyn Daube

Chapter One

The Thief

Filina Sommerset liked to say that she had seen everything. She was one hundred and four years old, after all. Mother of nine children, grandmother of twenty one, great-grandmother of thirteen, and great-great-grandmother of one, she had outlived seven of her children and three of her grandchildren. Seen storms that seemed to desire the destruction of the world, floods that turned her village upside down, and fires that burned so bright, night turned into day. She had seen the best and worst of people, the birth of her children, and the death of her children.

Yes, Filina liked to tell people she had seen everything, yet she had never seen a man wrapped in a black-hooded cloak climb through her third story window before. Her room wasn't just on the third floor; it crested a steep hill with a two hundred foot drop down a ravine. No one would be crazy enough to break into her house. Perhaps the legendary thief Leire would dare—his reputation was such that many in Lenen called him *The Shadow*. But why would he? Filina had nothing of value. No gold. No jewels. She had shared every treasure she ever received with her children. She kept only trinkets and memories.

The invader silently moved one leg inside her bedroom, slowly pulling himself up. Impressive, but no matter how extraordinary the feat was, she wasn't going to allow a thief to just waltz his way into her home without her permission.

She reached for the double crossbow next to her bed. It had been bought by her youngest great-grandson, Niel, who, at fourteen, thought his great-grand-nana needed some extra protection. He'd been right.

A candle flared, shrinking the darkness in the room.

“Stop right there!” Filina ordered, holding the crossbow steady, hand on the trigger.

The thief faltered, his leg twisting oddly. He missed a step and almost tripped. Not very thief-like. “Bloodless!” he cursed, putting his hands up in defeat. Smart lad, you didn't mess with an old lady and her crossbow.

“Why are you here, boy?”

"I'm not a boy. I'm a man. I just turned twenty-one." Filina raised her brow and her crossbow trying to see the face under the hood. "I will turn twenty-one in two months," the thief corrected.

"I am one hundred and four years old. You are merely a child."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Why are you here? I sense you are not some random thief. Random thieves don't risk their lives. You are here for something, and you will come back to get it when I am not here. What is it?"

The thief moved slowly, the hood of his cloak hiding his face as he glanced past the window he came in, possibly measuring if a jump out was survivable. It wasn't. Filina wasn't going to accept anything other than the truth. The question was, was the man willing to give it to her or die with the secret?

"A paper," he admitted. Guess he wanted to live.

"My will." Filina smiled. It wasn't the first time someone wanted to get their hands on it. No matter how much she shared with them, some of them would never be satisfied. "Which one of my children asked you to steal it?"

"Niel."

"Niel?" Filina's confidence almost vanished, and she lowered her crossbow. The thief rushed toward the door, but stopped when she raised the crossbow once more. "What reason did he give you that would compel you to steal from me?"

"He said he was your caretaker. That your mind had gone and you refused to give your will to anyone. That you rewrote it stating that you wanted everything you owned destroyed after your death. He asked me to retrieve it so he could fix it and keep it in a safe place."

"Rubbish! My mind is fine."

"Your hands, too."

Filina didn't find that the least bit amusing and fired one of the arrows from the crossbow. The thief hit the floor faster than a rubi bird diving for prey. "That was a warning. I have done many things during my life, and I hope murder will not become one of them."

"I see an arrow, I duck." The thief held very still. He was apparently no fool, and he knew she had an extra arrow on the bow at the ready.

“Hush! Get up.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The thief slowly stood, taking care to keep his face hidden.

“How much did Niel pay you?”

“One hundred rio.” He pulled a small pouch from his cloak and offered it up. “This is half of the payment. I don’t want it anymore. This was a mistake.”

Filina considered taking the money, but she had a better idea. “I didn’t know thieves were such cheap labor. Keep the money. I’ll pay you one thousand rio if you work for me.”

The thief held the little pouch in front of Filina for another minute, maybe hoping she’d take it. She didn’t, and he put it back in the inside pocket of his cloak. “What is it that you want retrieved, Mrs. Sommerset?”

“My grandson, of course. And I want your name.”

The thief tugged down the hood of his cloak. He was clearly younger than he had stated. Wind-snarled fair hair tumbled over his shoulders, and several strands had snagged in the clasp of his cloak. Others had stuck to his forehead from the sweat. He’d be a handsome lad if not for the pieces of straw in his hair and the dirt on his face. His skin was tanned from the sun, but it wasn’t marked with the lines of age an older man would have. He blinked slowly, his eyes a gray so vivid they spoke of the troubling things he’d seen, things that shouldn’t be seen by children’s eyes.

“You’re not twenty, are you?”

The boy shook his head. “Seventeen.”

“Your name?”

“Rem Lumes.”

Chapter Two

A Child's Honor

Rem sat in the middle of Filina's living room cradling a cold cup of milk. Certainly not the way he thought this job would end.

The old lady scared him. No way was she that old! Her long peppered hair was tied in a ponytail, and really old people didn't have any hair. Sure, she had wrinkles and her step hobbled a tad, but her violet eyes never reflected any uncertainty, and her hands didn't shake once as she kept that crossbow aimed at his chest. When she shot the arrow at him he thought that was it, that he was going to feel it piercing his chest, but the arrow flew far above his head and sliced into the wall. Rem guessed Mrs. Sommerset didn't mean to kill him, but why take the chance?

The march downstairs had been quiet. Rem had tried once to hasten his steps—no way the old lady could keep up with him—but Filina saw through him immediately, and poked his back with the tip of the arrow as a warning. There was no way he was getting out of this job, was he?

Once on the main floor, she made Rem go to her kitchen and pick up the milk jug next to the hearth, as well as a jar of honey and two crystal cups. Rem wanted to bolt through the door, but he had accepted her odd job offer and was honor bound to complete it no matter how much he wanted to leave. What in Jove's name had he been thinking when he accepted a lousy hundred rio for this job?

The little crystal cup looked as if it would shatter if Rem just put the slightest pressure on it. Filina took a sip from her cup. "Too cold." She hovered her hand above it until steam rose from the cup.

Rem's eyes widened. "You're Legion!"

"Ha!" Filina snorted, doing the same with Rem's cup. "I haven't been involved in Legion business for decades, but yes, the power runs in my family. I can do silly things like this, but nothing big. I can't set houses on fire, or people for that matter."

A shiver crawled up Rem's back. "The candle..."

"You didn't notice?" Rem shook his head and sipped the warm honey-flavored milk. He despised the Legion and anyone involved with it. Most

Legion members thought they were better than normal people just because they had a little magic. Rem had yet to meet any Legion members who could really do anything other than parlor tricks, but he'd heard the stories of those so powerful that they could kill men by simply looking at them. For a second, Rem thought about asking Filina if any of those stories were true, but decided he'd rather not know. People in the Legion were all just a bunch of braggarts, anyway.

"There's a guest bedroom down the hall to the right. You can spend the night."

Rem spit some of the milk back in the cup. "Is that alright?" he asked.

"I'm not so mean-spirited to kick out a homeless child in the middle of the night. Especially not after hiring you."

"I'm not—" Rem was about to say he wasn't homeless, but that wasn't true. Last night he'd slept in a barn next to a horse and in the morning, washed himself on the banks of the Simas River. He had to admit there was no fooling the old lady. He'd considered using the fifty rio down payment to get a room at an inn, but he was glad he hadn't. He felt utterly humiliated that he'd been tricked into being a simple thief. His job required sneaking around and taking things without permission, but at least they were things that needed to be returned to their rightful owners. Or so he'd thought. A sickly feeling gnawed deep in the pit of his stomach. How many other people had tricked him into stealing? How many times had he been naïve enough to believe them? "I'll leave at dawn. I'll bring back Niel."

Filina put her cup down next to the honey jar. "Do you know where to go?" she asked.

Rem remembered a small home. Shaking Niel's hand. It gave him a headache. "Yeah, I can handle it." He had to. Rem had made the mistake; he owed her, and had accepted the job when he'd put the coin pouch back in his pocket. He was homeless, a child as far as Mrs. Sommerset was concerned, and alone in the world, but if there was one thing he had, it was his word.

The importance of keeping one's word had been one of the things he'd learned from his parents. They were little more than blurry images fading from his memory now—a woman squeezing him tight while she ran, a man behind her protecting them. Their voices had become echoes, ghosts he barely remembered. Sometimes, Rem wondered what thing his parents had run away from, and why, after going through all the trouble, they had abandoned him.

Vague memories, scattered images, the creepy sensation of webs and dead leaves brushing his bare skin as his mother hid him inside the hollow of an old tree. She'd kissed his forehead and held his hand while she told him to be quiet. His father promising they would be right back. Rem remained inside the tree for days, cold and hungry. Alone and afraid, he cried for his mother and father, but they never came back for him.

To keep your word. To tell your child you would be back when you had no intention to.

Rem had learned to live with that. It was one of the reasons he had decided to start his new life without that taint. To be someone who left goodness behind in the world, not something bad. To start living honorably because he knew how it felt when someone gave you their word and you waited and waited for them to keep it, before slowly realizing they lied to you, and that everything you thought was true in the world, was actually false.

It took him almost his entire life to realize this, but he was here now, and he was not going back.

Mrs. Sommerset remained quiet. Perhaps she was already regretting asking a child to work for her? "There is food in the kitchen. Help yourself to anything you need." She went up the stairs, leaving Rem alone with a slow burning candle.

This would be the perfect time to run away. The front door tempted Rem as he stood. There would be little consequence to leaving, except his broken honor. Rem put everything back in the kitchen. No one would ever say he was a bad house guest. He'd take this job. He'd decided for his honor's sake, but most of all, he desperately wanted the thousand rio. With coin in his pocket, he wouldn't have to sleep in barns anymore. Maybe he could even settle down somewhere.

A simple bed next to the window and a scuffed wardrobe completed the small guest room. It had been a long time since he'd slept on a real mattress. Rem removed his cloak first, and threw it on the right side of the bed. His belt and sheath were next. He'd hidden the fact he'd been armed, but his sword never left his side. His boots and leather top were last off, leaving him in only his plain white shirt and his trousers, which were passably clean and comfortable. The only bad thing was that, unfortunately, they tended to smell. Rem sniffed the inside of his shirt. It didn't smell, but could use a rinse in the river next time he washed. He could deal with a little odor for a few more days until he found Niel and brought him to face his great-grandmother.

He really had no idea how he was going to convince Niel to come back with him. He'd just have to figure it out as he went.

Rem fell on the bed, his eyelids feeling suddenly heavy. Today had been a strange day. Everything sped by in a big blur. Walking here, passing random strangers, climbing the wall of the house, almost getting skewered by an arrow. Rem wanted a clear picture of the many little events that had happened, but the pillow was soft, and as soon as he closed his eyes, sleep claimed him.

Chapter Three

Leila

Niel's village, Vesca, was only half a day's walk from Mrs. Sommerset's house. The fact he'd traveled the path the day before made the trek seem shorter.

While walking past empty fields and small patches of forests, Rem thought of ways to convince Niel to return to Mrs. Sommerset's house. Whichever idea he came up with, meant he'd have to confess that he did not have Filina's will, as his contract with Niel stipulated. He couldn't lie and say he'd lost it. Maybe just telling the truth would work best? He could tell Niel the will was still in Filina's possession. He only had to think of reasons for why he was unable to obtain it and why Niel needed to go back with him.

At the edge of the woods, Rem skidded down a steep incline and only managed to save himself from landing in a spiky thorn bush by grabbing the root of a large oak. As he straightened his clothes, he noticed a small collection of chimneys in the distance. Smoke rose from a couple of them, probably mid-day meals being prepared in the little wood and brick houses. The familiar smells brought Rem back to a time when he was younger and peeking through windows, hoping someone would take pity on him and give him some food. Rem's stomach complained about being empty; he made a mental note to grab something to eat.

Vesca was a small village wedged between a forest, two farming fields and the Simas River. The village shops surrounded the simple fountain at the center, with residences extending to the village's edge.

Niel's home wasn't far from the fountain, six houses away if he recalled correctly. The exposed-beam, two-story house blended perfectly well with the rest of the town's dark lumber structures. It was clear all the houses had been built in the same period of time. Rem knocked on the door three times, right under the fancy *L* carved into the wood. The story he'd chosen was now clear in his mind.

The door opened slowly, and a small freckled face framed by dark blond curls peeked through the gap. "Can I help you?" she asked, lisping through a missing front tooth.

Rem didn't remember seeing the girl before. "I'm here to see Niel Sommerset."

"Uncle Niel left for a Legion meeting. I dunno when he'll be back."

Not the Legion again. Rem frowned. "Do you think he'll be back by nightfall?"

The girl shook her head. "Last time Uncle Niel went to a meeting, he was gone for two weeks."

Two weeks! Rem couldn't wait that long. Mrs. Sommerset had only left him with the fifty rio Niel had given him, promising to pay the full one thousand once Niel had been delivered and that wasn't even close to being enough for his basic needs. He could barely afford food with what he had.

"Do you know where the meeting is?" Rem asked. The girl stood there silently for a moment and then started closing the door. "Wait." Rem slid off his cloak, flipped it over, and pulled the hood over his head, hiding himself in a sea of red. "Niel was supposed to take me," he lied.

The girl's mouth formed a small "O" shape and she no longer seemed quite so hesitant. "Nevenen," she said, then closed the door in his face.

"Bloodless!" Rem swore under his breath. A pair of elderly women passing by looked at him with contempt, but he ignored them and kept on walking, flipping his cloak back to black before reaching the edge of town. As far as distances went, Nevenen was the closest, most accessible village to Vesca. Most of the food farmed in Vesca was exported to Nevenen. Carts and caravans rode up and down the road between the two villages day and night—it was a short, one hour trip. Unlike Vesca, Nevenen was a large village that hundreds of people called home. A place he would typically avoid.

Rem snuck a ride inside a shinberry cart. He was tired of walking, and a free ride was a free ride as long as the driver didn't notice him. Rem also didn't say no to easily accessible food. Shinberries were too sweet for his tastes, but his hungry stomach didn't care.

Finding Niel or wherever the Legion meeting was taking place wouldn't be easy, but he knew someone in Nevenen who might be able to help. Someone Rem hadn't spoken with in almost a year. Someone he'd rather not see. But that person had the information he needed regarding Niel's whereabouts.

Rem left seven rio on the edge of the cart as payment for the shinberries he'd eaten, and made his way into Nevenen. Crowds of people were walking about now that it was so late in the day. They were heading home. Buying meals from street vendors, Rem blended in easily. The village's center also had a fountain, but much larger than the one in Vesca. A few children sat on the edge soaking their feet. Some were even brave enough to stand in the low water and splash around. An old man tossed a coin in while he walked past, causing the children to all scramble for it, splashing a young woman busy pasting wanted posters for the thief, Leire, around the base of the fountain.

The Rubi's Nest was the largest tavern in Nevenen, and aptly named after the large population of rubis in the area, the little red birds that were famous for dive bombing into the Simas, as well as anyone unlucky enough to walk into their territory. Pubs weren't usually very welcoming to people Rem's age. The owners preferred to reserve their limited space for regulars or men with plenty of rio to waste. But with the sun still out, the place was half-empty, and no one spared Rem a second look.

A dark-haired girl with striking, sun-warmed skin tended the pub. The platinum strands caught in a ribbon running from her forehead to the ends revealed her inhuman heritage—the thin fae blood that ran in her veins. Rem hesitated. She looked exactly the same as the last time he'd seen her. Strong, motivated, dazzling.

Rem leaned against the far end of the counter, distancing himself from the rest of the patrons. He waited until the girl turned and noticed him.

Rem waved. "Hello, Leila."

Her eyes shot up, met his, and she dropped the mug from her hands as she ran to him. She leapt over the counter and threw her arms around him.

"Rem!" She held him tightly, like she was afraid he'd disappear if she let go. Maybe it hadn't been such a good idea to vanish for months without saying a word. "You—how could you leave like that? What have you been doing? How—" The words tumbled out one over the other. Her eyes filled with relief. "I missed you," she said, and hugged him again. Rem immediately regretted coming here. He wasn't ready to see her yet. He wasn't over their last meeting. Not completely.

She was shorter than him now. Had he really grown so much in just a few months, or had she always been shorter?

She certainly hadn't been when they first met. Rem had been so young when his parents abandoned him in the tree hollow, it was pure luck he survived at all. Found by a hunter—or so he'd been told by the orphanage priestesses—he'd spent the next four years in an orphan house, where every day was a battle for the limited supply of food the priestesses gave. The older children always got first dibs. Some shared their portion with the younger children, but most just kept it for themselves. After his best friend, Ziemi, died when they were six, Rem decided to run away from the house, thinking he would fare better in the streets.

He'd been wrong.

After less than a month, Rem had been on the verge of death, starving and hurt. He'd often wished to simply fall asleep and never wake so he wouldn't be hungry anymore. His hands had been bruised and covered in scars from scrambling for meals. He'd seen three other kids his age, die. Others disappeared. No one cared about them. No one cared about *him*—no one except Leila.

She'd been a wise, old, eight when she found him. She'd grown up in the streets and was strong and resilient, yet she was barely able to keep herself alive. She'd been scrounging for food when she found him lying in a puddle of mud, bruised from a fight, and suffering from three days without eating. It would have been so easy for her to walk away and let him die, but unlike so many others would have, she didn't. She grabbed his hand and took him to the place she called home. Rem sometimes wondered, *why him*. Why not someone else? He wasn't the only street kid dying to live.

They survived together. They learned how to get food. There were many ways—begging, working, thievery—to name a few. The latter proved the most productive. One of them would create a distraction while the other stole. Thievery became their lives, their way to survive. They got so good at it, people whispered their name in the shadows. The older they got, the less food they stole. Replaced by things they could sell for coins.

Leila stepped back and tried to clean his face with her sleeve. “You never cared about dirt.”

Rem squirmed away. “I'm fine.”

“You weren't the last time I saw you. Are you still having the nightmares?”
Leila asked.

Rem blinked, as a memory he'd tried to forget resurfaced. He saw a man, a blade, blood. "Sometimes."

Leila grabbed his hand. Her touch was something he'd missed. They'd been inseparable until the day he tried to kiss her. She'd stopped him before he could and said the words that changed everything he believed in. "*You're my brother, Rem. I could never love you like that.*"

It was still too painful to think of that day. Rem had decided he couldn't be around Leila anymore if she didn't share his feelings, so he'd left without saying a word. That had been ten months ago. He thought he'd be over the sting of rejection by now, but the wound still felt tender.

"I need information." Rem pulled his hand away from Leila's grasp, kept his voice just above a whisper.

"Information? Rem... are you in trouble? I thought we were going to stop."

"We have. I mean, I have. I'm finding my own way, doing honest work. I'm looking for a man named Niel Sommerset. He's part of the Nevenen Legion clan. I heard they're meeting somewhere around here."

"You shouldn't get involved with the Legion."

"I'm not getting involved with them. I just need to know where this guy is. Please, Sis."

Rem surprised even himself. It was easier to say the word than he had imagined.

Leila smiled for a second, then turned serious. "If I tell you where they are, you have to promise not to disturb them. The Legion is not to be messed with. The stories I've heard from the Nevenen clan are not kind. A man missing three fingers was here just last week, and he was telling everybody the Nevenen clan had done that to him."

"I'm not an idiot."

Leila's eyes narrowed and that little furrow formed between her brow warning him he better do as she said, or she would pull his ear until he promised, but they were no longer children. At some point she had to let him make his own choices, good or bad. Leila sighed. "Try next to the river, near the abandoned barracks."

Chapter Four

The Legion

Rem thanked Leila and ran off in the direction of the river without looking back. The Simas River meandered for miles throughout the entire country of Lenen, and was legendary for its grandeur and occasional ferocity. It was an unpredictable body of water, as calm as a foggy morning one moment, or furious as a battleground the next. Many people became prey to her current each year, but the Simas gave life more than she stole it, there was no way Lenen would survive without her.

Rem kept to the river bank as he raced toward the barracks. Thank Jove, he didn't have to cross the temperamental Simas. Only a couple of hours of daylight remained. Rem slowed his pace as he got closer to the tree line, just past the brush. It was the perfect place to hide. But the barracks were just ahead, so he had to be cautious. From his hiding spot, Rem heard the men and women of the Nevenen Legion clan chanting.

The flash of red caught his attention. Not many of them, just nine. All had their hoods over their heads, hiding their faces. This was how they identified themselves from people that weren't Legion, from people who didn't have magic running through their veins. Ordinary people like him.

Rem frowned as he crouched down in the brush. He checked that the ties of his cloak were well knotted. He didn't want to risk Legion members seeing the red lining under the black. He hated resorting to that trick, pretending to be Legion—to scare people or hoax them into giving him information. Rem sometimes wondered if using it made him a hypocrite. To dislike the Legion so strongly while at the same time using their very recognizable color to his advantage.

As one, the clan raised their hands in front of them. Each member held a small blade, and with it, they each cut a single line across one of their palms. Rem cringed. Like he needed to be even more creeped out by the Legion's weird rituals. Seeing them like this, hiding, secretive, believing themselves better than anyone else... Rem didn't care if sometimes wearing their red made him a hypocrite.

The Legion members created a circle while continuing their chant. Blood flowed freely from their open wounds as they put their blades away. One of the

group, a man with broad shoulders, stepped toward the middle. His bushy, white beard escaped the concealing hood, but not much else was visible. By the time he reached the center of the circle, the rest of the group hushed, and waited for him to speak.

“We have an intruder,” the man announced. Startled, Rem dropped to the ground, and pressed his entire body into the dirt. Maybe it wasn't him the leader spoke of. Leaves rustled behind him and heavy footsteps followed. It was him.

Rem didn't try to run. That would likely get him killed. And if he pulled out his sword, that would just start a fight and get him killed even faster. No choice. He didn't fight when the dark-haired Legion guard grabbed his arm and hauled him toward the center of the circle where the white-bearded man waited. Rem didn't say a word, either. Surrounded by men and women in red cloaks, he was severely outnumbered.

“Do you know what happens to those who spy on the Legion?” the old man asked as he pulled his hood back. His beard wasn't completely white like Rem had thought, but peppered like Filina's hair. Charcoal gray eyes watched Rem intently—unusual—Legion members generally had vivid eyes of unique colors—gray was common, the same color Rem had. Rem felt the scrutiny of those eyes. “Do you?”

Yes, Rem did. Punishments, shunning, stories mothers told their children to keep them safe in their beds. He'd heard once of a boy who accidentally stumbled upon a meeting, and a week later, they found him floating face-down in Simas. “I'm not spying. I'm looking for someone in your group. He hired me to do a job.”

“Who?”

Rem looked around the hooded figures. He couldn't really see their faces. “Niel Sommerset.”

The old man's brows rose. “Step forward, Niel.” One of the hooded figures slowly made his way to them and pulled down his hood. Striking violet eyes glared furiously at Rem through a mop of short, ash-brown hair that covered his ears. The purple stood out against his pale, olive skin, marred only by a narrow white scar above his left eye.

“I don't know this kid,” Niel lied. Rem wasn't particularly surprised.

“Yet he knows your name.” The old man didn’t seem angry. Slightly amused perhaps. He kept his eyes fixed on Niel. Did he know Niel was lying, like Rem did?

“He hired me to steal from his great-grandmother,” Rem wasn’t above throwing the blame on Niel. He wasn’t the one lying.

The white-bearded man turned his eyes on Rem. “Child, what is your name?”

Rem hated that word. *Child*. He stopped being a child the day his parents abandoned him. Few people could call him a child, just Leila, old ladies with crossbows, and obvious Legion leaders. Rem didn’t want this man’s attention on him; he’d much rather be invisible. He gave the man his name.

“To which clan were you born?”

Rem cringed just thinking about being a child of the Legion. “I’m not Legion. I don’t have any magic.”

The bearded man’s eyes furrowed. “My name is Abraham Thorns. I lead this Legion clan.” The way Abraham stared at him, Rem thought perhaps he should have recognized that name, but he couldn’t remember any story where he’d heard it.

“Nice to meet you,” Rem didn’t know what else to say. This play of meeting, greeting, and talking was a farce. Soon this old man and his clan would reveal their true faces.

“What did Niel ask you to steal?” Abraham asked.

“His great-grandmother’s will.” Once he got started, the entire story spilled out easily, from what he did for a living, to Niel approaching him at the market where he’d been trying to haggle the price down on a pair of napples. How Niel invited him to his home for dinner, telling him the sob story of his crazy nana. And finally offering the hundred rio to retrieve the will.

“You must be pretty gullible to believe a story like that, Rem.” Abraham didn’t hide his smirk, and Rem felt the shame of being the fool, followed by anger and disappointment because it was true. He had fallen for it. He had been gullible enough to believe Niel’s story. Rem always thought he was a good judge of character, that he knew when someone was hiding their true nature. He’d seen it enough from living on the streets. Learned it the hard way from the corner men who dressed like counts and barons and convinced young girls or

boys to go with them. Rem had almost been one of them until Leila found him and kicked the man between the legs.

Once he grew older and knew the cruelty of the world, it was him doing the deceiving, him setting up acts. Him jumping and rolling through dirt until his skin was broken, allowing Leila to slap him until his eyes were red and his cheeks swollen, so when he knocked on a door and begged for food, they wouldn't say no. Distracting vendors, pretending he wanted to purchase a trinket while Leila put things in her satchel. Is this what his victims had felt when they'd realized they'd been deceived?

"Unless..." The amusement on Abraham's eyes vanished, and he extended his hand toward Rem's head. Niel's eyes widened, and his teeth pressed against his lip.

It took every inch of Rem's self-restraint to stay still as Abraham touched his forehead with the tip of his fingers. Rem felt the tinge of sorcery there, like a virus invading his consciousness, and his skin crawled from the sensation.

Abraham snapped his hand away, and his eyes were no longer amicable. "There's a spell in the boy's mind. You have broken faith, Niel."

Rem shook away the feeling of power inside his head. A spell in his mind?

The Legion guard that had dragged Rem from the bushes grabbed the back of Niel's neck and shoved him closer to Abraham.

"Lorez, please. No need to be so rough. Niel has been one of us for a few years. He knows the rules and what happens when you break them." Abraham's words were kind, but the tone was harsh.

Rem thought back to yesterday. It was still all so blurry. He couldn't grasp onto anything that happened between meeting Niel in the market, and finding himself inside Filina's home. Everything was hazy, a mess of disjointed moments inside his head—pieces of memories—Niel touching his hand, walking through an empty field, seeing Filina's big house in the distance, staring down at the ravine from the second floor. Nothing clicked until Filina spoke like a snap of fingers, her voice drawing him back from a trance. The only clear thing was standing in Filina's bedroom, needing to steal her will, and being scared of being shot with a crossbow.

Niel stared ahead, like he didn't care what was happening, like he wasn't even there. Anger pulsed in Rem's veins, hot and searing. How dare Niel use him like a puppet! How dare he take Rem's life like it meant nothing. Rem

dashed forward with his hand a tight fist, and landed a savage punch to the sorcerer's face.

Niel's head snapped back, his feet tumbled, and he fell butt first to the ground. Blood poured out of his nose, and his eyes flashed with anger toward Rem. Rem stood ready for Niel to fight back, but Niel saw something behind Rem, and his ire disappeared in a blink. The fight was over without even beginning. Niel wiped away the blood trickling from his nose with the hem of his cloak, and he calmly got back on his feet, a thin smile on his lips.

Lorez suddenly grabbed Rem's arms and held them behind him in a tight grip. Abraham approached and grabbed the hem of Rem's dark cloak. Rem's breath caught. The hood of his cloak had fallen back when he'd punched Niel. Abraham turned over the hem to reveal the red.

"You pretend to be one of us," Abraham's voice rattled. There was such anger there.

I'm dead. They will kill me for this. Niel stepped next to Rem.

"I have never seen such offense to this clan. Both of you," Abraham snapped.

Rem looked around in panic, his breath choked in his throat. He didn't want this to be the last thing he experienced, to die surrounded by figures in red. He should have never accepted Filina's demand. No amount of money was worth his life. Lorez's large hands squeezed his upper arms, and thinking quickly, he threw his head back and slammed the back of his skull into Lorez's forehead, forcing the man to release him. No hesitating this time. Rem went for his sword.

"Put that away, child! Unless you wish to die." Abraham's eyes fumed with rage.

"I think you've already decided that's what you're going to do to me, so I'd rather not." Rem raised his sword. "I've seen what you do to people who offend you." This was going downhill fast. Rem looked around. The six remaining Legion members in the group were closing in. At least two were powerful sorcerers. Abraham of course, and Niel with his sly mind tricks. Odds were high some of the other members were just as powerful, or close enough to be a problem. Did Rem trust his swordsmanship enough to try and escape?

Abraham signaled his clan to a halt. He seemed conflicted. "What about repaying your transgression with a job?" His voice calmed. "Everything will be forgiven. You won't have to fear the end of your life from us."

Rem kept his sword pointed at the elder. "What kind of job?"

"Find something that has been lost and return it to us."

Return something? Rem had a feeling that anything lost or stolen from the Legion would come with endless complications, but what choice did he have? He had to accept the fact he wasn't getting out of here alive unless Abraham allowed it. "If I get this thing back for you? You'll forget I was here? You'll forgive what I wear?"

"Yes." Abraham took a step back. "Merina. Senum," he called.

Two cloaked figures separated from the group and lowered their hoods. They were an odd looking pair. The man's dark brown hair was cut short to the point his ears stuck out. Exhaustion tugged at his green eyes, upstaged by the dark, jagged scar on his chin. The woman seemed small and fragile next to him, younger than him with locks darker than the night. She had been beautiful once, but the bags under her blue eyes had stolen her youth. "Senum and Merina Borges," Abraham introduced the couple. "Their boy, Luca, has run away. His power disorients him, makes him confused. He's wandered away before, but we've always managed to find him. This time he's run far up north, outside our territory. It is difficult for us to go retrieve him without breaking norms with the clans of that area. Luca's Inception ceremony is in four days. That day he will finally become part of this clan, and his blood and his power will become part of us. After that, he will no longer be lost."

Senum put an arm over his wife's shoulders. Merina pulled a small broken rag doll from her cloak and squeezed it. "Please bring our Luca back," Merina begged. Tears trickled from her eyes. This mother wanted her child back. Unlike his own mother, who had left him inside the hollow of a tree and walked away.

"I'll bring him back," Rem decided, lowering his sword. "What does he look like? Where can I find him?"

"Niel will tell you." Abraham grabbed Rem's wrist at the same time he grabbed Niel's. "Bring back Luca, Niel," he ordered, his tone carrying a clear warning. "You have four days." Niel tried to pull his arm back. Abraham's eyes turned dark, and he began chanting.

If Rem could have described what happened next, he would have said an unknown force pulled him off the ground and threw him fifty feet into the air. Abraham's sorcery—his power—was more frightening than Rem ever imagined.

Rem collapsed to the ground, his heart beating madly, his head throbbing. The world spun around him and the taste of blood and dirt mingled on his tongue.

“Bloodless!” Niel swore next to him. He picked himself off the ground and dusted off his cloak. “That spineless bastard!”

“What happened?” Rem asked. He was still trying to figure out what Abraham had done to them.

“He transported us.” Niel was looking around, touching his cloak, searching for something. “And he took my coin pouch.” The statement was followed by another set of obscene sentiments.

“We’re not in Lenen anymore?” Rem hated the idea of not being in Lenen. Lenen was dangerous enough as it was. But being stuck in one of its neighbor countries would be far worse.

“We’re still in Lenen. Up north. Abraham’s power is not that great, but we’re now a few days travel from the barracks where the ceremony will take place. We have to make sure Luca doesn’t miss that ceremony.”

“Not that great? That old man just threw us miles away from where we were just seconds ago! That is—” Rem couldn’t finish the thought out loud. *Terrifying*. So terrifying he didn’t want to think about it. If Niel thought this type of power wasn’t great, Rem didn’t want to find out what *great* was then. Ever.

Niel removed his red Legion cloak, made it into a giant ball, and tossed it in the bushes. He wore a plain outfit underneath, just dark brown trousers with a dark brown vest over a white shirt. A foldable dagger dangled from his belt. Rem took note of that little blade. It was good to know Niel was armed. “Why are you even here?” Rem pulled his hood back over his head. “You’re the last person I want to talk to right now, after what you did to me.”

Niel made a face. “Because it’s such a joy for me to escort two brats back to Nevenen.” He stomped away a few steps, then turned to look back over his shoulder. “This is my punishment for using my power on you.”

Rem felt like punching Niel again, but he restrained himself. “After I return the boy, I’m taking you back to your great-grandmother.”

For a moment, Niel’s expression turned serious. Maybe he regretted what he had done to his great-grandmother after all, and wasn’t a heartless prick like

Rem thought. Niel rolled his eyes. "Absolutely not. Nana Filina will kill me for what I did."

Rem happily imagined hitting Niel on the head and dragging him to Filina's doorstep. He almost said something about making sure Filina would have her day with Niel, but he decided to save it for another time. If what Niel said was true, he was obligated to not only help locate Luca, but bring him back to the Legion for their ceremony in the barracks. The barracks was only half a day's walk from Filina's house. He'd figure something out by then, and complete this awful job and collect his damned one thousand rio.

"There's a town up ahead." Rem pointed past a line of trees to a group of houses where smoke rose from a chimney or two. "We can make it before evening."

"Piri. I've been here once before. It's not a nice town if you're Legion. Luca must be there." Niel tussled his own hair. No one would guess he was Legion without his cloak.

"How do you know?"

"Abraham's power is pretty accurate. That, or he already knew where Luca was."

Rem made sure his sword was safely in its sheath. "If that's the case, then why did he send us to get him instead of doing it himself?"

Chapter Five

Luca

“He’s here,” Niel said, as he walked out of the tiny village inn to meet back up with Rem. Niel dusted his sleeve.

Piri was a cesspool. Discarded trash littered every other alley. The market was closed, and the houses were in shambles or abandoned. Their fountain sat broken and empty, just like the people in this town.

“Why didn’t you go get him?” Rem hadn’t ditched his cloak like Niel had. Unlike the mind sorcerer, he could hide the red.

“Because I’m from the clan Luca is running away from?” Niel replied sarcastically. He walked around to the side of the building and pointed at the light coming from the second floor. “There.”

“What are you pointing at?”

“Climb up to Luca’s window and get him.”

“No! I already had my window climbing exercise for the week. Your great-grandmother’s window access is dangerous—did you know that?”

“Of course I do. Pretty sure I placed the impulse inside your mind to climb to that specific window.”

Rem impulsively threw another punch at Niel. Niel blocked it and returned one of his own, hitting Rem in the nose, and sending him to the ground. “That’s for earlier! I only pretended to let it slide because Abraham was there and because you were pretty screwed on your own with that half-red cloak. Don’t forget, you’re just a kid. I’m an adult.”

“I’m not a kid!” Rem stood, but kept his distance from Niel. His nose wasn’t bleeding, but it hurt. The urge to retaliate was strong, he wanted to hit the egocentric sorcerer badly and erase the smug look on his face. Rem felt emotion after emotion pile up about this deceiving Legion man, and on top of the list was hostility. Manipulating people, trying to steal from his great-grandmother, Niel was a horrible person.

Rem kept the thoughts to himself. It wasn’t worth getting in a fight with Niel, even if he knew he could easily beat the trickster in a fair duel. “I’m seventeen. You can’t possibly be that much older than me.”

Niel looked down his nose at Rem. “I’m twenty-one. I’m an adult. And in this little rescue mission, I’m the boss. Now climb to the window and convince Luca to come with us.”

Luca sat on the edge of a bed in the smallest room of the inn. The bed creaked when he moved, one of the doors of the wardrobe was broken, and dust covered the small chest by the foot of the bed. The little details kept bothering him, because he didn’t remember them, but it didn’t matter. This was where he was supposed to be.

Remier was almost here.

Luca had the dream to come here three days ago. He’d dreamt of walking for those three days, crossing the river, getting a room at this very inn, and sitting on this bed. He glanced at the window.

Remier—the boy with the blond hair. The boy he’d dreamt about.

Luca remembered his mother’s words before he left, when she thought she was going to see him the next day. *You are so important to the Legion, Luca. Without you, we are lost...*

More than once he had heard her say those words, and they always sounded like a lie. It was the same with his father, except Senum didn’t have as much to say. It was possible Luca may never see them again, yet even so, he felt little regret about lying to them—or leaving them. They would never understand, but he had to be here.

Today.

Now.

Voices carried from outside his opened window. Hushed, then loud, *louder*, a scuffle. That, he didn’t remember from his dream. Scraping sounds on the wall followed the voices, closer and closer. A hand appeared on the windowsill, then another, blond hair covering a face hidden under a dark cloak. Suddenly, the blond boy pushed himself up over the windowsill, saw him, then his leg got stuck on the edge, and he crashed face first onto the floor.

Luca laughed joyfully. “Remier.”

“Bloodless!” Rem swore, stubbing his toe on a chair as he stood quickly. That had been his worst window entrance ever. He hadn’t expected to find

someone there just waiting for him. He had expected... he wasn't sure what he had expected. A little kid that played with rag dolls? When he looked up and saw Luca his brain stopped, and his coordination along with it.

Rem slowly pulled down the hood of his cloak. The way Abraham and his parents had talked about him, Rem imagined a kid a few years younger than him, nothing more than a stupid little boy that had run away. But that was not the person standing in front of Rem. No.

Foremost, Luca was not a child. He was a teenager about the same age as himself. Rem had to tilt his head down slightly to meet Luca's eyes. Haunting eyes as blue as the Simas River—a sign of the Legion blood in his veins—surrounded by silky-looking, tousled brown hair. Rem had the urge to run his fingers through it, but shook his head and the nonsensical thoughts away.

Luca tiptoed back and forth like he wanted to close the gap between them, and it took a lot of self-restraint not to do so. “Who told you my name?” Rem looked around the room, half expecting to find other Legion members hiding under the bed or in the wardrobe. The room was empty except for Luca.

There was a sense of awe in Luca's eyes, awe mixed with joy, and he just stared and stared like he knew Rem. *Weird*. “Remier. Hello.”

Luca knew his real name. How? Rem was certain that they'd never met before. He definitely would have remembered those eyes. Dread slithered up Rem's spine. The only way Luca would know his name was if someone told him, if someone set this up. “Are you in on this, too?” Rem demanded. The smile on Luca's lips vanished. “I said, are you in on this?” Rem asked again, hovering over Luca, using his height to his advantage. Luca finally looked away, his face going from happy to doubt to downright sad. The awe was gone.

Rem recalled what Abraham had said about Luca—that his power disoriented him, that his power left him confused. Maybe Luca thought he was someone else? Maybe Luca didn't even remember how he got here.

Luca bit his lower lip and took slow, even breaths. His hands closed into tight fists. His eyes shimmered as he stared at the floor. Rem felt like apologizing. “I didn't mean to yell at you.” He opened the wardrobe just in case there really was someone hiding there. “Look—your parents, and Abraham, asked me to take you back home. Do you even remember running away from home?”

Luca shook his head and stopped biting his lip. “I didn't run away. I just left and didn't tell anyone.” Luca played with the hem of his shirt. “Don't you feel anything when you see me?”

What the heck was he talking about? Maybe Luca really wasn't right in the head, as Abraham had implied. Why hadn't he asked Niel more about Luca before climbing the side of a building like a good dog without questioning him more?

"Why would I feel anything?" Rem said and glanced outside, noticing the sun low in the sky. He was wasting time, so he stepped forward, and reached for Luca. He was going to take this odd, blood-sorcerer back to his clan, no matter what. He'd pay his debt of life to the Legion, return Niel to Filina, and be done with the whole mess. Clearly, Luca just wanted to rile him up. Blood sorcerers, especially Legion members, were people who should never be trusted. Like Niel, who used it to manipulate, like Abraham who abused his power. Rem loathed them all. He wondered what Luca could do, what his power was.

"Don't touch me!" Luca yelled, stepping back. He looked frightened. Truly and honestly frightened.

"Look, your clan told me to take you back. They want you back, and I want my freedom from them."

"No!"

Rem closed in. His fingers brushed the silk of Luca's shirt. Luca's entire body stiffened, and he pulled back as if struck. His mouth opened wide and a soft choke escaped it, spasming once, as if he forgot how to breathe. Luca closed his eyes then reopened them slowly. The blue was gone, replaced by a gray fog. Rem shuddered at the sight. This was not the same person.

Luca took a sharp breath, his voice barely a whisper, thick and ominous. "If you touch me, you cannot go back. You will fall in love with me, and we are going to suffer."

Chapter Six

Luca's Words

"I said something weird, didn't I?" Luca covered his mouth. His eyes were a clear blue again, the fog in them gone.

Rem hesitated, but only for a moment. "Quite." That had been a premonition, or as close to one as he had ever seen. Rem didn't really believe in the predictions of fortune tellers. He'd met a few, but they had all been shamblers with little or no talent. The only one he'd met that he thought could be real had been a sixty-year-old woman in the village of Beru—near the desert—that told him he would take a life before his seventeenth birthday. She'd been right.

But this Legion runaway—Rem wasn't sure what to think. His common sense told him it was smoke and mirrors, a carefully developed plan to scare him, but his gut hesitated.

If Luca's words were true—If Rem closed the space between them and touched Luca—it would be him choosing the fate of Luca's prediction. That he would fall for him.

Rem shook his head and snapped away the nonsense. He didn't believe in premonitions. He didn't believe in fate. Life was an accident. His own life was an accident—when he met Leila, when he ate moldy bread when there was nothing else, when he drove a sword into a man's heart—none of those things could have been his fate.

Fate was a lie.

Rem closed the gap left between him and Luca and grabbed his arm. His thumb rubbed the soft skin over Luca's wrist. One second. Two. Three. Testing Luca's words. "I've touched you, and I'm not in love with you. And to make it clear, you're not really my type. You're too short. I like darker hair. You're eyes... well, maybe I like your eyes. They're beautiful." Rem felt Luca's pulse under his thumb speed up. "Not that it matters, because I would never be interested in someone from the Legion. The only reason I'm here is because I've been threatened. I don't even know how old you are."

Luca stared at Rem's fingers wrapped around his wrist, and placed his free hand over them. "Sixteen," Luca's voice was just above a whisper. "Everything

I've seen—all this time it's just been me, just me. The moments with you... why did I ever believe it would be any other way?"

Strange. Strange. Luca was very *strange*. "You've seen me?" Luca's fingers felt warm against his skin. It had been a while since he'd felt the touch of another person. That touch reminded him of how long he had been drifting from place to place. How much he wanted to stop.

"I've seen you," Luca's words were soft.

Rem was getting tired of Luca speaking in riddles; it was impossible for Luca to have seen him before tonight, but he could tell that Luca believed what he said. "I'm not the same person you saw," Rem said coldly.

The words were a taunt, a test to see how Luca would respond. Surely he would laugh them off or dismiss them. Luca raised his head; there were tears in the corners of his eyes. "No. You're not. Now let me go."

Rem let go. "Look, Luca—"

"No. You're right. I don't know you. I've never met you. It's true that I saw you in a vision, but that's not the same as meeting you in person. You don't say the same words. Or do the same things." Luca opened the chest by the bed and pulled out a long red Legion cloak.

Rem crossed his arms. "Sorry to disappoint."

Luca turned away. "It's fine. I don't care anymore. Just take me back to my parents. My clan. I don't even know what I came here for."

"It's a long journey. A few days."

"I know. I walked all of it." Luca looked dejected. He threw the cloak on and tied the knot slowly, avoiding Rem's eyes. His body suddenly spasmed again, and like before, his breath caught. His voice came out in a raspy whisper, "There will be three incidents to end this journey. If you miss them all, your objective to take me back to my clan will be achieved."

"Luca?"

Luca blinked, then took a deep breath, wiped his eyes, and headed for the door. "Take me back, Remier. I want to go back."

Rem opened the door. "Then let's go." Luca walked ahead, the red of his cloak hiding everything except his head. The red flowed behind him like a waterfall as he rushed down the stairs. Before Luca stepped out into the foyer of the inn, Rem grabbed his arm and pulled him back into the dark of the stairs.

“Are you sure you want to wear your Legion cloak? Isn't Piri famous for being anti-Legion?”

Luca pulled the cloak tighter around him. “It's fine. It's who I am. Who I'll always be until I die.”

Rem let a soft curse escape his lips. If his job was to take Luca safely back to his parents, then the least he could do was get on friendly terms with him. Maybe he should have just pretended to believe what Luca had said, no matter how ridiculous it sounded. Falling in love? He'd thought he'd been in love with Leila, but she only thought of him as a brother. So love wasn't something he wanted to think about right now. Maybe when he was older and wiser, with his past long behind him, and his feelings for Leila completely resolved. Maybe he'd meet a nice girl, or boy, someone uncomplicated. Where they could either make babies or adopt them. Not someone from the Legion. Not Luca. Luca seemed too fragile. Rem had always imagined sharing his life with someone more like himself, someone who could stand on their own two feet, someone like Leila.

Rem sighed. He didn't want to think about Leila right now. She wasn't here. They weren't a team anymore, and wouldn't be again. He was alone now, and this was where life had led him.

The few people at the inn turned their heads as Luca went by, but no one said anything. Luca opened the door and walked outside. He stood out with his red cloak, and every passerby slowed down to stare at him. Some downright stopped and pointed. Luca pulled the cloak over his head. “Which way, Remier?”

“Call me Rem.”

“Which way, Rem?”

Rem pointed toward the town center where Niel was supposed to be waiting, and Luca headed that way. Rem walked beside him for the short walk to the broken fountain.

“When you said there would be three incidents to end this journey, what did you mean? I always keep my word, and I promise to take you back safely.”

Luca glanced at Rem. “Sometimes I can't control the things I say.” As Luca and Rem walked by, a group of young men whispered to each other. “There are many things that could prevent you taking me back to my clan,” Luca sounded distant.

“Like what?”

Luca opened his mouth to answer, but a shout interrupted him.

“Legion scum!”

Luca cringed, but didn't turn around. He hid further under his cloak. Rem did turn around. The shout had come from one of the men they had just passed.

Three men stood just a few feet away, two with dark hair, and one blond. The blond gripped a small blade between his fingers, and he was the only one armed. Rem stood in front of Luca, feeling his sheath at his side. These men were no match for him. He pretended to hesitate and when the blond was five steps away, Rem dashed forward, kicking the blond in the gut, knocking the wind out of him. It gave Rem enough time to disarm him and land a blow in the middle of his head. The tallest of the dark-haired men grabbed Rem by the shoulders and pushed him down to the ground as he threw punches against Rem's back, while his friend moved toward Luca. Rem tried to push the heavy man off of him, twisting his body around and delivering a punch right between the man's eyes, knocking him out. Luca made a sound. Rem turned as the third man picked up a large rock and threw it, hitting Luca in the face. Luca didn't fall, didn't run, he barely flinched. The man grabbed a second, bigger rock.

Rem sprinted, his hand closing over the hilt of his sword. “Drop it!” Rem warned, as he pressed the tip of the blade against the man's back.

“It's three against two—” the man glanced behind him and noticed his two friends were unconscious on the dirt.

“You really don't want to hurt someone under my protection—” Rem pressed the point of his sword harder until a drop of blood formed—“again.”

The man hesitated, then dropped the rock and ran, leaving his friends behind.

Rem pulled Luca away from the scene before anyone else showed up. He needed to get Luca out of this town and to some place of relative safety. Maybe the forest near where he and Niel had been transported would work, but Rem had one thing to do before leaving the village. He hauled Luca between two decrepit houses, hiding them from the view of strangers. “I told you to take that cloak off!” Angry, he tugged at the knots of the cloak around Luca's throat.

“No!” Luca pulled away. “I'm Legion! I have to wear this.”

“No, you don't.” Rem reached for the knots again. His breath caught when he saw the blood under the hood. “You're bleeding!”

Luca tried wiping the blood away, but smeared it across his cheek and eye instead, making it look worse. "I am not a child! I can make my own decisions. Aren't you always saying that?"

Rem did always say that. He hated when someone started acting stupid or changed the way they treated him once they realized his age. Yet here he was, treating Luca like he was a little kid.

Rem sighed. Luca was just as stubborn as he was then. He couldn't force him to take off the red cloak, but at least he could make it useful. Rem made a little ball of cloth with the hood of Luca's cloak and gently wiped the blood away from his face. The culprit was just a cut under his eye that was bleeding profusely, but it wasn't that bad. "You said there would be incidents that would prevent me from taking you back. Was this one of them?"

"No," Luca said, flinching when Rem touched his cut. "That was just people with hate in their hearts." The blood was almost gone. Luca leaned against the piece of cloth Rem held. "Can you do something for me? I promise to never ask again."

"What?"

Luca stared down. "Can you hold me? Just once. I need—"

Rem didn't wait for Luca to finish. He pulled him close, one hand around his back, the other on the back of his neck. It was an easy request. If this was all it took to make a fresh start with the weird Legion boy, so be it. Hugs were easy. They were simple and didn't mean anything. Luca reached up and held on to the back of Rem's shoulders. His body shook with each breath. Rem tried to say something, but nothing came out.

When was the last time he'd held someone like this? The day he left Leila's side—the day after he'd taken a life—the day he'd promised to become the opposite of what he had grown up to be. To atone for a childhood of crimes—even if it was to survive—thievery was something that no longer gave meaning to his life. The act of taking a life... Rem wanted to help people. He wanted to atone for the life he'd taken. Using the tricks he'd learned as a thief, he'd thought he could help others get back what was taken from them, but every item he returned somehow made him feel emptier. How could things replace a life?

Luca squeezed him tighter, and Rem realized that, here in his arms, was a person. A life. This was his chance. He had to get Luca back to his home no matter what. This was the way he would atone for his crime. Rem took a deep

breath, his fingers grazing over Luca's brown locks, and reminded himself hugs meant nothing.

Luca fell into the temporary safety of Rem's arms and cursed his power. How many times had he seen this? How many times had he fantasized about this? Believed it to be more than what it really was. He wanted to cry, to break down right here, right now. It didn't matter if Rem saw or not; he needed to let go of every dream or hope he'd ever had—let it flow away like the blood that had flowed down his face.

Rem's heart thumped against his ear, and Luca couldn't hold it in anymore. The tears fell unwillingly from his eyes, as he mourned what he had believed was his future, his truth. He'd been so naïve.

Rem suddenly pushed him away. Putting his hands on Luca's shoulders and putting that space between them. This was reality, Luca reminded himself. This was what was real. Not him in Rem's arms. He had to stop crying.

Rem kneeled like a knight before his king. Luca had never seen such a thing before. "I'll protect you," Rem said, and grabbed Luca's right hand with both of his, squeezing tight. "Luca, I've known you for less than one hour, and I've already broken a promise to you. I promised I would take you back safely, and you already got hurt." Rem stood and gently touched the skin next to Luca's cut. "So I will make that promise again. I'll protect you, Luca. I promise I won't let anyone hurt you. I promise I'll take you back to your parents."

Luca stared. Happiness prickled all over his entire being. He leaned against Rem's touch and the happiness turned to heartache. Rem had no idea. Luca made his own promise, if only to himself. That this would be the only time he would allow Rem to hold him—to touch him. He promised to let go of his dreams. And most important, he promised himself that Rem would never find out how he felt.

"Three chances that won't happen," Luca echoed the premonition.

Rem touched the sword against his hip, a quick reflex. "What could possibly stop me?"

"My death," Luca said as a matter of fact. "Or yours."

Chapter Seven

Nightfall

They found Niel leaning on a tattered fence just past the village entrance. Luca's eyes lowered in a glare when he saw him.

"So nice to see you, Luca," Niel said mockingly, and made to pat Luca's head.

Luca moved back. "Don't touch me! You don't need to mess with my head to convince me to go back. I'm doing it of my own free will."

"Are you now?" Niel stared at his fingers. "How about a slight suggestion?"

"Don't touch me!" Luca snapped. Niel stretched his hand toward Luca again.

Rem stepped forward. He'd promised to protect Luca from anyone who tried to hurt him, and that included Niel. "He said, don't touch him."

Niel snorted and withdrew his hand. "Touchy." Rem glared. Niel rolled his eyes. "What? Did he tell you I would try to kill you or something? Just because he can see the future, doesn't mean he can't lie."

"He didn't say anything. I just don't want you touching him." Rem wrapped a hand around Luca's wrist and started hauling him toward the woods.

"Where are you going?" Niel yelled. "I made arrangements to stay at a barn. Free of charge."

"To Veles," Rem answered and continued forward, tugging Luca along.

"Are you mad! That's almost a three hour walk. The sun will set in one—one and a half at most. We should stay here."

Rem didn't bother to turn around. "It's too dangerous."

Niel ran and tried blocking Rem and Luca's path. "Dangerous? What about werewolves, vampires, or the fae? Isn't it more dangerous to be eaten by one of them?"

Luca's fingers brushed against Rem's. Rem glanced down for a moment then looked back at Niel. "Werewolves are banished to Zemera Island, vampires are extinct, and the fae don't eat people. The only danger here is humans. Can't you see what happened to Luca's face?"

Niel opened his mouth, but quickly closed it. "It's still safer than going into the woods."

Luca pulled on Rem's hand, and tilted his head to look at Niel. "If we stay in that barn, someone will burn it down."

Niel bit his lip, and Rem spared him one last glance before moving forward with Luca. If they hurried, they could make it to Veles shortly after nightfall.

Niel followed behind, muttering under his breath.

Rem adjusted his cloak tighter around his neck. The sun was almost down, and the chill of the night had started seeping into their skin. Luca also hugged his red cloak. Niel had to manage with rubbing his hands over his arms. They made for a strange group. Two cloaked figures, one in black, one in red, and one obviously wishing he had a cloak.

Rem matched Luca's pace. The young blood sorcerer hadn't spoken a single word since they'd left Piri, but he frequently turned to stare at Rem. At least five times, Rem had turned his head to catch Luca pretending he hadn't been staring. If this continued, it was going to be a tedious trip. "Why don't you tell me about yourself?" Rem said, breaking the silence.

Luca glanced toward Rem. "What's there to know?"

"Why you ran away from your clan would be a good start. Tell me why I'm here."

Luca pursed his lips. "Would you laugh if I said its fate?"

"Yes," Rem scoffed. "You made the choice to travel to Piri. I made the choice to talk to Niel in the market, even if he did use his power on me. I talked to him. I went to his home. The only reason we're here together is because we are victims of coincidence. You chose yours. I stumbled more into mine."

"Did you?" Luca looked back at Niel.

Niel, who had remained quiet until now, looked irritated to be pointed a finger at. "Why are you looking at me? I wasn't the one who left."

"You chose Rem, didn't you? You wanted someone to steal for you, and out of all the people in the market, you chose Rem. Why him?"

Niel threw his hands in the air. "I don't know! I'd never seen him before, so if he got hurt, or caught, I wouldn't have to worry about it." Rem's fingers

lingered over the hilt of his sword. Niel stopped. "Listen—I know what I did to you was pretty awful. Did I care about your life when I messed with your head? I did not. Was I aware that you could have died climbing to my grandmother's window? I did!" he yelled in frustration and yanked at his hair furiously. "But I need that will! I need to show Nana that she can't just disown me. Doesn't she know how much I love her? Why? Why did she stop loving me just because I joined the Legion? Didn't she think that would hurt me?" Niel dropped to the ground; he kicked some dirt with his foot, held his forehead with both hands. "You two should keep going. I need some time to think. I'll catch up with you in Veles."

"No." Rem's voice was firm. "We're not separating. We already knew you were a selfish asshole, but we are not the ones who need to listen to your half-assed confession. It's Filina who needs to hear that."

Niel looked up at Rem and Luca, took a deep breath, and seemed to realize that among the three of them, he was the only one acting like a child. He slowly stood, and Rem wondered if Niel's pride had survived his outburst. Niel looked at Luca. "What about you, Luca? Why did you leave your home? You're an Inception child. You have everything. Everyone worships you."

Luca shifted uncomfortably. Rem remembered Abraham talking about a ceremony with the same name. "What is the Inception?"

Niel started walking forward again. Rem and Luca followed. They'd wasted enough time chatting. "Inception is the name given to powerful blood sorcerers," Niel began. "They're children usually born to Legion parents. They display their powers at an early age. People like Abraham. They are revered, honored, and everyone loves them," Niel spat the last words. "They don't have to suffer to join the clan."

"It can't be all that great if Luca decided to leave," Rem said.

Luca looked a little pale. "I didn't leave. I just—I saw myself here, so I came here."

"That isn't a premonition." Rem kicked a pebble out of his way as they reached a clearing. "You could have just stayed put. You could have ignored what you saw." *Or claimed you saw.* "Then we wouldn't be here. And I—"

Luca froze, held his head between his hands. "They're coming for me."

Startled, Niel strode to his side. "Who?" he asked. "Lorez? Abraham?"

Luca pointed ahead. He was eerily calm. "No. They're not from our clan."

Rem saw them now. Five red-cloaked figures illuminated in the glow of the falling sun. Their hoods were down—three men and two women.

“This is the first incident,” Luca warned. His hand pawed at Rem’s cloak. “They want me dead.”

Rem’s sword rasped against metal as he withdrew it from the sheath. Seizing Luca’s arm, he dragged him beside him. “Don’t leave my side!”

“I think I can bespell one or two of them,” Niel said, and snapped his fingers once. He almost seemed giddy, as if looking forward to a fight.

“Who are you? What do you want?” Rem yelled across the clearing. He pointed his blade at the strangers, wanting them to see he was armed.

“We’re members of the Piri clan. We want the oracle of the Nevenen clan!” One of the two women spoke. She was standing fourth in line. To her left, a young man with dark hair put his hands together and started chanting. The space between his hands started sparking, and as his words rushed faster, the sparks grew stronger. “—lur!” he yelled, and a large bolt of light zapped directly in their path.

“Move!” Niel yelled and jumped aside. Rem jerked Luca the opposite way as the bolt struck between them. Three of the Piri Legion rushed them. The man who’d hurled the lightning bolt at them lay on the ground, unconscious. The woman who’d spoken earlier knelt at his side.

Reaching up, Luca touched his head as headaches struck him. Visions invaded his mind, and for a few seconds, Luca couldn’t tell what was real, and what was a vision. Rem pushed forward, intercepting two men who were trying to reach Luca. The first wasn’t even a challenge—one elbow to the side of the man’s head was enough to take him out. Across the clearing, Niel was trying to put his hand over the other woman’s head, but she kept dodging him and trying to stab Niel with a dagger.

Luca found himself apart from the melee, a spectator. Niel managed to snap two fingers against the woman’s forehead; her eyes rolled back, and she slumped to the ground. Niel laughed; he was having fun, then turned his attention to the kneeling woman.

Two swords clanged and Luca turned toward the noise. The second man Rem was fighting was big, too big to be simply human. Some type of fae must be in his blood, ogre blood.

The ogre-man swung his sword fast. Rem dodged the swipe aimed at his head, rolled, stood, then curved his sword against the man's back, slicing skin. It was only a superficial wound, but the ogre-man screamed like he'd been cut down. Rem did not hide his glee.

Another vision pounced on Luca. In it, he saw the ogre-man putting his sword on the ground. Saw Rem walk away. Then the ogre-man pulled a knife hidden inside his cloak and plunged it into Rem's back.

Luca blinked as the vision faded and the now became real; he saw Rem cut the ogre-man's leg just above the knee. "Any deeper and it will leave a mark," Rem gloated.

"You brat! You—"

Rem laughed, angering the ogre-man even more. His anger made him brazen and his attacks both hasty and reckless. His mistakes made it easier for Rem to dodge the attacks and retaliate with his own.

The sword fight only lasted seconds, but it felt much longer. The ogre-man's frustration with being unable to cut Rem was palpable. Luca noticed Rem only had a shallow cut on his shoulder, while the ogre-man suffered open wounds all over his body. Blood trickled down his face as he muttered under his breath and let go of his sword. Showing his intent to surrender, he kicked it from his reach.

"Wise choice," Rem said, and sheathed his sword. Niel was standing in front of the girl and the unconscious lightning man. They didn't seem to be a threat anymore.

Rem turned his back to the ogre-man, his eyes searching for Luca.

Luca's breath caught; in the distance he heard the call of rubi; it was so quiet now that the fight was over. If a stranger came upon them they would never know people had just been trying to kill each other. Rem's smile widened when their eyes met, and Luca saw the moment his vision started becoming reality, saw the ogre-man reach for something inside his cloak. Luca ran. "Rem!"

As Luca ran toward him, a strange sense of joy came over Rem. He'd managed to keep Luca safe like he'd promised. "Rem!" Luca screamed again, but there was nothing joyful in Luca's face. Why would Luca be scared now? Behind him, someone's steps crunched on the loose dirt. Luca suddenly threw

himself between the noise and Rem's unprotected back, and shoved him to the side. Rem tumbled a few steps forward and heard a yelp—a very soft sound—like when a small creature gets trapped by a predator, and it screams one last time.

The ogre-man had Luca in his massive hands like a little rag doll. His large fingers wrapped around the dagger he'd plunged into Luca's shoulder, far too close to his neck.

A red haze clouded Rem's vision; his fingers tightened around the handle of his sword, pointing the tip toward the ogre-man's head as he ran. Fast—incredibly fast—Rem's body moved in one fluid motion. For that moment he wasn't Rem Lumes, teenage wanderer, homeless orphan, retriever. He was the shadow he and Leila created, the whisper in the dark. He was the boy who'd driven a blade into a man's heart. And he was about to do it again.

How dare this brute hurt what was his to protect?

The ogre-man focused his entire attention on Luca as a thin smile formed on his lips. Rem dashed and drove his sword forward. As if he sensed Rem's fury, the ogre-man dropped Luca and raised his arm so he could block Rem's attack. Rem's blade met thick leather, barely stopping Rem from driving the sword into his chest. Rem twisted, and something moved inside him, something so fluid it didn't feel human. He kept the pressure on the handle on his sword, making sure the ogre-man continued to block him while he pulled a smaller blade from the other side of his belt and drove it deep into the ogre-man's shoulder.

There was screaming. And blood. The ogre-man stumbled back allowing Rem to stand over Luca, both blades ready.

I dare you to touch him again!

A swift-moving shadow appeared behind the ogre-man, jumped up and clamped its entire hand around the oversized head. The ogre-man's eyes rolled back, and he went down. Niel loomed over his unconscious form.

“Luca!” Rem kneeled on the dirt next to Luca's writhing form. “Don't move.”

“There's a knife in my neck,” Luca gasped.

“It's not in your neck.” Rem held a hand to Luca's chest, keeping him still. What now? They still had an hour's walk before they reached Veles. And Piri—the town these people came from—would likely be glad to see Luca die.

“Niel. Help.” Rem’s voice shook. He hated breaking his promises. He hated seeing Luca breathing shallowly with an unnatural piece of metal protruding from his body.

Niel swore under his breath. He lurked next to Rem and Luca, unsure of what to do. “I’m not a healer. I can only close small wounds.”

Luca twisted to glance at the two remaining Piri Legion members—the lightning man and the woman by his side. The man was still unconscious; the woman had his head on her lap. “She’s a healer,” Luca whispered. Rem wasted no time rushing to the pair, his sword out.

“I told your friend I wouldn’t attack!” the girl yelled, holding her partner. She loved him, Rem realized, loved him enough to not abandon him. “I didn’t want to be a part of this. I just didn’t want Pine to go alone.”

“Can you heal my friend?” Rem didn’t want to point his sword at the defenseless pair, but he needed a quick answer.

The girl started at the tip of Rem’s sword, at the blood on the blade. She nodded.

“Then do it.”

After setting Pine’s head on the ground, she made her way to Luca’s side. She kneeled next to him and examined Luca’s wound. Rem didn’t like the furrows that appeared on her face.

“I need someone to pull the dagger out,” she said.

Rem reached for it. If someone had to take that little dagger out, it had to be him. He knew blades like the back of his hand. He’d seen the damage they did. He didn’t trust anyone else to do this. He didn’t trust the woman either, but he had no choice in the matter. She was the only one who could save Luca. But if she didn’t...

Rem felt something he hadn’t felt in a long time as he imagined himself kneeling there with a bloody dagger in his hand while the girl did nothing but watch Luca die. A distorted irrational feeling of anger awoke deep inside him, making him say words he would otherwise never utter. “If you let him die, I will kill the man you clearly love, and I will make you watch.”

Her face twisted in silent horror and fear, and even Rem was horrified at the words that had come out of his mouth. But he wasn’t taking them back. Luca had to live.

The girl rubbed her hands together and took three long breaths. "I have a small knife in my belt. I need to take it out to cut a line on my palm."

"Why?"

"It will increase my power. This is a bad wound. I want to make sure I do a quick job."

Niel stepped in. "She's telling the truth. Our power does increase when we spill blood. That's why some people call us blood sorcerers."

Rem nodded, and the girl pulled a little knife from inside her cloak, cutting twin, single lines inside both her palms.

Rem carefully clasped the handle of the dagger protruding from Luca and held his breath. Luca's eyes silently pleaded with him, like he wanted to say something, but couldn't. "Ready?" The woman nodded. Rem pulled the dagger out quickly and there was so much blood. Luca gasped, his eyes going dark immediately. He started muttering, his body jerking up, so Rem held him down while the girl covered the wound with her hands. She chanted quickly, her hands emitting a strange glimmer.

The blood stopped. Luca calmed. His eyes closed.

"The wound is sealed." She slowly moved her hands away from Luca's wound and delicately wiped the blood away, as if afraid the wound would reopen.

Rem hesitantly touched the spot where the wound used to be—solid flesh.

The girl was hugging herself, like she was afraid to move. "Can you leave now? Please let us be."

Rem watched as Luca breathed in and out. Niel touched Rem's shoulder. "They will wake up in less than an hour. We better hurry."

Rem picked up Luca, his body light in his arms. Rem had the urge to clean the blood from Luca's neck, but it would have to wait.

The girl stared at him as he walked past, her eyes wide, her body shaking with fear.

Yes, Rem thought. Tell everyone what you saw. Tell everyone what happens when you hurt someone I've sworn to protect.

He hoped she told everyone. He hoped she told the entire world.

Chapter Eight

Sweet and Sour

Luca slept like the dead. More than once Rem worried that the girl had not healed Luca properly, that the shock had been too much, but Niel reassured him Luca was fine.

They reached Veles hours before the sun rose. At the first the inn they came to, the manager refused to give them a room, but one tap of Niel's fingers against his forehead was enough to make him change his mind.

The room had two beds, a wardrobe, a chest, and even its own water closet.

"Is this the best room in the inn?" Rem asked as he put Luca down on the bed closest to the window.

"What else would I get?" Niel kicked his boots off and used the plumbing pipe to splash some water on his face. "Get some sleep. We start early again tomorrow. Luca should be up by then."

Sleep. Rem couldn't even remember the last time he'd actually slept. So much had happened since then. Just this morning, he'd woken up in Filina's house and eaten the meal she had left for him in the kitchen. He'd been to Vesca, Nevenen, Piri, and now Veles, all in one day. He'd seen Leila after almost a year, infiltrated a Legion meeting, and gotten caught. He'd feared for his life. He'd met Luca. Exhaustion didn't even come close to describing how Rem felt. His brain was heavy, his thoughts too many to count. Fatigue weighed on his bones.

Rem tossed most of his clothes on top of the chest, keeping just the plain shirt and trousers on. Niel was already asleep and snoring, sprawled on the bed closest to the door like a large feline. Luca took so little space on his bed, Rem was sure Luca wouldn't mind if they shared it.

Rem gently removed Luca's boots and his cloak. His shirt was ruined from the blood, but Rem still removed it carefully, soaked it in water, and left it to dry on the windowsill.

He hadn't shared a bed with anyone since leaving Leila. It was how they had helped each other to keep warm from the cold, snuggling together like poggpuppies. Rem felt a shiver from the breeze outside and pulled the thin sheet over himself and Luca. Luca shivered, his brow furrowed, and his eyes opened.

He looked around, seemingly confused. Rem waited for him to ask for an explanation, but he didn't.

"I'm cold, Remier," he said.

Maybe it was the impulse of memory. Maybe Rem was just as cold as Luca was, and body warmth made the best blanket. Either way, his body seemed to move automatically, curling a hand around Luca's back and pulling him close until Luca was in the nook of his arms. Luca looked up, his eyes studying Rem's face, then he closed them and went back to sleep.

How odd was this? Just hours before, Luca had asked Rem to hold him for no real reason. Luca said it would be the only time, yet here he was again in Rem's arms. Could it be? Could he really fall in love like Luca had said? Rem thought he knew love with Leila. It was the desire to be with someone, to think about them at odd moments, to laugh at the same things together. He and Luca had nothing to laugh about. Handing over the boy to his parents would be a weight lifted off his shoulders. This wasn't love. This was—what was this anyway?

"Remier," Luca murmured, his eyes were still closed. He was only dreaming.

Things had gotten far more complicated than Rem had ever wanted. Or intended.

Or perhaps it was simpler than that. Perhaps Rem just missed the warmth as well.

Luca's feet were freezing. He moved them tentatively, searching for a blanket, but there was nothing. Something warm lay against his side though, something warm and heavy that made him forget all about his cold feet. Luca slowly opened his eyes, his brain still fuzzy from sleep. Rem, sleeping next to him, holding him.

Luca had dreamed about this. It was one of his favorites. Rem usually slept deeply like this—quiet, heavy, one arm hooked over Luca's body. Other times he snored lightly and hogged the covers. Sometimes Rem didn't sleep. Sometimes he kissed Luca.

Luca wondered what would happen if—in this version of his dreams—he kissed Rem instead.

The gap between them was small, just a few inches. So Luca leaned in and just did it. Rem's lips were warm and soft, and Luca couldn't remember any other dream where they'd felt like this.

Rem moved away, and his gray eyes slowly opened.

A loud snore caught Luca's attention. Niel. Niel was sleeping in the bed next to them. Wait. Niel had never been in one of his dreams before.

"What are you doing, Luca?"

Realization hit, and Luca scrambled out of bed, tangled his feet in the bed sheet, and tripped into the space between the two beds, landing on his rear. *THUD.*

"Ow, ow, ow," Luca muttered, rubbing his sore behind.

Ruffling noises came from Niel's side. He mumbled, "Can you stop with the noise? I'd like at least one more hour of sleep."

Luca stopped fidgeting and untangled himself from the bed sheet, hoping that Rem had dismissed everything as some strange dream and gone back to sleep. Luca looked up to find Rem's head hovering over the edge of the bed. "Were you just kissing me?"

Luca wanted to throw the bed sheet over his head and hide. He heard Rem settling in the bed. "I'll forget it happened, if it makes you feel better," he mumbled, his voice husky from sleep.

Luca slowly sat up and peeked over the edge of the bed. Rem was lying back with his eyes closed. Luca silently tossed the thin bed sheet over Rem and then hurried to the water closet, closing the door behind him.

The mirror on the wall was a small dingy thing. Luca shook his head at his reflection. By Jove, he looked horrible, and where was his shirt? Someone had tried to wipe most of the blood away from his dirty face, but there were still red specks on his cheek and throat. Luca splashed water on his face, washing thoroughly until the specks were gone. He stared at the angry pink line on his collarbone. It was like seeing a ghost come to life. He'd dreamed of having this scar, but he'd never known how he was going to get it.

He didn't remember much after the ogre-man stabbed him, but he remembered Rem. He'd looked so incredible, fighting like magic flowed in his veins, fighting because of him. It didn't help Luca's resolve to try and let go of his feelings for the blond boy. Feelings he'd built up from dreams that, so far,

weren't entirely accurate. A good portion of them had already happened—Rem climbing through the window, Rem cleaning blood from his cheek, Rem holding him. Luca wondered how many more visions would become reality, and how many would remain dreams forever.

Luca quietly stepped out of the water closet, careful not to wake Rem or Niel. He spotted his shirt draped on the windowsill and put it on. It was stained with dried blood, but he had nothing else to wear.

“We should get you a new one.”

Luca looked up. Rem was still lying in bed, but his eyes were open, and he was staring at Luca. Niel, oblivious, continued snoring.

“It's fine,” Luca said, his fingers scratching away bits of dried blood. Rem stood up and started to get dressed.

“I have some money. Let's go before Niel wakes up.”

They left their cloaks with Niel and found a clothes shop in the market. Veles wasn't a large village, and this early in the morning not many people were out and about, but there were enough to make Luca feel self-conscious and a little embarrassed about the state of his bloody shirt. He took one look at the assortment of shirts and quickly picked up a plain white one to replace his ruined one.

“Thank you,” Luca tossed the dirty shirt in the wastebasket, and followed Rem as he browsed through the market. Rem stopped at a fruit cart where a man was selling napples for half a rio. Rem took two and tossed one to Luca. “I don't like napples,” Luca admitted as he sniffed the sour fruit.

Rem hesitated. “They're cheap...”

Luca flushed with embarrassment. How could he complain about a gift of food when there wasn't a single rio in his pockets? He'd spent it all on his trip to Piri. Luca pulled at his new white shirt. “This cost twenty-five rio,” he said.

Rem was halfway done with his napple. “So?”

“We could have gotten something less expensive. This shirt is worth at least two meals. Why didn't you say something?”

Rem shrugged. “Because it's the one you wanted. Because it was my fault your old shirt was covered in blood. Once again, I failed to protect you. I have done nothing but break my promises to you.”

“I chose to protect *you*. Didn't you notice? It was my own decision that got me hurt. You shouldn't have spent so much money.” Luca took a bite of the sour napple and forced it down, his face twisting the entire time.

Rem laughed, then took the napple from Luca's hands, biting it and eating it effortlessly. “What do you like then?” he asked, pulling a full rio from his money pouch. Luca almost told Rem to put the coin back, but instead, he took a look at the assorted fruits and pointed to the batch of natberries.

Rem purchased the large, purple berry and gave it to Luca as they started making their way back to the inn through the quiet streets. Rem continued eating the napple Luca had bitten. “You like sweet. I like sour. Yet another fact that reassures me I'm not falling in love with you.”

Luca was halfway through chewing his natberry, the sweet taste he enjoyed vanishing. He tried hiding the hurt those words brought, but Rem noticed.

Rem bit his lower lip, a quick quirk. “Are you hoping that really happens?”

Luca held back the impulse to say the answer he wanted. He stared at the fruit Rem had bought him, touched the shirt Rem had bought him, little memories of dreams that had come to pass. Maybe he should throw caution to the wind and just tell Rem how he really felt? “I—” he started to say, then stopped. A piercing and familiar headache struck him. His sight grew foggy, darkness covered it. He gasped. “The thief Leire will come for me.”

Chapter Nine

The Oracle

Luca looked behind him, like he'd seen a ghost. He squeezed the natberry in his hand until juice flowed out. "Leire is coming for me?"

Rem frowned. He opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again. "You shouldn't be scared of that, Luca."

"How can you say that? Haven't you heard the rumors? The stories? Haven't you seen the dozens of wanted posters?"

"Nobody has seen or heard from Leire in months. He's probably dead."

"Then why would I say that he'll come for me?"

Rem shrugged. "I don't know. Haven't you ever said something that doesn't turn out like you said it?"

Luca stopped to think. "Sometimes. But there's always some truth to it. Especially the premonitions I can't control." Luca fidgeted while his eyes stared off toward empty air and his body shook. "Why would he come for me? I don't remember ever seeing something like that. Why wouldn't I have seen it before?"

Rem put a hand on his shoulder when Luca's shaking worsened. "Nothing is going to happen to you, Luca," he said.

Luca brushed him off. "How do you know?"

Rem seemed annoyed. He rolled his eyes. "Because I'm going to protect you, even from a famous thief. I will protect you. Trust me."

Fear and anger tugged at Luca's heart when he heard Rem dismissing his words. Rem still didn't believe what he could do. He still didn't believe the things Luca saw.

Out of all the horrifying things he'd seen, Luca tried to remember the last time he'd been so frightened by a vision. The more visions he had, the more he became numb to them—and there were plenty of horrifying things he'd seen—some he still hoped to prevent. But this vision? This one felt different. This one pulled at something deep inside him and stole his hope, because it could mean he may never be happy. It could mean that even if he lived through this journey, it would be all for naught.

His thoughts. The vision. Rem's attitude.

It all came together to form anger and fear. Anger that he had no control about the things he said. Fear of the stories he'd heard about Leire. Anger of what would happen to him if what he said really came to be.

The dread and enmity took over Luca's emotions and bubbled out of him. Luca's body shivered, and all the affection he felt dimmed. He pulled the neckline of his new shirt down until he exposed the dark pink line near his neck. He looked at Rem and said things he didn't mean, things he didn't even believe. "You've done a really good job at protecting me so far."

Luca walked away. He didn't want to be near Rem anymore. The day had started so wonderfully—the reality of Rem's warm body next to his, stealing that kiss, experiencing Rem's kindness. All of it ruined by his stupid power.

Luca didn't pay attention to how far he walked, but soon found himself on the edge of town. More people were walking about and running errands now. Luca looked behind him. Rem hadn't followed him. Sticky juice from the natberry still in his hand covered his fingers. Luca took a moment to finish eating the sweet fruit. Once done, he licked his fingers, found a corner, and sat down to think. He'd said such a horrible thing to Rem. He flinched just thinking about it, and wondered if Rem would ever forgive him. There were things he had seen that hadn't happened yet, so that meant Rem had to forgive him. Right? Luca swore to himself and headed back to the inn.

Rem opened the door only to see Niel still sprawled on his bed, still snoring. He glared at the obnoxious sorcerer, then made his way to where his things were on the bed he and Luca had slept in. He placed a small leather sheath he'd purchased on the bed, and started getting ready for the rest of the trip. He'd forgotten to clean his belt and swords the night before, the blood on them was dried and disgusting. It had been almost a year since his blades had tasted blood. Rem would be perfectly satisfied if his blades never tasted blood again.

He washed them in the water closet until they were spotless and safely back in their sheaths. Luca wasn't back yet. Thinking of the blue-eyed sorcerer just made Rem remember that stupid discussion at the market. Talking about Leire out of nowhere? What did that mean? What did Luca know? Rem couldn't shake the feeling that Luca was hiding something from him. He couldn't afford to trust him, even if a part of him wanted to.

Rem knew he was supposed to be getting along with Luca. He needed the boy safe and sound and back in Nevenen in one piece; his life depended on it. He didn't have time for this nonsense. The more he thought about the conversation, the angrier he got. With no other outlet around, he grabbed the handle of the chest and threw the entire thing across the room.

Niel jumped up fast as a kheemah, and pushing his back against the wall, he dove his hand into his pocket for his foldable dagger. It took him a minute to realize that there was no danger. "In blood's name, Rem, if you wanted to wake me up, you could have just called me." He sat down. "Where's Luca?"

Rem shrugged. "I don't know."

"You don't—what?" Niel scrambled off the bed, pushing the sheets away with his legs. "You left him alone?"

"He stormed off," Rem tried to defend himself, but hearing Niel say the words struck a chord and made him realize that he may have put Luca in danger by simply leaving him alone. Mistake after mistake, that's all he did when it came to Luca. Make mistakes.

As Niel put on his boots, Rem ran for the door. He opened it and stopped short, relief flooding through him. Luca stood on the other side, looking startled.

"I'm sorry," Luca said.

Rem wanted to say he was sorry too, but the words wouldn't come out. The little ball of pride he held on to stopped him.

Niel smacked Rem on the shoulder. "Seriously, children, you made it sound like Luca had run away again." Luca stepped inside and Rem closed the door. Niel stretched and made his way to the water closet. "I'm going to take a bath. Who knows if we'll have another chance before making it to Nevenen. You can have one after me. You should start packing." Niel locked the small door and Rem heard the water running.

Luca sat on the bed they had slept in, looking around for something. "I don't really have anything except my red cloak," he said.

Rem watched as Luca reached for his Legion cloak. He wanted to understand Luca better, otherwise they would keep misunderstanding each other. They still had a few days until they got to Nevenen, and one of the first things Luca had told him was that they could possibly die in the span of those

days. Rem had to admit that he had initially dismissed Luca's predictions as foolery.

Speaking of love and death.

Those had just been words to startle him, words he willingly ignored, but now something made him hesitate. Luca kept insisting he saw the future. Rem had heard many names for the blood sorcerers that carried the power to see—augurs, seers, soothsayers, prophets. Each with its own level of power—its own level of notoriety. They reserved one name for the most powerful.

“There's something I've been meaning to ask.” Rem sat next to Luca. Water still ran in the background. “When the Piri clan attacked us, they called you a name. They called you an oracle. I thought I knew enough about how the Legion names their future tellers, and I thought oracle was the name given to the most powerful of them. No offense, but I haven't really seen anything to indicate that you are that powerful.”

Luca looked far ahead, like he was trying to see something that wasn't there. “The future is so full of maybes,” he said, tilting his head to look at Rem. “Abraham was the one that gave me the Oracle title. My parents told me I started having visions as soon as I could speak. That my eyes have gotten dark since I was a baby. They told me that when I was two, my grandfather wanted to take me to visit some friends, and I threw a fit so big he had no choice but to leave me behind. A horse trampled him just hours later.”

“You didn't warn us about the Piri clan until they were right in front of us.”

Luca looked away. “Sometimes I can control what I see. Most times I can't. When my eyes go dark, that's random. Often times I only see flashes of things seconds before they happen. Sometimes I have dreams...” Luca choked out the last word and stretched his hand until his fingers closed around the hem of his cloak. “I don't know how else to be.”

Rem wanted to pull Luca away from his cloak. Why did it feel like the world was wrong when Luca wore that red? When did such thoughts start crossing his mind? And why? Why should he care? A question popped inside Rem's mind, perhaps one that should never be asked. “Luca, do you even want to be in the Legion?”

Luca let go of his cloak and looked up at Rem.

“Of course he does,” Niel interrupted. He was lurking at the door of the water closet, dressed and looking refreshed. “You can't choose to be in the

Legion. The Legion chooses you. Luca was lucky enough to be born Legion. Do you know how hard I had to work to prove myself?"

"I'm not talking to you, Niel," Rem snapped.

Niel glared, and for a second Luca thought he was going to start a fight with Rem, but he stepped back, and ran a hand through his wet hair. "I'm going to make sure the innkeeper hasn't forgotten I requested some items last night for our trip. Hurry up with whatever you're planning on doing. We need to make it to the next village before nightfall."

Niel shut the door behind him. Rem turned his full attention on Luca. "Do you like being Legion?"

Luca thought about it. No one had asked him that before. Not his mother. Not his father. Not even Abraham. There had never been any other option. Slowly, Luca shook his head.

Rem sighed and fidgeted on the bed. "Then how come you didn't try to avoid me if you knew I was coming for you? Why did you wait in a room for me to find you? I have to take you back to them. Otherwise they'll kill me."

Every word Rem said felt like a little jab to Luca's heart. It came down to that, didn't it? One life versus another. And who would choose someone else's life before their own? Especially, if it were someone they just met.

Luca stood, intending to leave. He didn't want to talk about this. Rem grabbed his hand and pulled him back down on the bed next to him. "Tell me why."

Luca wanted Rem to stop touching him. "Because I thought it would lead to a future that I don't believe in anymore."

"A future where I love you?"

Luca's lip quivered. It wasn't supposed to be like this. Rem never asked him about this in his dreams. "Yes." Saying it, admitting it, felt like a huge clump had been released from his spirit. It felt like he was letting go of his hopes and dreams.

Rem leaned back on the bed and stared at the ceiling for a long moment. "What am I supposed to say to that? It's ridiculous, Luca. In a few days we will arrive in Nevenen, and we won't see each other ever again."

"I know that. I know that." Luca's voice was tight and wounded. It would take time that he didn't have to sort out every feeling he'd ever felt. Every

feeling he'd ever clung to. "Some of the things I have seen—some of the things that made me believe—what I thought were visions of you loving me. They have already happened, and they had nothing to do with you loving me. They were just misconceptions. My misconceptions."

"Like what?"

Luca shook his head. "I don't want to talk about it. Please, don't make me talk about it." He stood again and two visions played before his eyes. One where he walked away, and Rem stayed behind, a second where Rem grabbed his hand and pulled him down again. Luca started to leave, and with each step he wondered where the division between the two futures was. Would Rem let him go? Would Rem make him stay? Two steps. Three. He was out of reach. The bed squeaked, the floor creaked, and Rem's hand closed around his and pulled him back.

Niel casually patted the innkeeper's hand. "I left a money pouch in the room by the bed. You can pick it up in an hour."

"Understood." Niel smiled and pressed his fingers against the man's skin and waited until his eyes stopped staring blankly. "Anything else I can help you with, Mr. Sommerset?"

"No." Niel stepped away from the man. "Just forget we were ever here."

"Yes, sir."

Niel released the man and raced back up the stairs two at a time to tell the boys to get moving. The sooner they left, the sooner they would reach Nevenen. Halfway down the hall he heard Rem's voice and Luca's shaky replies.

"I'm not letting you out of this room until you explain things to me, Luca."

"That isn't fair."

"What's not fair is keeping secrets from me, how do you expect—"

Niel rolled his eyes and reached to open the door, but something in the tone of Rem's voice stopped him. Suddenly, he didn't feel like interrupting. Niel lingered for a moment in front of the door, feeling like an eavesdropper. *Might as well start getting those supplies ready then.* If the boys wanted to have a heart to heart, they could go at it as long as they didn't involve him. All Niel wanted was to make it back to Nevenen in one piece with Luca. He couldn't wait to be back home.

Luca shook his head, as if that would somehow help him sort out his feelings. Rem almost put a hand on Luca's shoulder, but stopped short and pulled back. "I'm trying to understand you, Luca. What you are. What you can do. What you want. You keep saying you see the future, but so far, you believed I would somehow magically fall in love with you. You didn't even notice the men who attacked us in Piri, and even I could have predicted that that Legion clan was going to attack us if I had looked up and spotted them before you did."

"You wouldn't understand."

"No, I don't."

"You don't believe I have a strong power."

"No."

Luca looked straight into Rem's eyes. "Then give me your hand."

Rem did so without even hesitating, which he wouldn't have done if some part of him didn't trust Luca, even if he didn't believe him.

Luca's hand was smaller, his skin a tad paler than Rem's. His fingers slowly moved against Rem's palm as he took a deep breath.

"An old woman is warming a cup of tea with her hand. She laughs when you call her Legion."

Rem snapped his hand back. "You see the past?"

Luca grabbed Rem's hand again, and Rem tried to pull away, but Luca held it firmly. Flashes of things and feelings he didn't understand or grasp rushed through his mind, and then he settled for something that would prove to Rem what he could do. What he could see.

"Trees. Water. It's raining. I hear the Simas flowing in the distance. A woman is carrying you. Her blonde hair cascades around you. She's running. Her breath comes in gasps. I don't know what she's running from."

"The woman puts you in the hollow of a tree. There is a man with dark hair behind her looking around, his hand on her shoulder. Blood seeps through his fingers. She holds your hand as she tells you something, but I don't know what it is. You don't remember. The man takes her place for only a moment, and then they leave. You wait for them. Play with the dead leaves inside the hollow. It stops raining, you get hungry, but still you wait for them to return. They never do."

Luca blinked, the past fading away in a fog. Rem's hand was an anchor leading him back to the world, back to the *now*. Tears spilled down his cheeks. Rem sank to the floor, like his spirit had left him.

Regret was the first thing that tugged at Luca's chest. He'd hoped to show Rem a memory from his childhood. Something happy. A memory so powerful it had a permanent place inside his heart. He'd never imagined it would be something like *that*.

"I'm sorry," Luca muttered, because there was nothing he could do to erase making Rem remember he had been abandoned.

Rem looked up. His eyes were red, the pain of the memory still fresh. "My mother was hurt?" He stood up and tightened his grip around Luca's hand. "Do you think they were trying to save me? That they didn't get rid of me?"

Luca shook his head. He didn't know what to say. He didn't know how to interpret what he'd seen. "I only told you what I saw."

"I remember my mother holding me and running. I remember her holding my hand. I remember someone telling me to wait, but nothing more. I don't remember it raining. I don't remember my father—my father—what did he look like?"

"You look a lot like him," Luca said, still shaken from the vision. "But you have your mother's hair."

Rem's demeanor changed. The pain disappeared from his face. A mixture of joy and relief replaced it. He wrapped his arms around Luca, hugging him tight, pulling him inches off the ground. "Thank you!" he said against Luca's ear. "I've spent my entire life believing my parents abandoned me, and you just told me they were trying to save me. They *did* save me."

That may be the truth, Luca thought, but it also may not be. Someone else could see the same memory and interpret it in a different way. He pushed the pessimistic thought aside; he didn't want to dash Rem's hope. Rem, who had lived suffering with the thought of being unwanted, now could hope that he was loved so much, his parents would sacrifice everything for him.

It was a much better memory. A life changing memory.

Even if there was the possibility that it wasn't true.

Chapter Ten

Monsters

Rem took a quick bath and headed down to look for Niel as Luca took his turn. The inn was quiet in the early morning. Rem expected to find Niel sitting at one of the tables of the inn's pub, but he wasn't there. He spared a small thought of concern, but quickly dismissed it. Niel could take care of himself. If they were lucky, maybe he'd gone on ahead. Rem didn't care for traveling with the older sorcerer; he could take Luca back all by himself.

"Excuse me, young man." The voice came from a table to Rem's left. An elderly man sat nursing a cup of tea. He pointed at something next to Rem. "Would you mind bringing me some honey from the jar over there?" Rem grabbed the small golden jar from the counter and took it to the old man's table. "Thank you." The man shook with frailty, so Rem poured some honey inside his tea. The old man thanked him again and reached out to Rem with one hand. "Would you mind helping me up? I want to take this tea to my wife."

Rem extended his arm, and a set of frail fingers slowly grabbed Rem's hand. Rem tried to pull the man up, but he stayed motionless, his dark eyes staring at Rem. Something prodded the corner of Rem's mind, different than Niel, but somewhat similar. Rem tried to pull his arm back, but the elderly man held on tightly, his lips curving upward into a leer.

Rem wanted his hand back. The man was setting off all sorts of alarm bells, and when Rem looked down, he saw the man's fingernails lengthening.

A loud thud came from behind Rem. A chair fell, followed by a blur of brown and red. Luca desperately grabbed Rem's hand and pried it away from the old man, stepping between them, pushing Rem away with his entire body. The old man had a look of pure glee on his face, and he started laughing—nothing pleasant—a sound so creepy it sank under your skin and made it crawl. As he—it—laughed, because it was not human, its face changed from that of an elderly man to a young, jagged face with pale skin and dark hair. Its eyes were the only thing that remained the same, a striking green. Despite its amusement, the creature looked sickly, with dark bags under its eyes.

"You know what I am?" It asked Luca, who still stood between them.

"Soul taker, ghost, possessor. A devi."

The creature leaned back on its chair. "That, and many other things, human boy."

"You were trying to possess me?" Rem asked and rubbed his forehead. The tingle he'd felt inside his mind was gone.

"Trying, yes. But it's close to impossible to steal the body of one unwilling. Then again, I could have gotten lucky."

Rem tried to attack the devi, but Luca stopped him, using his body to block him. "That's what he wants, Rem. To find a weak spot so he can get in. A broken heart, a troubled heart. Look at him—the current body he owns is falling apart, he's desperate for a new one."

The smile died on the devi's face. "Smart little sorcerer. Well educated, but don't portray me as a thief. I make pacts, too. This body wanted to escape the island of Zemera, and now he's in Lenen. See? Wish fulfilled."

"You kept his body."

"I gave him a full week in Lenen as the pact stipulated. He may have changed his mind along the way, but once you make a pact..."

"You can't break a pact with a soul taker." Luca put his hand over Rem's.

The devi stopped smiling. "Leave me alone if you know so much, unless you want to make an arrangement, of course." The devi tapped his fingers against the table, his smile back in place.

Luca grabbed Rem's hand and pulled him away and back to their room. The water was still running when they stepped in. Luca turned it off.

"Thank you," Rem said. "I couldn't let go of his hand. Did you have a vision?" Luca nodded as he looked around the room. "Is this Niel's?" He picked up the small black sheath on the bed.

"No. That's for you." Rem took the sheath from Luca's hands and opened it up, exposing a dagger. "Just in case."

"You bought me a knife?"

"A dagger. It's a good blade in case you need to defend yourself." Rem put the dagger back in its sheath and handed it to Luca.

"Thank you." Luca slowly pulled the dagger from its sheath, inspected the little blade and the delicate design on the hilt. His fingers traced the little symbol. Jupiter.

“Do you have all your things?” Luca asked.

Rem looked around. His belt and swords were secured around his middle. His money pouch was in his pocket. He nodded.

Luca opened the door. “Niel’s waiting for us by the stables.”

Niel decided they would ride the rest of the way to Vesca, stop at Zilin for supplies, and eventually make it to Nevenen. The Simas was just a few hours from their current location, and they could follow it all the way to their final destination.

Luca was trying to shove his legion cloak inside the small knapsack that Niel had given him. It took some convincing, but Luca agreed to not wear the red cloak until they got to Nevenen, opting to hide it instead.

Rem had offered to help Luca, but he refused. So Rem silently stood by as Luca very slowly stuffed his cloak inside the knapsack. Niel’s voice caught his attention, and Rem watched as Niel spoke with the owner of a stable near the edge of town, saw him touch the man’s forehead and walk away with two mares. One had a dark coat, the other a reddish-brown coat.

Rem was certain he would never approve of Niel using his manipulative power, but he wasn’t going to complain to Niel about it—that was a waste of breath. Instead, he planned to tell Filina all the things Niel had done when he delivered him to her.

“We need three horses,” Rem reminded Niel when he was within earshot.

“Luca can ride with you.” Niel handed the reins of the black horse to Rem.

Rem wasn’t sure why, but he suddenly felt flustered. “Why me?” Less than an hour earlier, Luca had discovered more about him than anyone else alive—anyone except Leila, of course—and while Rem was extremely grateful Luca had given him a new perspective about his parents, it was still something he wasn’t ready to talk about. There was much to sort out inside his own head first. “Can’t he ride with you?” As soon as he said the words, Rem wished he hadn’t. He turned to Luca, who looked dejected, and with good reason. Here were two idiots fighting right in front of him about who had to ride with him. Rem ran a hand through his hair in frustration. “Never mind. He can ride with me.”

Niel pulled at the reins of his horse and rode off. Rem helped Luca get on the black mare, pushing him up and then climbing after him.

It was an uncomfortable ride. Every time Rem pulled on the reins his arms would brush against Luca's, and Luca would try to flinch away. Rem tried to start a conversation to break the silence, but he had no idea what they could possibly talk about. He didn't want to share his life as an orphan or thief, and he wasn't in the mood to listen to Luca's happy childhood as an Inception child. The minutes stretched into hours without a word between them. Having Luca so close reminded Rem of last night, and that just made the trip awkward. It had been so pleasant to wake up with someone next to him. Wake up to someone kissing him. Rem couldn't stop thinking about Luca's premonition. That they would fall in love, and he certainly wasn't in love, but damn if he hadn't felt butterflies when Luca's lips touched his. There was a new flutter of excitement when Luca talked to him, and Rem had to admit these little feelings for what they were. He liked Luca.

"I'm sorry, Luca." The words were arduous to say. "You know I have no problem riding with you."

Luca didn't answer immediately. Maybe he was still upset. Luca's hands tightened around the saddle. "It's okay. I'm used to it. People have turned away from me my entire life."

"Because of the Inception thing?"

Luca seemed to try and turn his head, but gave up. "Yes."

They reached a forest and the trail got trickier as trees started to block the path. Luca got quiet—it was clear he didn't want to talk about his role in the Legion. They were so different, Rem thought, he and this boy—different family, different choices, different paths. Rem started to think of what type of person he would be if he'd been born into Luca's world. Would he be like Niel? Would he be like Luca? Would he still be who he was right now?

Luca stiffened and straightened his neck to look ahead and around him. "Stop. I need to get down."

Rem complied, getting off the horse in one fluid motion, then helping Luca until his feet touched the ground. Luca walked off to a group of trees. Rem yelled at Niel to turn back, that they were taking a break. Niel complained the entire thirty seconds it took him to turn back.

"We took a break two hours ago. The plan was to keep going until we made it to Zilin." Rem just pointed at Luca. "What is he doing?" Niel got off his mare, tied her to a tree, and started browsing inside his knapsack for food.

Rem tied his mare next to Niel's and joined Luca at the edge of a small clearing of trees.

"I remember this place." Luca breathed out when Rem was behind him, and took a good look at the river, then at a group of trees a few feet away.

"Maybe on your way to Piri?" Niel sat at the base of one of the trees and bit into a large greenberry. "So happy we got some horses. My feet are still hurting from the walk to Veles. I think I got a blister."

"You need better shoes," Rem suggested. "A shop in Beset makes these great leather shoes."

Rem showed Niel the pair he was wearing, but Niel just glared. "Sadly, I didn't get the notice I was going to spend four days walking through Lenen, so I didn't bother to visit Beset for new shoes."

Rem shrugged, then dropped his knapsack and took a piece of bread to share. Luca was still wandering around, slowly going from tree to tree as if searching for something. One step to the right. Three to the left, and then he froze in front of one of the trees.

"Rem," Luca said carefully.

Rem joined him. He offered Luca a piece of bread while he chewed his own. Luca pointed to a large, dark oak tree with a small hollow in the middle.

It took a moment for Rem to see the tree, for his brain to make the connection. "That can't be..." Rem swallowed the bread and slowly went to the tree, touching it, his fingers curling. "Do you think it's the same tree?"

"What tree? Why are you talking about a tree?" Niel joined them at the small clearing.

"Rem was left here as a child," Luca answered.

"It may not be the same—" Rem let go of the hollow tree and stepped back.

"It is." Luca touched the tree and immediately removed his hand as if it had zapped him. His voice was very low and very careful. "There is sorcery in this tree."

Niel butted in. "Let me see." He touched the tree with all five fingers and waited three seconds. Then he put his hand inside the hollow, hovering it around. Finally, he snatched the half piece of bread from Rem's hand and tossed it inside the gap.

“I paid for that!” Rem yelled, but quickly closed his mouth when he saw the empty hollow. “Where did it go?”

Niel reached inside and pulled out the bread, as if from thin air.

Rem shook his head in confusion. Luca reached out for Rem, but dropped his hand before it made contact.

Niel spoke in such a way it sent shivers down everyone's spine. “You're a Legion child, Rem.”

Chapter Eleven

Truth, Teeth, and the River

“There’s no way I’m a Legion child.” Rem tried to keep calm. He stared at the tree, then at Niel who had said those words like they were nothing, at Luca who just stood there, silent. “I don’t have any magic. I can’t do anything.”

Niel shrugged. “I know some Legion families that have human children. It’s not that rare.”

Rem’s new theory that his parents had left him to save him started to crumble. What if he’d been abandoned because he was a failure? A powerless Legion child?

Luca was suddenly beside him. He gently wrapped his hand around Rem’s and squeezed once. “I know what I saw. I do think they were trying to save you.”

Niel grabbed a rock and tossed it into the hollow. “I agree. Why else would they hide you?”

Rem wanted to know that too, but he couldn’t get the answer, no matter how much he wanted it. The only people who knew were gone from his life. He had lived fifteen years without them. He could live the rest of his life without them. He was done with maybes.

Rem didn’t want to be here anymore. If he could, he would find an axe and chop down the tree. “It doesn’t matter. I don’t care where I came from, who I was, or what I could have been. It’s not me. I’m the person I am because I was left here, and nothing else matters to me. I don’t have any powers, so think what you want, but I’m not going to think about it because it doesn’t change anything.”

Niel seemed shaken and looked willing to say more, but he didn’t. “You’re right. It’s better to just forget about it, but if you ever want to try and find out who you belonged to, we can talk to Abraham. He may know something.”

“I don’t,” Rem decided. He stared at the tree for one more second before turning around. Luca followed him.

The horses were agitated by the time Rem reached them. He untied the reins of his black mare, trying to calm her down, but as soon as the horse was free,

she pulled hard on the reins and ran off. Niel was more careful untying his mare, but the same thing happened as soon as he freed her. Niel, true to form, swore up a storm.

Luca grabbed Rem's shoulder. "There's a xiger coming."

Luca blamed himself for not seeing it sooner. He'd been so distracted when the forest suddenly started looking familiar—how it had become the small clearing he'd seen in Rem's memory. As soon as Rem had decreed an end to all discussion on the situation, Luca let his thoughts about Rem's past fade, and that's when he saw it—the deadly creature stalking them from just beyond the tree line.

The xiger slowly emerged from the shadows, revealing its mesmerizing green and black striped coat. Rows of its sharp teeth glistened. Its dark yellow eyes glowed. Its clawed paws left dark imprints on the dirt as it slowly approached. It was a majestically frightful creature.

Rem pulled out his sword hastily, and Luca stepped back. Niel ran. The xiger snarled at them, its sharp teeth snapping. Rem lashed at it with his sword, but he was just delaying the inevitable. The creature was as big as them, fast and fierce. One calculated jump, one swift attack with its claws, and it would all be over. "Niel! Help me!" Rem screamed as the xiger snapped at his sword.

"He left!" Luca yelled.

"He what?" Rem glanced at where Luca was pointing and saw Niel finishing crossing the Simas. He was safe on the other side.

Rem cursed. Some words that even Luca hadn't heard. The xiger moved closer, and Rem made a decision. "Cross the river, Luca!"

"I can't—"

"Go!"

Luca ran, but hesitated at the edge of the running water. Niel sat on the opposite riverbank, just lazily waiting for them. The water was quickly up to Luca's knees, impeding his speed; the water was cold, the current strong. He didn't dare swim, afraid the current would drag him away.

"You're taking too long!" Niel hollered when Luca was halfway across. "Why is Rem bothering with that xiger? Doesn't he know they're afraid of water?"

Luca stopped. The world faded, and he saw Rem still fighting the xiger while he waited for Luca to cross the river. Saw the xiger jump and sink its teeth into Rem's neck.

Luca turned around. "Rem!" he yelled, but Rem couldn't hear him. Not over the growls of the xiger and the noise of the heavy current. Luca turned around, making his way back to Rem. His pace was sluggish, the water reaching his thighs. The river was deeper than just a minute ago, the current faster. He wasn't going to make it like this. Luca nudged a rock with his foot and dove under to grab it. Rising, he aimed and threw it at the xiger. It hit its backside, distracting it and allowing Rem to block its deadly bite. Luca had more visions. One with him. Him standing exactly where he was right now in the middle of the river, Niel on one side, Rem on the other; the current rising suddenly, taking him away. Then a second, an alternate; Rem jumping in to save him; both of them being dragged by the river.

Two visions. Two possibilities—One where he died alone, another where Rem died with him.

It was going to end here then. He would never make it to Nevenen.

"Luca!" Rem's blade sunk into the xiger's neck. Blood gushed from the wound. Before Rem could finish it off, it gurgled some horrible noises, then turned and ran away.

Luca felt his feet sinking in the mud. He looked up to see Rem stepping into the river. "Stay there!" he yelled. "I'll come to you." Luca started making his way back to Rem—it was the only way to keep Rem safe—lying to him. The water was almost up to his waist. His pace slowed. His feet sank into the mud, and Luca went under. He swallowed water, but surfaced back up quickly, gasping. A cry escaped his lips. This was torture. He wished it were over.

Something hit the surface close to him.

"You're so slow, Luca." Rem was suddenly beside him, reaching for Luca's hand. "What are you doing? Move!" Rem's hand closed around Luca's and pulled him back to his feet, pulling him as they scrambled back to the shore. "This bloodless river is going to take us!"

They tried to hurry, but the increasing water slowed them down. Luca saw the vision with both of them drowning again and cursed himself for this useless gift. What was the point of having visions if he couldn't really change anything? If he failed at making Rem stay safely on the riverbank? This was the second out of the three incidents Luca had tried to warn Rem about, and this

was the one that was going to kill them. Luca slipped on a rock and sank under the surface again. Rem pulled him up. "I'm sorry, Rem!" Luca cried. "Leave me! You might still make it."

Rem squeezed his hand. "I don't want to live with that for the rest of my life. Now move!"

Luca struggled against the water now up to his chest. Then they heard it—the legendary roar of the Simas and its deadly force. Saw the wave coming at them.

Rem swore and did the only thing he could. He wrapped his arms around Luca and held him tight as he dove under the water just before the wave hit.

The current threw them around like ragdolls, almost pulled them up to the surface, but Rem intended to stay underwater as long as possible. Or at least long enough for the sudden wave to pass. The current threatened to rip Luca from his arms, so he held on tighter. Luca must have figured out what Rem was trying to do—he wrapped his hands around Rem's back and clung tightly to him.

The lack of air was burning his lungs. His senses were shaken by the tossing and tumbling. Rem held on tighter and tighter, but the river was stronger than their desire to hold on, and Luca started to slip from his grasp. Rem opened his eyes and saw Luca struggling to stay with him, his face full of panic, swallowing water.

He was going to lose Luca! The river was going to take him!

They needed to get out of the river. They needed to be free of it now!

A sudden blow of water pushed them down. Threw them against the rocks of the riverbed, and Rem couldn't see anything anymore.

Chapter Twelve

Betrayal

There was water in his lungs.

Rem choked and coughed, the water rising like bile up his throat and spewing out. Air slammed into his lungs, and he sucked it in. Air. Life. He was alive.

A petite human body lay next to him. Still. Luca.

Rem crawled toward him, his body heavy with water, his clothes and cloak soaked.

“Luca...” His voice was hoarse—his throat raw.

Luca. Luca. I promised I'd protect you. You can't die!

His fingers hovered above Luca's mouth, just under his nose. There was no breath.

“Rem! Luca!” Rem heard Niel's footsteps just up the riverbank. Without thinking, Rem pulled Luca to him, wrapped his arms around Luca's body protectively, and held him close, while drawing his sword with his right hand. Niel appeared from the brush like an apparition. One that Rem really didn't want to see. “You're alive!”

“Stay away from us!” Rem pointed his sword at Niel—Niel, who had run as soon as the xiger appeared; Niel, who hadn't bothered to tell them xigers were afraid of water; Niel, who'd stood safely on the riverbank while he and Luca got dragged underwater. He didn't even try to help them. Like he wanted them to drown.

“Rem, is Luca breathing?”

“Don't come near him!” Rem snarled. He held his sword as high as he could manage, but it felt heavy in his hand. His body wanted to shut down so badly. “Luca?” Rem asked, stretching his fingers until they touched Luca's skin and found it cold to the touch.

He had lied to Luca just like his parents had lied to him. “*We'll come back,*” his parents had said to him. “*I'll protect you,*” Rem had said to Luca.

He just wanted Luca to open his eyes... Rem heard Niel running, closing the space between them, felt Niel's fingertips press against his forehead.

Rem blinked, the world became fuzzy, and he let go of his sword. Niel was there, glaring at him. "Give me Luca," he ordered. Rem was holding something—someone—Luca was lifeless in his arms. Rem gave Luca to Niel. Why didn't that feel right?

Niel laid Luca on the ground and placed a hand atop Luca's chest as he started chanting words Rem didn't understand. The fog in Rem's head was thick, his thoughts trying to find solid footing. It wasn't right that Niel had Luca.

Don't touch him. Don't touch him. I promised to keep him safe. Me! Not you.

Rem lurched up, but his body was still being pulled down by something unseen. A spell. The soaked clothes. His legs felt like stones. As if someone had put a giant rock on top of his shoulders. That bastard Niel had bespelled him again with his forsaken mind trick. Rem was going to kill him.

Every step was agony, his movements slow and painful as he fought the suggestion to stay put. Niel's entire concentration was on Luca, he didn't notice him approaching.

Rem pushed Niel away with all his strength. Collapsing on top of Luca.

"In blood's name, Rem! Don't you see I'm trying to save him?"

Was he? Had he? The fog finally receded. Rem didn't realize until then that he was holding Luca again, holding him as close as he could. Like a child clutching a precious possession when someone tries to take it away. What had come over him?

Luca coughed, water escaping his mouth. Rem turned him over so he could spit it out, so he could breathe. It was a few minutes before Luca stopped coughing. Rem never let him go. Niel just stood silently by.

"We didn't die," Luca said, almost gasping, he was so out of breath. "We were supposed to die."

Rem gently rubbed Luca's back. "Is that what you saw in your vision?"

"Yes," Luca cried. "We drowned. We died."

"No, we didn't." Rem wanted to hug Luca tight to reassure him he was alive.

"Then why do I see it? Why do I feel it? What's the point of me having these visions if they're not really real?" Luca was raising his voice.

Disappointment? It was all disappointment. “What’s the point if they don’t show me the possible good outcome? The one where we don’t die? What’s the point of seeing something seconds before it happens? Or years before it happens? Why did they show you loving me?”

Luca exhaled, his body shivering from the cold. He lay still in Rem’s arms, his breathing coming in slowly. Rem never let go. Luca’s last words echoed inside his head, and he watched the water of the river roar by and pretended Luca hadn’t said them.

Rem dreamt of the rain. He dreamt he was young again. His mother clutched at him desperately. The rain droplets felt like ice on his skin, and they kept falling and falling until he was knee deep inside the flowing river. He wasn’t a child anymore; his mother was gone, and it was he who was clutching someone to him. Luca. The Simas came thundering down on them like a monster, and Rem woke up. His pulse thumped loudly in his ears, slowly calming as Rem realized it had been just a nightmare.

They had made it to Zilin late in the evening. Drenched and exhausted, Rem remembered walking inside the inn but nothing else. Niel must have tricked yet another innkeeper to let them stay in a room.

Rem turned his head slightly, and noticed he was close to the edge of the bed. The room was empty. The second bed was made, like no one had slept on it. There was warmth next to him. Luca was asleep in his arms again, his chest slowly rising and falling with each breath. Luca’s chest and torso were bare. Rem noticed he wasn’t wearing a shirt either. Their clothes were laid over the windowsill, drying.

Without thinking, Rem ran his hand through Luca’s hair, careful not to wake him up. Luca was warm, and Rem couldn’t help but get closer until his forehead gently touched Luca’s temple as the relief of escaping death overwhelmed him.

Luca stirred, but he didn’t wake. Something else tugged at Rem’s heart, something he hadn’t felt in a long time. He remembered the last time he’d woken up and found Luca kissing him, how he hadn’t felt any of the things he thought he would have felt. No urge to push him away. No urge to recoil. He felt all the opposite things, and he wanted to feel them again.

This time, he closed that small gap, and brushed his lips against Luca’s, slowly and gently. Luca stirred again, and this time he did wake, his eyes opening, that bright blue finding Rem.

Rem stopped, the back of his fingers grazing Luca's face. He only hesitated a second before closing the gap again and again. Wrapping his arms tighter around Luca, he opened Luca's mouth with skill. He'd kissed enough boys and girls, and even one elf, to know what to do.

Rem allowed himself to be carried by the moment. Unthinking, he rolled Luca until he was on top of the younger boy, his kisses getting stronger, the warmth of Luca's bare skin spreading through his body.

Luca tried to say something, but his voice got lost while Rem kissed him. His hands squeezed at Rem's shoulders.

Rem finally took a breath and looked at Luca; there were tears in the corners of his eyes, and just like that, the moment was gone. Rem rolled back to his side, running a hand over his eyes. "I'm sorry," was the only thing he could get out, and it was such a weak thing to say.

Luca made a sound—a short catch of breath full of hurt. Rem turned his head and saw Luca covering his face with both hands while he tried as hard as he could not to burst into sobs.

Rem wanted to comfort Luca until the hurt went away, but he was the reason for it. How could he comfort someone when he was the problem? Rem stood and got dressed as quickly as he could. Luckily, the clothes were dry. "I'm going downstairs to find some food. I'll be back soon." Luca turned away to face the wall. Rem left—every step feeling heavy and strained.

Chapter Thirteen

Blood

Niel wasn't in the downstairs area of the inn, but someone else Rem recognized was.

At a table near the far end, a young child was speaking with a man with dark hair and sickly green eyes.

Rem rushed to the pair, pulling the child away from the devi's grasp. The kid looked up at Rem. "Run home now." Rem patted his shoulders and the child ran. Rem reached for his dagger.

"Oh, I wouldn't do that if I were you. Zilin has a very well-known rule against brandishing weapons inside common areas." The devi flashed a smile, but it quickly vanished. "That's the second soul you've made me lose."

"That's a child. I should kill you where you stand."

"Trust me, blondie. I'd much rather take a grown soul, but—" The devi picked at one of its nails until it came right off. Rem flinched. "I'm running out of time." It flicked the bloody nail at Rem. Rem dodged it as goosebumps raised on his skin.

Despite the disgusting display, Rem realized something. This monster, this creature, was just like the xiger. It was just doing what it needed to survive.

"Do you have a name?"

The devi's brows rose. "Devi."

"Devi, the devi?"

"That word is the only thing I knew when I started to exist, so I ran with it." Devi looked around at the empty inn. "Not like I owe you any explanations. Go away if you're not going to kill me."

Rem hesitated. Was it really a good idea to leave this thing alive? Probably not, but it wasn't his place to choose what could exist in the world.

Rem headed back to the room to find Luca sitting by the foot of the stairs. He must have been watching Rem talk to Devi. His cloak covered his entire body.

"Is he one of the moments you warned me about?"

Luca shook his head. "No. He is—" He closed his eyes, reopened them. "He's no danger."

"But to someone else? Can you see whose life he will steal?"

Luca stared straight ahead. "Someone willing."

Rem sighed and sat next to Luca, leaving space between them. "Are you going to wear your cloak again?" Luca nodded.

Rem wanted to scoot over and tear that cloak from Luca's shoulders, but the last time he'd pushed his feelings on Luca, he'd made him cry. He would not do that again.

Tell him you're sorry for jumping him this morning. Tell him you want to be forgiven. Tell him you want to see him again, even after tomorrow. Rem opened his mouth, but closed it without saying any of the things he wanted.

The innkeeper refused to take Rem's money when he tried to pay for the room, insisting that a man with ash-brown hair had already paid for it. Niel. Rem left some coins on the counter anyway. It wasn't nearly enough for the room, but it eased his conscience a little bit.

"Where are you headed this day?" the innkeeper asked.

"Nevenen," Rem answered, making sure Luca was waiting by the entrance.

"That's a long way from here, young man. How are you planning to get there?"

"I'm not sure." With Niel gone, it was really up to him to figure out how to continue the journey.

"Well, whatever you do, make sure you make it to a village before nightfall."

That caught Rem's interest. "Why?"

"There's a vampire roaming the forest between here and Nevenen. Some men have gotten killed."

Rem frowned. "Vampires are extinct."

"Saw one of the victims just a few weeks ago. Throat ripped out, arm torn from his body. People have gone missing as well."

"Animals could have done that." Rem shook his head; he didn't have time for this superstitious nonsense. "Thanks for the warning." He headed out, Luca

following, and they made their way to the stables. Maybe he could borrow a horse if he promised to pay it back later. He didn't have enough coins to afford one.

Niel was waiting next to the stables with a cart and a horse to pull it.

"No." Rem pointed at Niel, then grabbed Luca's hand and started walking around him. He'd been so naïve to actually think he'd gotten rid of the trickster. He didn't even care if he was supposed to take Niel back to Filina. All he wanted was for Niel to be as far from them as possible. "We're done with your lies and your cheats!" Rage boiled over Rem's emotions. Why couldn't Niel just leave them alone? Why didn't he just disappear? "We can't trust you. We'll get our own transportation."

"I didn't trick anyone for this!" Niel followed them. "I know you hate when I do that, so I've been working all night, asking for favors, getting some rio."

"How could we believe you?"

"Ask the people I helped."

"You could have told them to say whatever you wanted. Nothing you say is trustworthy."

Niel hesitated, and for the first time, Rem saw real shame cross Niel's features. His brows furrowed, and he pursed his lips. "I know that! Once people know what my gift is, they never see me the same way again. Not my friends. Not my parents. I didn't even dare tell Nana what I could do because I didn't want her to shun me, but she did it anyway. The Legion is the only place that accepted me. The only place I belong, and if Luca is not there by tomorrow, I can never return to them. I will do anything so Luca makes it safely back."

Rem didn't like a single word Niel said. They were all selfish sentiments and selfish words, but they were Niel's truth and the most honest expression from him since meeting the man. It was enough. Rem sighed, turned and tossed his belongings in the cart. Luca did the same, and they were on their way.

They made good time, the day passing by languidly, the hours filled with simple stories and even chuckles. Niel took charge of the reins the entire journey, stopping only a handful of times to let the horse rest. It was impossible to make it to Nevenen before nightfall and the only village along the way was Nemas, close to the coast. Rem insisted they take the two hour detour, but that wasn't something Niel wanted to do. The earlier they made it to Nevenen, the

better. "Are any xiger's going to try and eat us if we spend the night in the cart?" Niel asked Luca. Luca blinked, startled by the question, but eventually shook his head.

When the sky started showing hues of pink, Niel stopped to make camp in a large clearing just a ten minute walk from the Simas. He tied the horse to a tree and left some food and water nearby. Luca and Rem started clearing a space so they could start a fire while Niel handpicked branches and leaves from the trees nearby. He never asked for help, carrying a handful of twigs each trip. Luca tried carrying some, but Niel told him he could handle it. He wanted to show the boys they could trust and depend on him, even if they only had one more day together.

The fire brought warmth and a sense of safety from the coming night, but it wasn't real safety. The sounds from the forest were more ominous than he'd imagined. It really was the middle of nowhere, hours from any village. Maybe it had been a mistake to ignore Rem's request to go to Nemas. It was too late for second thoughts. Rem made a small pile of sharp looking rocks, then filed his sword with one of them. It seemed that even with Luca's reassurance, Rem couldn't stop worrying about another xiger attacking them.

They roasted some meat over the fire and ate as the sky grew darker. Rem sat next to Luca, almost bumping shoulders with him. Niel sat away from them, giving the boys some space. He could tell they still weren't comfortable around him after the Simas incident. Luca was telling a story about his childhood, something involving his cloak, town children, and a tumble. Rem laughed as Luca told the story, and Luca smiled while telling it.

Luca must have been exhausted, because as soon as he'd finished dinner and his story, he lay down and fell asleep next to Rem, using his cloak as a blanket. Rem couldn't seem to stop looking at him.

"You want some advice?" Niel broke the silence, speaking softly so he wouldn't wake Luca. "Don't fall in love with Luca, Rem."

"I'm not falling in love with him," Rem answered immediately, but the forlorn look in his eyes betrayed his true feelings. It was none of Niel's business what Rem's feelings were. He remembered when he'd been young and in love. What a mistake that had been, but then again, he'd never looked at someone the way Rem was looking at Luca.

"Maybe not." Niel threw a log in the fire. "But your mind's starting to get full of him. I sensed it when I muffled your thoughts by the river." His eyes

were dead serious. "Luca is a Legion child, Rem. He was born into it. He will die a part of it. Whatever you are or aren't, you still don't belong in his world."

"Filina left," Rem said, still looking at Luca.

A picture of his nana smiling crossed Niel's mind. "My family wasn't born Legion. My grandmother joined them when she was young, saw their true colors, then worked really hard to leave her clan so that her children wouldn't be born a part of it. I completely ignored everything she taught me about them and joined them anyway."

"I thought you loved being Legion."

"I do. I did." Niel thought back on the night Rem interrupted the meeting. How he knew instantly he was caught and how no one had spoken up for him. Not even his friends. "I don't know anymore." Niel shook his head. "I thought they were my family, the ones that accepted me and my power, but not a single one of them volunteered to help me when I made a mistake. No one is here but you."

Niel knew those words were the truth as soon as he spoke them. Flashes of moments with the people who stayed silent crossed his mind, and he felt the hurt of it again. Sometimes the truth hurt like a bitch.

Rem stared at the fire. It crackled and popped in a dance that kept him warm. Luca slept soundly close to him, his chest rising softly with every breath. If Rem wanted, all he had to do was extend his hand and he could touch him. There was so much to think about, but no time left to do it. Tomorrow, they would reach Nevenen, and they would all part ways. The last few days would become nothing more than memories, and perhaps it was better that way.

Niel was right. He and Luca did belong in separate worlds. It didn't matter if Rem's parents had been Legion, he still didn't have any powers. Rem would never be accepted by them. He could never join Luca's clan, even if he wanted to. His only option was to say goodbye, and he already knew it was going to be hard.

The horse whinnied. Luca suddenly opened his eyes, sat up, and looked around in alarm. He leaned forward, holding his head with both hands.

Rem went instantly to his side. "What's wrong?"

Luca raised his head quickly, and stared at a hedge just before the tree line. "The monster you told me to warn you about," he said slowly, pointing at the bushes. "He's coming."

Rem rose, looking toward the spot Luca was pointing at. Was it another xiger? Something else?

The figure of a man slowly emerged from the darkness. Its hair was dark silver, its skin the color of ash, and its eyes a bewitching red. Its feet moved as if they didn't touch the ground, and it tilted its head curiously. For a moment, Rem thought that Devi had followed them, but it wasn't. Someone from the fae? No. Rem remembered the innkeeper and his warning.

It couldn't be.

Rem pulled Luca behind him. "A vampire."

It was not possible. It couldn't be!

Of all the monsters in Lenen, vampires were the most lethal. Many legends told of victims and survivors who dared visit the forests after dark. Stories that had stopped being heard years ago, before Rem was even born. It was common knowledge vampires were real, that they once populated the forests of the country, and that fear and retribution initiated their extermination. People could get rich just by killing a vampire and claiming its bounty. In just a couple of years, the stories stopped being told, and the creatures became forgotten, extinct.

Niel leapt up and ran his folding knife across the back of his arm while he chanted a spell. He didn't get to finish. The vampire suddenly appeared in front of him, grabbing where Niel had cut himself, squeezing so hard Niel fell to his knees on the ground in front of the creature.

"So eager to feed me." The vampire smirked and ran a finger up the cut on Niel's arm, collecting blood, licking its finger in one fluid motion. Niel was trying to pull his arm away from its hold when the vampire dug its nails into Niel's wrist and twisted it until something snapped. Niel hollered in pain, his wrist a mess of red. "Stop screaming," the vampire ordered, and just like that, the screaming was replaced by an eerie silence. For a moment Rem thought the vampire had bespelled Niel, but one look at the sorcerer, and it was clear that Niel was using all his strength to keep his mouth shut. The vampire seemed surprised that Niel had obeyed him. Its lips moved slowly, "Your blood has magic. Legion blood. Sorcerers." It turned its head toward Rem and Luca. "Young and powerful always taste the best."

Rem stood as straight as he could, his sword and dagger in hand. Luca moved next to him, flaunting the Jupiter dagger Rem had given him. "Let him go!"

To their surprise, the creature did just that, and in the blink of an eye he was in front of the pair, reaching for them. Rem swung his sword at the creature. He missed. Luca screamed, and something sharp grazed Rem's cheek.

The vampire moved again to stand a few feet away. Rem stepped closer to Luca. How could he fight when they couldn't even see the creature move? The vampire was licking its blood-speckled fingers. One, two, three, four. Luca was putting pressure on his shoulder with one hand while blood seeped through the small gaps between his fingers. Rem touched his own cheek and felt the blood running down where the creature had cut him. The vampire spat the blood, making a face of disgust. "Children's blood always has a bad aftertaste. Disappointing. I really thought I had a feast just walk right into my territory." It cleaned the remainder of the blood with the hem of its shirt. "Very well." Its eyes settled on Niel. "A small meal is better than no meal."

Niel tried to stand, but slipped when his broken hand couldn't support him. Rem saw the fear in his eyes, and knew as well as Niel knew that it was pointless to run. Rem remembered the first time he'd heard a story about the sharp-toothed creatures. One of the men from the orphan house had just returned from a supply trip, shaken and wounded. Rem and three other boys hid under a table while they listened to his story of how a woman had appeared out of nowhere and woken them in the middle of the night—how she had opened his companion's belly and killed him.

Every child in Lenen grew up with stories like those. Rem did. Luca did. Niel did. Stories meant to keep wandering children safely in their beds at night. There wasn't a single story where the victim survived. Yet, even knowing this, Niel tried to escape. He crawled on his knees and one good hand until the vampire grabbed his ankle and dragged him back.

Niel tasted dirt before the vampire turned him face up. The hand around his ankle grabbed him like a vice, and pulled him closer to the monster. It reached out and grabbed the collar of Niel's shirt, hoisting his upper body off the ground.

It happened in the blink of an eye, but for Niel it felt like an eternity, the world slowing until he saw every detail—the vampire yanking him closer, his fingers grasping at the dirt, looking into dark red eyes that stared at him. The idleness wasn't his imagination, the world really had slowed just for him. Maybe this was part of the vampire's power, to allow its victims a few seconds

more of the life it was taking. Niel felt every breath he took, every heartbeat. The vampire blinked, and Niel could see every eyelash, every speck of ashen skin, and he wondered if the skin would break like dust if he touched it.

“Let go,” it spoke. Niel blinked, the spell he’d been in gone, and the world caught up with the moment. He wrapped his fingers around the vampire’s wrist and pulled on his power.

“You are going to release me. You are going to walk away. You are not feeding on anyone ever again.”

The vampire tilted its head just slightly then pried Niel’s fingers away from its wrist. Putting one of the digits inside its mouth, it bit down.

Niel cursed and tried to kick the vampire between the legs, so it slammed him against the ground once before hoisting him back up.

“You are still fighting. Stop.”

“I’m not going to let you kill me quietly.” The vampire slammed him to the ground again. Niel’s vision blurred; for a second he couldn’t breathe, and the world slowed down once more. His power was useless. His power couldn’t save him, nothing could. “Please, let me go.” There was no honor among the Legion to beg for your life, but Niel couldn’t care less about that. He wanted to live. He wanted to see what type of men Rem and Luca would grow up to be. He wanted to ask Nana Filina for forgiveness. He wanted so much more than just this.

The vampire didn’t say anything; it just exposed Niel’s neck and sank its fangs into the flesh.

The pain burned like a venom spreading through his body, numbing his senses. Niel heard Rem’s voice and saw the boys through the haze of his vision. Rem ran toward him, sword in hand, Luca behind him with the dagger. They ran as fast as they could, but for every step they made, it seemed the creature moved further away. They were trying to save him, even after he lied to them, abandoned them, manipulated them. He wished he could ask for their forgiveness as well, because he deserved this. Leading a life of cheating, not caring who got hurt, hiding his power, and using it on people. This was his penance. It was the balance the universe had designated for him. Niel tasted blood on his lips. As far as he was concerned, the universe could go screw itself.

Feeling for the folding knife in his pocket, Niel pulled it out and drove it down toward the vampire’s back. He felt the blade sink into flesh all the way to

the hilt. The fangs pulled out of his neck. There was the weightlessness of being tugged forward, then suddenly he was released and hit the ground. The creature vanished as quickly as it had attacked, taking the dagger with it, and leaving Niel on the ground bleeding, wondering if he'd survive the night.

Chapter Fourteen

Goodbye

“Niel?” Luca’s voice sounded distant, like an echo that was trying to pull Niel back into the world. Niel took a deep breath and regretted it instantly.

“Bloodless...” Niel felt Rem next to him. The boy really did not think things through before saying them, and Niel was hurting too much to snap something back. He was worried about something else.

Niel tried to look past Rem’s shoulders. “Is it gone?”

Rem was looking for something inside his knapsack. “The vampire?”

“Yes.” It hurt to move. It hurt to breathe. His neck pulsed in pain with every heartbeat. “You said they were extinct.” It wasn’t Rem’s fault that thing had found them, but he wanted to blame someone. He didn’t want to admit that even he had ignored his own advice of not traveling during the night. That even he had believed the stories of werewolves being banished to Zemera, and the last vampire dying at the hands of bounty hunters when he was just eight. “Why didn’t you warn me sooner, Luca?”

“Don’t blame Luca,” Rem said immediately. Luca shifted uneasily.

“I’m not. I just—Owww!” Rem moved his head up, and Niel felt something wrapping around his neck. Rem had torn out a piece of his cloak and was using it as a bandage. The hands holding his head were not delicate, and it was clear Rem had no idea what he was doing, but he was helping. Anyone else would appreciate the act of kindness, but Niel hated being dependent like this. Dependency just opened you up to letting the wrong person in.

“I think that’s as much as we can do right now,” Rem said as he tied a crude knot on the piece of cloak. “You need a healer. It’s pretty bad.”

“I can feel it,” Niel spoke through gritted teeth. “We need to get to Vesca. I know the healer there.”

“It’s more than a half a day’s trip. Even if we left right now, we wouldn’t make it until the afternoon. Turning back to—”

“No,” Niel groaned. “We have to be in Nevenen tomorrow for Luca’s ceremony. Just hurry and help me get on that cart.” Niel moved and his neck

pulsed, spreading pain through his entire body. Rem and Luca each grabbed one of his arms and helped him up.

"I know a closer place on the way to Vesca," Rem said as they slowly made their way to the cart. "I think the person who lives there can help you."

"Who?"

"Your great-grandmother."

Niel momentarily forgot the pain, and held on tight to Rem. "You are not taking me to Nana. We're going to Vesca."

Rem blinked. "We'll go to Vesca."

Niel relaxed and thought only of the pain he felt. The pain of having survived. It was a long way to the village he called home, and all he wanted was to close his eyes. Climbing on the cart was agony, and Niel wouldn't admit it, but he was happy Luca was there to help him, and that Rem was there to drive the cart. That they were taking him somewhere where he would get better.

They left the clearing in a rush. Niel kept a close eye on the brush, afraid to see a shadow, but there was nothing there. Even if he did see the vampire, there was nothing they could do to stop it, so Niel instead worried about another thing—his power when his blood was flowing. Every Legion member knew that their power changed with the flow of blood. It was also the best way to cast a spell that you weren't born with—healing spells, protection spells. Niel had always needed to touch the person he wanted to influence, and had never really tried to do it without.

Niel wondered... had Rem agreed with him to not go to Filina's house, or had he used his power without touching skin?

The side of the cart bumped against a tree. "Sorry," Rem said. "I've never driven a cart before. It's also pitch black."

"Just go slowly. You'll be fine." Niel trusted Rem to get him to Vesca, hoping he made it that far. "Luca," Niel's voice was raspy and strained. "I need you to help me close the wound. I think it's still bleeding."

Luca crawled closer to Niel. "I never learned how to heal," Luca admitted.

Niel's laugh was dry. "Inception children don't need to learn the basics, do they?" Luca looked away. Niel coughed. "Sorry. I didn't mean that. Do you have a blade? I have another folding knife in my pocket if you don't." Luca pulled out his Jupiter dagger. "Make a shallow cut somewhere on your palm."

Luca's hand shook, but he did what Niel said, and pressed the edge of his dagger against his skin until he bled.

"Just put your hand over the wound and repeat these words—*cerar senar lefar*. Think about healing. Think about making things better."

"*Cerar senar lefar*," Luca chanted the words over and over.

Niel sighed in relief, the magic easing the ache. It took him three months to master this technique, and here Luca was doing it on the first try. The adrenaline was gone, Luca's chants were like a lullaby. Niel sighed. He just wanted to sleep. He just wanted so badly to sleep.

Niel released a long soft breath. "Thank you. That feels much better..." He closed his eyes.

"Niel?" Luca's voice rose in panic.

"What happened?" Rem pulled at the reins and took the risk to look behind him.

Luca put a hand on Niel's chest. "Nothing. Keep going. He just fell asleep."

Rem let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. Luca climbed over the small division and sat next to him. "You should get some sleep. I have the reins for now."

Luca remained silent, scooted until his body touched Rem's and rested his head on Rem's shoulder. "I should have said something."

Rem turned his head to look at Luca's profile. He was staring at the bright red cut on his palm. "You can't blame yourself," Rem said. "Niel will be fine, you'll see."

Luca glanced behind them and closed his eyes. "I see Niel. Then I don't. Like he will live, or he won't."

"Which one is it?"

Luca shook his head. "I don't know."

Rem had the urge to put his arm over Luca's shoulders, but he couldn't let go of the reins. There was nothing Luca would accomplish by worrying, or by wishing he'd done things differently. It was late, and they were tired. Rem had a sleepless night ahead of him, so he told Luca to go to sleep again, and this time Luca did, lying next to Niel.

The drive was tedious. The sound of the horse's hooves, a monotonous chorus. Rem paid close attention to any other sounds, but it was hard to hear. All he could do was trust the horse would get spooked if there was anything out there.

"Children's blood always has a bad aftertaste."

Rem remembered the vampire's words. Remorse came with the memory, because the second he'd heard them, he'd felt only grateful. It meant the creature wasn't going to kill them. It meant it wasn't going to kill Luca. Rem hadn't had a single thought of worry about Niel at that moment, and he had to accept that.

The full moon slowly moved across the sky until the dark gave way to hues of pink and purple. Rem started dozing off when, suddenly, Luca shook him awake.

"Let's switch," he said. Rem was so tired, he gave Luca the reins without hesitation.

Niel was still sleeping. The blood on his neck was visible even through the dark cloth of the cloak. Everything seemed more real, sitting here beside him. When he'd been driving the cart, it felt like whatever was going on back here was something he had no control over. If Niel died. If Niel lived. All he had to do was drive the cart.

Rem was careful not to nudge Niel awake as he settled down and fell asleep. His dreams were filled with turmoil—Luca kneeling on the ground wearing his red cloak, the Jupiter dagger in his hands, the blade covered in blood. Rem tried calling his name, but Luca didn't respond. Rem crouched next to him and took the bloody dagger from Luca's hands. "Whose blood is this?" Luca slowly untied the knot of his cloak until it opened and revealed the blood on his chest.

Rem opened his eyes. The sun was already out, its warmth clear and present. Luca silently held the reins. They seemed to be going faster now, thanks to the light. Niel was awake, his eyes watching Rem as he sat up. His breathing was jagged as he tried to stay awake, his eyes drained of life. Rem imagined Niel dead in that cart, and knew that was something he didn't want to see. Maybe it was time to forgive him for abandoning him and Luca by the side of the river.

"I'm sorry," Niel's voice was a raspy whisper. "For making you steal from my great-grandmother. You wouldn't be here if it wasn't for me."

Rem looked at Luca. Two days ago he would have cursed Niel to kingdom come, but now...

"I forgive you." It was spoken so softly, Rem thought Niel hadn't heard him, until he saw a smile form on his lips as he closed his eyes once more. Rem never thought Niel could actually die; his spirit could carry him anywhere. But that smile, that look...? Rem moved closer. "You are not dying in this cart."

Niel tried to laugh. "I think I am. It feels so strange. Everything leaving me. It makes me want to let go, and it sucks because I really want to stay."

"Rem! I see the village."

Rem hopped over the division and grabbed the reins. "Stay next to Niel until we reach the healer's place." Luca jumped to the back and put his arms around Niel. Rem pushed the horse as much as he dared. He knew the poor creature was exhausted, but they couldn't afford to stop now. Rem ignored the gazes and complaints from the locals as he rushed through the streets. The healer's place was a small, single-story cabin with a small wooden sign on the front with the name Hasler, a drawing of a medicine bottle, and a red L on it.

Niel sat up with Luca's help. "I'll go alone. You two get some food at the pub." Niel reached for his knapsack, opened it up and pulled out a long red cloak. He tried to push Luca away and get out of the cart on his own, but he slipped and fell to the ground. Rem and Luca reached to help him. "No." Niel swatted their hands away. "I'm fine."

"You can barely stand."

Niel ignored Rem's words and slowly draped the red cloak around him, tying the knot loosely around his neck. Rem had almost forgotten how Niel looked in that red. How Niel was part of the Legion. "I'll be fine. Hasler is a very good healer. I know her." Niel tried to pat Rem on the shoulder, but something crossed his face, he doubled over and spat blood on the ground.

Rem swore and helped Niel up, yelling at Luca to get the healer. Niel still tried to stand on his own, muttering for Rem to leave, so Rem put one of Niel's arms behind his neck and dragged him inside the little cabin. It was a small space with a small waiting area that opened up to a room with a single table where patients could lie down. A bronze-skinned woman with dirty blonde hair was standing in the space between the two rooms, Luca was behind her.

"In blood's name, Niel, what happened to you?" Niel opened his mouth to reply, but just coughed up blood again.

“Put him on the table, now!” Rem and Luca did as told, the red of Niel’s cloak spilling over the sides of the table. Hasler put a tray of supplies next to them and sliced her palm open before untying Niel’s cloak and unwrapping the cloth around his neck.

The words that came out of her mouth were not pretty. Rem wished she’d told him what to do next, but she just placed her palm over the wound on Niel’s neck and started using her power. “Luca,” she said calmly. “Please grab one of the towels in the closet, and soak it in water so I can clean the wound.” Luca moved to the far end of the room. Hasler turned toward Rem. “When was he attacked? This wound isn’t fresh.”

“Last night,” Rem answered.

“You took too long to get here.”

“But I’ve seen—” Luca started to say, then stopped himself by biting his lip. He handed Hasler the wet towel. “He’s going to die?”

“He’ll live.” Hasler started cleaning Niel’s neck while she continued healing it. There were two dark punctures where the vampire had bitten him. “But these marks will never fade.”

“Bloodless!” Niel swore. His eyes looked livelier, and he tried to move, but Hasler put a hand on his chest.

“Stay still. I’m not done with this.” Niel stopped fidgeting. Color returned to his face. He touched the marks on his neck. “Tera,” Hasler looked at him. “Remember that favor you owe me?” She nodded once. “I want you to promise me that you never saw these marks on me.”

Hasler glanced toward Rem and Luca, her brown eyes vivid, then back at Niel. “I swear not to tell a soul.”

“You too,” Niel coughed, his eyes on Luca and Rem.

“I promise,” Luca answered immediately.

Rem hesitated. Not because he couldn’t keep a secret, but because he wanted to know why this needed to be a secret. There seemed to be something that Niel, Luca, and Hasler knew that he didn’t, and he wanted to know what it was. Luca tugged at Rem’s sleeve, and one look into those blue eyes was enough for Rem to know he would agree without even knowing what the secret was. Rem couldn’t resist brushing his knuckles against the fingers tugging at him. He turned to Niel. “I promise.”

Niel and Tera were talking in hushed voices in the healing room while Rem and Luca sat in the waiting room. Luca was looking through the small window at the children playing outside near a large napple tree, a forlorn look in his eyes. Rem silently watched him, and he realized this was likely the last day he would ever see Luca. Once Niel and the healer were done, they would leave for Nevenen and Luca's home.

"What are you thinking?" Rem looked past the window and watched three girls and a boy chasing each other around the tree and laughing.

"I don't remember the last time I was so carefree," Luca spoke. "When did I stop being a child?"

"We're technically still children." Rem put both hands behind his head and stretched. "It used to always bother me. How the world sees anyone under eighteen. Like we suddenly become different people the day of our birth."

"Are you saying you don't mind it anymore?" Luca looked at Rem. "Being seen as a child?"

Rem touched the edge of the tear on Luca's shirt just over his shoulder. "Not when it prevents a monster from hurting you. I didn't know how to protect you from it."

Luca made as if to get closer to Rem, then changed his mind and moved away. "I'm hungry," he said, changing the subject. "Can we go to the pub? I'm ready for this day to end."

Rem nodded and led the way while trying not to think about what Luca had said. He didn't think he'd ever been carefree.

The pub was small, but it was quiet, and there was the nice scent of a cooked meal in the air. Luca picked a table in an empty area at the far end, while Rem gave the last of his coins to pay for their lunch—two bowls of soup. Rem patted the empty pouch inside his pocket. Having coins always seemed such a priority before. Or knowing where he'd sleep. Or where he would eat. Or what jobs he would do to earn more coins. He'd never allowed his pouch to have less than five rio inside it before.

Luca ate his soup quietly, his eyes closing with every taste. Like every spoonful held a secret he needed to discover.

Had it really been just three days since he met this boy? Had it only been two since he'd seen the rushing water coming at them? Just one since he kissed him? What would tomorrow be like without him?

"Luca," Rem broke the silence, and Luca suddenly shut his eyes tight and shook his head like he had a head cold. "What did you see?"

What Luca said was the last thing Rem expected to hear. "Maybe we should say goodbye here. Nevenen is less than an hour away. I can just go with Niel."

"My debt," Rem said without thinking, and instantly knew how insensitive the words were. Such cold words. What did those words say about him when they were the first thing that crossed his mind? Hadn't anything changed? All the little moments he'd shared with Luca. Did they mean anything at all?

Luca turned away. His voice was brittle and soft. "I should go. They're waiting for me." Luca stood, and Rem grabbed his hand. Luca closed his eyes for a moment, then looked at Rem. "Is there anything you want to say to me, Rem?"

Don't go, Luca. Stay with me.

Rem imagined pulling Luca to him, stopping him. He knew Luca would stay with him if he'd only say the words. That Luca would love him, but he didn't know if he could love Luca back the way he deserved. Rem had nothing to offer him other than roaming from place to place, working dangerous jobs for a few coins, and sleeping on beds of leaves or hay. Hunger when his pouch was empty.

Rem remembered Senum and Merina. How they pleaded with him to bring their son back. Merina's eyes haunted him, and he suddenly remembered his own mother. This time he remembered differently though, not as a shadow or blur who left him behind, but as Luca described her. Sad and beautiful—leaving him so she could save him from some unseen evil. Rem didn't want to be that evil.

"No," Rem said, his fingers releasing Luca. It hurt more than he thought to say that word.

Luca blinked. There were tears in his eyes, and he swallowed hard. "Rem, do you remember when I said that there would be three incidents that would prevent me from making it to Nevenen? The Piri clan was the first, the river the second—"

"The vampire was the third," Rem finished.

Luca shook his head. "It was never going to hurt you or me."

Rem rose. "There's one more?"

Luca shook his head again. "This was the third. When you let me go," he said, his voice a shudder. He reached for the small black sheath with the Jupiter dagger and laid it on the table. "I won't need this anymore. Goodbye, Rem." He turned and rushed out the door, leaving Rem behind.

Rem's brain was trying to hurry and process it all. From the moment he met Luca, it had been nothing but strangeness and words. Luca hurting. Luca calling his name in the dark. Luca's smile. Luca's lips. Luca's tears.

Rem imagined never seeing any of those things again.

He ran after Luca, calling his name as he stepped out into the street. He saw the red immediately. Three cloaks. Luca wasn't alone.

"Rem," Abraham said. The Nevenen clan leader was imposing, and—Rem hated to admit—intimidating. Niel stood next to Luca. He kept his hood over his head to hide his neck. "I heard you were here with Luca, so I decided to pick him up," Abraham added as he put a hand on Luca's shoulder. Luca's eyes were cast down, his mouth a thin, unemotional line. "You've done well, child. Consider your transgression against my clan, forgiven." Abraham put the other hand on Niel who raised his eyes and mouthed thank you to Rem.

This wasn't it, was it? This wasn't the last moment he would spend with Luca. "Wait—" Rem started to say, but he felt the pull of power and Abraham, Niel, and Luca vanished before his eyes, leaving Rem alone, and a few townspeople murmuring about what they'd just seen.

Chapter Fifteen

The Inception

Luca sat on the wooden chair in his room and looked into the small dirty mirror in front of him. His reflection stared back at him through the grime.

He couldn't get the image of Rem at the pub out of his head. He kept replaying the moment he saw Rem's fingers abandon his, and it brought a sad smile to his lips. A bittersweet feeling.

"Luca." Luca turned around to see his mother standing by the door. Her eyes were dark and sunken, her skin pale and wrinkled. Her lips no longer knew what it was to smile. When had she gotten so old and ugly? When was the last time Luca had heard her laugh? The day she put a small, child-sized red cloak over his shoulders and kissed his forehead. The day she picked him up after he'd fallen. The day before Abraham came to their door and told her he was an Inception child. "Niel's here to see you," she spoke softly, monotonously.

"He can come in." Merina let Niel in and closed the door, leaving them alone. He was still wearing his hood and only pulled it off once the door was shut. There was no bandage around his neck, and Luca could clearly see the bite marks. "What is it?" he asked. He'd never had a vision where Niel came to talk to him in this room. "Did Abraham forgive you?"

Niel's nervousness seemed to fade after hearing Luca's voice, and he moved closer until he was just behind him. Luca looked at Niel through the mirror. "He did, but—" Niel took a deep breath. "I've been looking forward to when he said those words for the past few days. It was all I could think about. If I don't belong with this clan, I don't belong anywhere. This is the home I chose—my family—but once he said them, I felt nothing. No joy. No relief. Like I didn't care what he said. It's so weird, isn't it? How quickly everything changes." Niel leaned against the mirror. "I think I discovered something new I can do. Maybe I can show you later." He glanced at the door. "I wonder what Rem is doing right now? I wonder what face he'd make if I told him I wanted to see my great-grandmother?"

Luca's heart skipped a beat at the mention of Rem's name. He couldn't allow himself to think about Rem anymore. "How's your neck?" Luca asked, taking Niel by surprise. The older sorcerer made sure his cloak was secure.

“It doesn’t hurt,” Niel whispered. “I’m just afraid of it. I can’t get rid of it.” Niel’s voice drifted as he touched his neck. “Luca, I know I haven’t been the greatest friend to you, but I hope someday we can be friends, that we could trust each other. It’s not because you’re going to be my boss from now on, but after what we’ve just been through... I kind of wish you were my little brother. One that, from tonight on, can order me around.” Niel laughed, his smile something honest. “I was wondering if you could see... Does this mark mean that vampire is coming back for me?”

“You think I’m going to inherit this clan?” Luca frowned, ignoring Niel’s question.

Niel shrugged. “I know Abraham is still far from dead, but he’s not getting any younger either. I’m actually looking forward to when you’re the boss. You will make a great leader, Luca. One I can trust.” He smiled and ruffled Luca’s hair.

“You really have no idea...” Luca’s voice became distant. “All this time, I thought you knew. It made me hate you just a little, but I can honestly say I’m sorry.”

Niel crouched next to Luca. “Sorry for what? I’m confused.”

Luca looked at Niel, and for the first time, saw Niel as a friend. The door opened, and Lorez stepped in. “Hey, Lorez,” Niel said amicably, but Luca could tell there was no friendship between them.

“Niel,” Lorez said bitterly. He didn’t return Niel’s amicability. “Make yourself useful and help me with these.” Lorez handed a set of chains to Niel.

Niel frowned as he grabbed the set of shackles. “What is this?”

“For Luca.” Niel opened his mouth to protest, but Luca stopped him, shaking his head. He showed his wrists to Niel while Lorez stepped back out.

“I said, what is this?” Niel asked.

Luca grabbed one of the shackles and closed it around his own wrist. “I’m not going to be Abraham’s heir, Niel. They’re going to kill me.”

Rem stared at the large oak door and listened to the noise of the tavern inside. How had he ended up here? At some point between the blur of seeing Luca vanish and finding himself alone with nowhere to go, he had jumped on the next traveling cart to Nevenen, and made his way to The Rubi’s Nest.

It did not smell pleasant inside. This was a place for adults. Unlike when he'd visited before in the middle of the day, this close to night, the tavern was full of men and women drinking spirits and smoking pipes. Rem knew he wasn't welcomed here at this hour, but he needed to see Leila. It didn't take long for Leila to notice him making his way to the bar, and she quickly excused herself, grabbing his arm and tugging him to the outside of the tavern through a back door.

The first thing she did once they were alone was hug him. "I've been worried sick! I did some spying about the Nevenen clan after you told me you were looking for them, and heard what happened. I'm so glad you're alive. I don't know what I would have done if I'd lost you."

Rem hugged her back, needing the comfort like he needed to breathe. His emotions swirled, trying to overrun him. He told her everything. He told her about Luca and Niel. About the devi, the vampire, the river. About letting go of Luca's hand.

Leila was quiet for a minute, absorbing it all and looking like she was trying to find the right words. "Rem, do you have feelings for this Legion boy?"

Something tugged at his chest. Such a straightforward question, and he still wasn't sure. "I don't want to be the one who takes him away from everything he knows. What kind of life would he have with me? He would never be safe with me, and you know that, Leila. With me, there is nothing but running and hiding. He's better off with his parents. His clan. He will have it all there. They're even having an Inception ceremony for him tonight."

Leila looked like he'd struck her. Her eyes pained. "Did you say Inception?" Rem nodded. "You don't know?"

"Know what?"

"Rem, listen to me." She placed her hands on both sides of Rem's face, squeezing lightly. "Do you know what happens to the Inception children of the Legion?"

Rem slowly shook his head.

"They're sacrificed to the elders. Their blood is spilled and drunk."

That little jab of hurt in Rem's chest exploded. The world spun for a second, then he pushed Leila away and started to run. She caught up with him quickly, grabbing his arm and pulling him back.

“Where do you think you’re going, Rem?”

“Let me go, Leila! I can’t let them kill him.”

She held him back, then hit him on the chest. “There’s nothing you can do! Nothing, Rem. The sun will set in a few minutes, and that’s when it will happen. You will do nothing but get yourself killed if you go there. I won’t let you do that.”

Rem tried to push her away and run, but Leila tackled him and pinned him face up with her knees. She could keep him there all night if she wanted; Rem knew she could. She had always been stronger than him, had always protected him, even when he didn’t want, or need to be protected. That’s what family did.

Rem tried to roll her off him, but only managed to kick the dirt desperately. She was just going to wait until the sun vanished. Until Luca was dead. Rem wanted to scream. Luca was going to die. His Luca. Whom he swore to protect. “If it were me—” Tears stung at the corners of his eyes. “Would you let me die? Or would you run as fast as you could?”

Leila flinched and a swirl of emotions crossed her features—surprise, sadness, love. She released Rem. “Run,” she said, and followed behind him as they hurried to the barracks.

The sun was barely visible on the horizon. Knowing that its disappearance meant Luca’s death made Rem feel utterly powerless. He would give anything to be next to Luca right this second. He knew no matter how fast he ran, he wasn’t going to make it. Like a cruel joke of the universe.

He recalled the moment he put his legs over the windowsill of Luca’s room and fell face first, Luca’s eyes full of joy at seeing him. Luca, who acted surprised when Rem didn’t know him. Luca telling him to stay on the river bank when he knew the water was going to take them. Luca crying when Rem kissed him. Luca enjoying the soup like it was the last thing he’d ever taste. Did Luca know all this time that he was going to die? Why didn’t he tell him?

Rem tripped, his thoughts of Luca scattered, and the world became a blur. The magic he often sensed when members of the Legion used their power surrounded him, consumed him, and the world changed. Leila disappeared; the houses around him disappeared; and Rem found himself in a clearing next to three red-cloaked figures, Niel, and Luca.

“Abraham?” Merina asked.

Rem stared at his hands like they were not a part of him.

“Rem?” Luca called his name, and that was all Rem needed to snap back to the moment. He stood up and pulled out his sword.

“Let him go.” He pointed at Luca. Senum and Merina took a step back, while Lorez pulled off his hood.

Lorez raised his hand, and Rem felt the tug of power across his skin, but it vanished as soon as it had appeared. Luca looked around. His mother, father, and Lorez stood motionless like frozen dolls, their eyes unseeing.

Niel stood a few feet behind Rem. He'd made two very deep gashes all the way across his arms, and the blood was flowing freely in rivulets. He held his arms just below the elbow as high as he could so the blood would flow faster. “Hurry! I can't hold them for long like this. Senum and Merina maybe, but not Lorez. His power is similar to mine.”

Rem reached for the chains around Luca's hands, but Luca pulled away. “Why are you here?” he asked with fright. “How?”

“Luca...” Rem stared at his hands again, like he needed to feel real after what he'd just done. “You don't think I'm freaked out too? I just magically appeared here. I don't know what to make of it! Please. Don't be afraid of me.” Every word was a plea, a hollow in his soul. How come he didn't know he could do this? How could he have lived his entire life not knowing he could do this?

Luca shook his head. “I would never be afraid of you, Rem. But I can't go with you. You're not supposed to be here. It's not what I saw.”

“Screw the future. You expect me to leave you here, now that I know what they are going to do to you?”

“You know?” Luca took a step back. “You were never supposed to know.” Rem reached for him and Luca avoided his touch. “This is the future I want, Rem. Leave.” Cold. The words were so cold.

Rem felt the knot in his throat. “What? No. Not until you tell me why. I swear Luca, I will drag you away.”

“I will never forgive you if you do.” Rem heard the grief in Luca's voice and felt the conflict deep in his soul. He wanted to understand. He wanted to do what Luca wanted as well, but what Luca was saying made no sense. “This is the future I choose, Rem. Let me at least have that.”

Luca tried to step away, but Rem grabbed his arm and pulled him back. “How can you say that? Explain it to me then. Out of all the futures you see,

out of all of the maybes, why choose the one where you die? Why—” Luca stared at the chains around his wrists and closed his eyes tight. Rem used the opportunity to wrap his arms around Luca. “Why do you want me to leave you, Luca?” It was such a simple question. “I don’t want to let you go anymore.”

Luca shuddered in his arms, and his voice was like a song of heartache. “Because, this is the only future where you don’t die.”

Rem’s face twisted. His heart lurched. Niel was in the distance, breathing hard.

“So what? What if I die? I have no one to mourn me.”

Luca rested his chin on Rem’s chest, and there his eyes brimmed with tears. Rem ran his fingers through Luca’s hair. “Fifteen minutes,” Luca said. “If you take me away now, it will only be fifteen minutes before they find us. They will kill you first, then they’ll kill Niel. And they will make me watch it all before they kill me.”

Rem kept running his fingers through Luca’s hair and along the sides of his face. “Why would you give your life for me? We barely know each other.”

Luca smiled wistfully, and he allowed himself to get comfortable in Rem’s arms, bumping his head against Rem’s chest. The horrible things in the world around them weren’t happening. Luca’s hands weren’t bound. “Because I’m in love with you, Remier—Rem. In my dreams I only ever called you Remier.”

Those were the words he’d been afraid to hear, what, deep in his heart, he’d known all along. “That’s not fair, Luca.” Something was squeezing at Rem’s chest, and it wasn’t the feeling of Luca’s forehead. “It’s only been four days. How can you fall in love with me in just four days?”

“I’ve been dreaming about you since I was a kid.” Luca tilted his head up to look at Rem. “I’ve met you a hundred times, climbing through that window. A hundred more I’ve seen you standing next to me, saving me. I’ve dreamt of you smiling at me, holding me, kissing me, loving me, dying for me. How could I not fall in love with you?”

“That’s really not fair.” The knot in his throat was tighter. He took Luca’s hand. “Run away with me. Now, while they’re like this.”

“No.” Luca stepped back. “This is the only way to save you. To save Niel.”

“Luca.” The heartache of being torn between what Luca wanted and what he wanted increased. “I won’t let you die for me.”

“Do you love me, Rem?”

Rem opened his mouth, closed it.

Luca smiled, stood on tiptoe until his lips brushed against Rem's. “I love that you do that. That you are so bound by your vow of honor that you won't even tell me you love me if you don't know if it is true. Not even if it would make me happy or run away with you.”

“That's not—” Luca put a finger over Rem's lips.

“You don't love me, Rem. How could you? We just met four days ago.”

“But I want to save you,” Rem choked.

Luca stepped back. “No. Let me die. Let me save you. Every time I told you a vision, and every time I warned you or didn't warn you, it was so this could happen.” The chains clanked as he moved his hands until they touched both sides of Rem's face. “I'll tell you what I see, Rem. You become someone people look up to. You will fall in love. You will have children. You will live until you are old and gray, and you will forget about me.”

Rem wanted to break the chains around Luca's wrists, to snap them in half. He wanted Luca's touch, his warmth. He remembered stumbling through a window and seeing those bright blue eyes, that wide smile. When was the last time someone had been happy to see him? He remembered the lightness of Luca's body as he pulled him to safety. The warmth of Luca's body when he slept next to him. The way Luca pouted when he bit into the napple. The fear that consumed him when Luca's skin had been cold as death.

“Don't you feel anything when you see me?”

“We were supposed to die, Rem.”

“I've seen you.”

“Goodbye, Rem.”

Lorez blinked. Senum and Merina blinked. They seemed to be awakening from a trance. Lorez was the first to fully wake up. He raised his hand, and Niel slumped to his knees like something pushed him down. “Take your son to Abraham,” Lorez ordered. Senum and Merina hurried. Senum grabbed Luca's arm and tried to pull him away, but Rem reached out and held Luca back.

Rem suddenly froze—like a million strings were wrapped around every inch of his skin, holding him back.

Senum pulled Luca away. Luca screamed and doubled over as he held his head in his hands in pain. When he opened them again, he looked at Rem in terror. "It changed. This isn't the future I want," he said, and tried to get away from his parents. Senum stopped his struggling, hefted Luca over his shoulder and took him away. "Father, no!" Luca kicked as hard as he could. "Rem! Rem! Run!"

Senum, Luca, and Merina disappeared in the twilight, but Luca's screams could still be heard. Lorez moved his hand, it glowed and shimmered in the dark. Rem's body moved on its own, the strings had attached to his skin and were pulling him to do things he didn't want to do. His arms moved, his hands moved, and Rem couldn't control anything. Rem's neck moved downward, his eyes behaved as if pried open. He was holding Luca's Jupiter dagger, the edge pointed straight at his abdomen. Rem choked as his hand pushed the dagger in. His skin broke, he felt his insides being torn, but he couldn't stop shoving it in. His eyes couldn't stop looking at it. Lorez moved his fingers like he was controlling a puppet, and Rem pulled the dagger out, aimed for a clean spot on his belly and pushed it slowly back in. Again and again. Rem gasped, he coughed and tasted the blood now spilling from his mouth. The fourth time he pulled the dagger out, his vision blurred, and Lorez lowered his hand. Rem fell to his knees. He tried holding himself up with one arm while the other clutched at his midsection. He could only gasp painfully when he tried to breathe.

Lorez kicked him until Rem fell to the ground. He grabbed the Jupiter dagger from the dirt. "I'll make sure to tell Luca what I did, before we slit his throat." Lorez looked at Niel, who lay slumped on the ground, arms covered in blood, his eyes closed. Rem couldn't tell if he was breathing or not.

When Lorez left, Rem tried to stand, but slipped back down, powerless, dying.

He was dying.

Rem rolled on the ground until he could see the sky. The sun was almost down. Stars painted the sky. He tried to breathe again and choked with the blood in his throat. Niel's words when he was lying on the cart came back to haunt him. His body was letting go—wanted it. It didn't care if Rem didn't wish to go. Luca's cries rang in the distance, his name, being called over and over. Maybe he could reappear there, and take Luca away before he died, but he didn't know how to trigger his power. Rem needed more time. He needed more magic, he needed—a memory of green, sunken eyes jumped at him. A

ghastly hand gripping his own. Devi. "*Leave me alone unless you want to make a pact,*" it had said. The warmth of life started to leave him. "I want to make a pact with you," Rem croaked. He lay on the dirt, stared at the sky, and pictured Devi in his mind. "I want to make a pact with you," he repeated louder, only he couldn't breathe. The sky didn't respond. "I want to make a pact with you!"

Rem felt a pull like his body was being thrown. The sky vanished and was replaced with a wooden ceiling. The quiet was replaced by the sudden frightened cries of the patrons at an inn.

"Bloodless!"

"What in Jove's name!"

Men and women crowded around Rem, looks of horror on their faces. Only one of the faces was familiar. Devi's eyebrows rose in amusement, a leering smile appeared on his lips.

"I want to make a pact," Rem coughed. "Save Luca from his Legion clan. Save Niel. Then you can keep this body to do as you please."

Chapter Sixteen

Broken

Niel felt warm, cold, and weak all at the same time. He smelled the earth underneath him, tainted with the scent of blood. He opened his eyes, the world whirled around him. His arms were killing him and slowly he recited *cerar senar lefar* as he ran each hand over the broken flesh, closing the wounds he'd made himself.

It took a while for the dizziness to fade. The wounds weren't completely healed; they remained angry red lines across his arms, but Niel couldn't wait for them to close. "Rem?" Niel called. He'd seen the boy standing close just a few seconds ago—surely he'd closed his eyes for only a moment.

The ground was disturbed where Rem had been standing and there was blood everywhere. He remembered Lorez forcing Rem to do something horrible. Niel shook his head. Had he passed out? How long had he been out?

A scream rang far off in the distance. "Luca!" Niel stumbled when he tried to run, his body weak from the blood loss. It felt like an eternity, but eventually the voices got closer and louder. One of them was Luca's.

"Mama?"

Luca felt the cold chill of his mother's touch. Her power allowed her to remove every feeling, every sense. This was the worst nightmare he'd ever envisioned. The one in which his parents actively participated in his death. He'd seen it so many times he thought he'd be numb to it by now, that it wouldn't break his heart. But knowing something would happen wasn't the same as living through it.

"Hush, Luca. Be a good boy." She touched his cheek, but Luca felt nothing. His hands were raised above his head, the chains binding his wrist, tied to a tall post. "You won't feel a thing."

Luca pulled at the chains. The sound was just like a bell, reminding him of his visions. "Father? Where is Lorez?"

Senum turned around. "Who the hell was that boy, Luca? And why can he transport like Abraham?"

“Where is Lorez?” Luca asked again, tugging at the chains harder.

“Here, boy.” The large man appeared at the edge of Luca’s vision. He stopped by Senum’s side. “Is everything ready for when Abraham comes?”

Senum looked small next to Lorez. “Almost. Luca is being uncooperative.”

“What did you do to Rem?” Luca yelled “What did—”

Lorez showed Luca his Jupiter dagger. The blade was covered with blood. “I’m sure you saw what I did. Now shut up! You’re going to die soon, too.”

He threw the dagger to the ground by Luca’s feet, and Luca stared at it while images flickered in front of him. All the possible futures he had seen, all the things that could be, so few of them left—then darkness—then nothingness. “You don’t know what you’ve done.”

Merina picked up the dagger and handed it to her husband. “Luca, Luca, why are you behaving like this? You are here to fulfill your destiny. It’s always been what you wanted.”

Her words were like stings to his heart. His own mother, the one who had sewn him a small red cloak when he turned five. Luca’s eyes watered. “If that is what you believe, then why do you need to tie me up?”

Merina pushed Luca’s bangs away from his eyes, her eyes no longer kind. “You’d better not act like this when Abraham shows up. Speaking of which...”

A red-cloaked figure was making its way to them. Lorez raised one hand, and the figure stopped for a second, then continued approaching. “Niel.” Lorez lowered his hand. “You’re a fool for showing your face after betraying us. How long do you think you can manipulate yourself and not succumb to my power?”

Niel removed his cloak and threw it aside. “It’s not too late to stop what you are doing. Merina. Senum. That’s your son.”

“We’re fulfilling Luca’s destiny.” Senum approached Luca with a blade in hand.

“You’re mad!” Niel bit his lip. “Even I, a thief and a liar, know this is wrong.” Lorez started approaching Niel. If he couldn’t use his power against Niel, obviously brute force would have to do. Merina pulled Luca’s shirt down a bit, exposing his chest, the skin above his heart.

There was a crack, a snap. The air changed, Merina and Senum screamed, and a chilly yet familiar laugh filled the air.

“This is so incredible.” The voice sounded distorted. It was Rem, but it wasn't. “So many untapped gifts.”

“Devi,” Luca called.

Devi looked at Luca. His eyes were a sea of black mixed with a striking green. “You know my name—well—saves me some time. I can't wait to take this body for a spin.”

“You.” Lorez pulled a long sword from the sheath on his belt. “I killed you.”

“This boy.” Devi looked down at his stomach, played with the bloody strips of torn cloth. “Yes, you did, but right before he took his last breath, he gave this body to me. All I have to do is kill you.” He pointed at Lorez. “You.” Senum. “And you.” Merina. He smirked. “Then I get to keep this body until it rots.”

Luca looked at his mother. “Mama you have to run. Father—”

“Senum?” Merina reached for her husband, but he shrugged her off. Instead, he gripped the blade tighter.

“We can still have our place in the Legion, Merina. It's not too late.” He closed the gap between him and Luca, pressed the tip of the dagger against Luca's chest.

Luca's eyes widened. “No, Father, stop!”

It happened in a second. A second when a child is betrayed. A second when a child is alone. Luca had dreamed of this too—the moment he became an orphan. Merina's spell faded, and with it came the grief and the fright.

Devi stood in front of Senum and Merina's bodies. Nobody had seen him move. “Two down,” he said nonchalantly, then raised his head and searched for Lorez. He was far in the distance, trying to run. Niel was chasing him. “I hear others coming. I hear them saying your name.” Devi walked until he was in front of Luca and touched the bottom of Luca's chin, tilting his head up so Luca would look at him. Devi's fingers. Rem's fingers. They felt hot to the touch, like a small burn. “So beautiful, even when broken, alone. This body feels strongly for you. It demands I protect you.” Devi broke the chains above Luca's head with a single tug. He reached for Luca's wrists and broke those chains as well.

Luca looked around him, saw the bodies of his mother and father, and the bile stung his throat, but he pushed it down. Reality was just another vision, he

told himself, except this one he couldn't change. He stepped back and let his power flow over him, the blood from the small wound his father had inflicted lending him strength.

"Our contract is fulfilled. Your life for his." Devi flexed his bloodied fingers, still testing his new body. He started to leave, but Luca suddenly reached for him and grabbed his right wrist. Luca held on tight, letting the fire where their skin touched, spread.

Luca shook his head. "Leave Rem's body right now!"

Lorez became a smaller and smaller dot in the distance until he disappeared into the line of trees. Niel slowed, his body hurting at every muscle, his heart working double to refill the blood he'd lost. His running became a jog, then a walk. Lorez was nowhere in sight.

"What am I doing?" Niel took a minute to catch his breath. "I need to go back to Luca." He turned and caught a blur of red before Lorez punched him in the stomach, knocking the wind out of him. His blade flew from his hand and rolled in the dirt. Niel reached for it, and when his fingers touched the edge of the handle, he felt a sharp sting across his back.

Ignoring the pain, Niel rolled away from Lorez's blade, grabbed his short sword, regained his footing, and attacked, plunging the blade into Lorez's side as deep as he could. With his free hand, he reached for Lorez's face, the only skin visible. Niel wished he could use his power without touching, but he was spent, and it took his entire concentration to not fall into Lorez's spell. If the older sorcerer managed to take control of him, it would all be over.

The way Lorez had taken control of Rem. The memory came back to him, Lorez standing in front of Rem, and Rem taking a dagger to his own belly. Lorez was the reason Rem was now what he'd seen.

Filina once told him that family gave life meaning, and that family wasn't always the one you were born into. She told him that the day Niel informed her he was joining the Legion. At the time, Niel thought she was giving him her blessing—that even if she spoke nothing but ill of the Legion—she still supported his decision to join them. He remembered when he went to visit her a few months later, his new red cloak draped over his shoulders. She'd taken one look at him and shut the door in his face.

Lorez easily pushed Niel away, and Niel pulled the dagger out, sickened by the sensation. Niel had felt the blade of his dagger go into flesh before—into

creatures and things he'd had to hunt or that wanted to kill him. It was a completely different feeling when it went into the flesh of someone he knew personally, someone he used to call a friend and more. It didn't matter that the friend was trying to kill him. He couldn't do it. He didn't want to do it.

How would Filina ever forgive him if he became a murderer?

That second of hesitation was the only thing Lorez needed to take his sword and run it through Niel's side—smiling as he did so—smug, knowing he'd won.

Niel gasped once, before collapsing to the ground. Blood seeped through his fingers as he covered the wound. Lorez raised his sword again, eager to deliver the killing blow.

Niel opened his eyes wide. One second Lorez was standing over him, the next he vanished.

At first, Niel thought someone had spelled Lorez away, maybe Abraham, maybe the thing Rem had become. Then he heard the crunching and the munching. Niel turned to the noise to see Lorez' body seizing and gasping as the vampire that had attacked them the day before ate him.

The scars on Niel's neck burned. It hurt worse than being run through by a sword. He knew how lucky he'd been to escape the vampire that night. They never left their food alive. Never. If they did, it was so they could eat you later. All the stories said so.

Niel tried to stand, but his right leg buckled beneath him, leaving him kneeling while he kept a hand over his open wound. The munching noises stopped. Lorez was dead on the ground. It was the last small pleasure Niel would get as he saw the vampire make its way toward him.

"Tell my nana I'm sorry," he almost said to the creature, because he was going to die, and it was going to be today. By sword or vampire. He really wanted to ask Filina for her forgiveness. For all the times she tried to contact him and he shredded every letter. He wanted it more than anything, but he wasn't about to send a dangerous creature knocking at her door with his apology. Her forgiveness—that was something he'd never receive.

Niel raised his eyes until they met the vampire's. "Make it quick."

"Make what quick?" It stopped in front of Niel. "You are not dying." Niel looked into the creature's face. Its skin was more alive, now that it had fed. Less pale, its eyes still a haunting dark red in contrast with its ashen hair and dark clothes. Its features were those of a young man. It was beautiful.

"I'm not? But this..." Niel looked down at his body and his red hand.

"It's a nasty wound, but it won't kill you."

"But you're going to kill me."

The vampire tilted its head. "I was thinking about it. But then I ate him, and I'm pretty full right now."

Niel didn't really feel fear, even hearing such things. This was part of the creature's spell. It crouched so it could be face to face with Niel and tilted its head like it had never seen a human before. "Do you wish to die?" it asked. Its voice was like a melody of sorrow. "Your blood is leaving your body. I can make it leave faster if that's what you want."

"Go away." Niel was tired of waiting. "I just want you to go away." Niel closed his eyes, and waited for it to come—the pain, and then death. Sharp nails traced the scars on his neck. The leaves rustled, and Niel opened his eyes. The vampire was gone.

Devi glared and nothing remained of Rem in that face. His eyes had turned the color of green fire, and the roots of his hair were starting to go black. "Remember," Devi snapped, "the only reason you are not dead is because I keep my word." Luca let go of Devi's wrist and took one step back, but Devi grabbed his upper arm, and smeared the blood from his other hand on Luca's cheek. "So powerful, and yet you couldn't see this happening."

Luca's eyes shimmered with tears. Devi enjoyed seeing the suffering, the despair. His new body was strong and powerful. It would last for many, many years—years he could come back to haunt this boy. He yearned to see the human cry.

But Luca did not cry. The fear on his face faded. His eyes radiated certainty. No more doubts. No sadness. "Who says I didn't?" he said, while quickly pulling his Jupiter dagger from inside his cloak, and opening a deep wound on the top of Devi's hand. The words that left Luca's lips were fast and ancient. Words the world hadn't heard for hundreds of years. Words Devi probably hadn't heard since he woke up in the earth, knowing nothing more than the name of what he was.

The spell surrounded Devi, weakening his hold on the body he'd taken, breaking every connection he'd carefully made. "Stop it! This body is mine!"

“This body belongs to Rem!” Luca continued the spell, the words spilling out faster, stronger.

Devi screamed. How it hurt! Worse than when he possessed the body. Worse than when he realized he was a living thing that needed a body.

Luca finished chanting the spell. Devi felt an unseen force rip him out of Rem's body and fling him far away, past everything he knew, to places he'd never been. Gone.

Rem's body fell. Luca tried to catch him, but he only managed to not let Rem's head hit the ground. The night had gone quiet around them. Everything was hauntingly still, the only sound his own breathing.

“Rem?”

Everything hurt. His body. His soul. He tried to breathe, but the air refused to go in. Was this the future where Rem didn't survive? The future where having the devi forced out of him killed him? This moment was the culmination of everything he'd seen. He'd tried so hard to prevent Rem from following him, but once Rem had appeared in the clearing, he knew there were two possible futures left—the one where Rem survived getting the devi out, and the one where he didn't.

He was only twelve when he first saw Rem in one of his visions—this vision—a young man with fair hair lying dead at his feet. At first, Luca thought nothing of the dream. He'd dreamt of death before. Deaths of strangers, deaths of people he knew. A few times he'd tried to stop death, and always failed. Death had its own mind. Rem was no different, but then the dreams continued through the years. Changing, shifting. Different days, different dangers. Different ways in which Rem died for him, different ways in which they died together. It wasn't long before Luca started looking forward to the dreams, especially the ones where he got to know Rem, got to love him.

Luca held Rem's hand, and it was cold to the touch. “Open your eyes, Rem.” He touched Rem's chest, but his heart didn't beat. Luca shook him from side to side, his throat tight. “Rem!”

Luca closed his eyes and concentrated. He tried to see five minutes from now, ten minutes from now. A month. A year. Ten years... but there was nothing. Rem's future was nothing. Luca had always thought that grief and pain were like a bubble, that once it popped, the sorrow that followed would be

intense and quick fading. He'd been wrong. It wasn't a bubble, it was like rain, a drop of water falling from his forehead all the way down his body that only got worse as it fell. No crying or screaming made the anguish go away. "Rem!" Luca cried. As if that would make a difference. As if that would make Rem open his eyes. It didn't, and for once, Luca was lost. "I don't know what to do. What do I do?"

Rem heard the sound of his name. Someone was calling him. A woman.

He opened his eyes, and there she was. Her golden hair fell past her shoulders, her green eyes bright and sad at the same time. There was a cut on her cheek and a swollen lump under her left eye. She was holding Rem's tiny hand. "Remier, I'm sorry we have to leave you."

A man with long dark hair and gray eyes appeared behind her. Scratches covered his face. "Gianen, we have to go."

"I'm not done with the spell, Roper. Give me more time." His fingers touched her cheek gingerly, then he vanished. Gianen continued touching Rem's wrist, making soft circles on his skin while she spoke words he didn't understand. When she finished, there was a spiral on his wrist that slowly faded until, finally, it was gone.

"You'll be safe now, Rem. Your power will be hidden, and if someone tries to take your life, this will save it."

Roper reappeared behind her, and Rem saw his shoulder was bleeding. Gianen went to him quickly, but he stopped her before she tried to heal him. "Is the spell done?" he asked.

"Yes." Gianen stepped away and allowed Roper to take her place.

He reached out for Rem until his palm touched tiny fingers. "Grow up, Remier. Be strong. If we survive, we will come back for you."

Rem knew that these were his parents. That this was the last moment they had spent with him. This was a memory that he had locked away, somewhere deep inside his mind, and only caught glimpses of. His little fingers touched his father's hand. He cried for him as Roper pulled back, and Gianen started weeping as they threw red cloaks over their shoulders and left.

"Rem..."

Someone else was calling his name. Rem slowly opened his eyes. It was night and it was cold. He smelled the scent of trees and the forest. He took a soft breath and saw Luca kneeling next to him. Tears marked his face.

“Abraham will be here soon,” Luca said to himself. “He’s looking for me. He needs my life to complete the ceremony.”

“I won’t let him have you.” Joves, it hurt to talk, like needles inside his throat.

Luca gasped. Shutting his eyes tight, he held the top of his head with one hand and saw what only he could see. When the episode was over, he slowly opened his eyes. “I see you.” His voice was hope, the sadness vanished. Luca laughed and smiled. Then threw himself atop Rem, kissing him once, twice, quickly, then slowly. “I love you, Rem.”

Rem grazed Luca’s cheek with the back of his fingers and knew he wanted to pull Luca closer, wrap his arms around him, and kiss him until morning, but it would have to wait. Luca turned his head like he heard something. “We have to go,” he said. “I don’t want the future where they find us.” Luca took Rem’s hand and pulled him up. Rem held tight to that hand, like an anchor, his connection to the world. He squeezed it and let Luca lead the way to safety.

Epilogue

Rem read the last line of the letter, crumpled it, then tossed it in the fire where it burned slowly to ashes. "Rem, I got the supplies you wanted," Leila called from behind the bar, putting a full satchel on top of the wooden surface. This early in the morning The Rubi's Nest was empty of patrons, so there was no one to comment when Rem grabbed the satchel without paying and hoisted it over his shoulder.

"I promise I'll repay you," he told his sister.

"I don't need or want any repaying. What kind of sister would I be if I didn't help my brother when he needed me?"

Rem kissed Leila's cheek. "I'll try to keep in contact with you."

"Are you sure it's safe for you to be here?"

"Luca said I would be, as long as I didn't stay more than five minutes after the man with the long beard came in."

"That specific?"

Rem shrugged. "As specific as he can be. Speaking of which..." The door to the pub opened, and an old man with a potbelly and a long beard walked in.

Rem quickly pulled the dark hood over his head, hiding his face. "Watch for my letters."

"I will." She touched his hand and waved goodbye.

Rem crossed the village square and passed the houses. No one gave him a second glance as he left, and Rem didn't look back, leaving Nevenen far behind.

Luca saw Rem before he appeared from behind the trees.

"Did you hear from Niel? Hasler?"

Rem dropped the satchel and pulled off his hood. "Yes. I got his letter. He's still somewhere up north, hiding from the vampire. He asked if the vision had changed."

Luca shook his head. "No. It's still hazy. If Niel tries to hunt down that vampire, I see him dying, but if he just stays away..." Luca closed his eyes. He

thought about Niel. "It's hard to see. Undefined. I don't know what Niel's future is."

Rem sat next to Luca, their shoulders bumping. "Don't worry about it. I'll let him know the vision is unchanged the next time I communicate with him."

Luca rested his head on Rem's shoulder. The air was chilly. Winter would soon come. Rem grabbed the hem of his cloak and pulled it up until he could wrap it around Luca. Luca touched Rem's hand gingerly. "What's wrong, Luca? What are you thinking about?"

"There's so many places we could go. Temen, Zilin, Nemas. We could even leave Lenen. How much money did Ms. Sommerset give you?"

"Five hundred rio. She wasn't happy I had failed to bring Niel in the flesh, but she seemed satisfied with the letter I delivered."

Luca traced the spiral mark on Rem's wrist with his thumb. "Did Hasler find any magic in you?"

"No. She thinks I must have burned it all when this showed up." He touched Luca's fingers over the mark.

Luca looked up. Rem leaned to kiss him, but Luca stopped him with a finger over his lips. "Do you remember the premonition I had about Leire? It didn't come true. I thought I was going to die at the ceremony, so I thought that vision would happen before. But I didn't die, and Leire didn't come for me. That means it's something yet to pass, and I'm scared. Scared that wherever we go, I can't stop that from happening."

Rem shifted, and Luca stopped leaning against him. "Luca I—"

"I know you promised to protect me," Luca interrupted. "But I don't want to be scared anymore. I don't want to live waiting for something that may or may not happen, something that may be tomorrow, or twenty years from now. I've spent so many years just waiting for the day I'd meet you. Doing everything I could, not to see you die, and now that we are here together, I don't want to live thinking only of what could be. I love you, Rem. I want to spend my future with you, but I also want to spend now with you without worrying what could happen tomorrow."

Rem didn't say anything, and for a moment, Luca thought he'd said too much, expressed too much. But then Rem pushed away the bangs from Luca's face. "Do you know that your hair falls and covers your eyes when you talk? I rather like it."

Luca concentrated on the warmth of Rem's fingertips on his forehead. "Rem, tell me something I haven't seen. Tell me something I haven't dreamed."

"How would I know what that is?"

Luca took Rem's hand. "I'll know when you say it."

Rem pursed his lips, like he pretended to think. There was no way he could know the things Luca saw. Then he smiled and gently touched Luca's forehead with his. "I love you."

A fleeting laugh left Luca's lips. He'd heard this before. Many times in dreams. He remembered every single one of the evanescent moments inside his own head.

Rem slowly pulled Luca toward him, wrapping his arms around him, kissing him once, twice, until Luca forgot how to breathe. And for once, reality was better than the dream.

The End

Author Bio

Ashlyn has been creating stories from a young age. From turning purple and orange plush dragons into characters, to an endless collection of notebooks and word files. Ashlyn's favorite type of story is the one that tears at your heart, even more if it includes things that go bump in the night. Her love of fantasy, sci-fi, romance, and LGBT characters fill her stories.

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