

## CHAPTER ONE

*Red for the fated ones,  
lovebonds bright gold.  
Green for the boundless, o'er seas they will hold.  
Blue for the piecebound—two fragments made whole.  
Gray for the hollow ones.  
Black for the cold.*

— Unknown  
Verdinian nursery rhyme

Remy Canta hurries down narrow back streets toward home, bloody knife cupped between his hands like a prayer.

This is how he'll make things right.

Brandishing the blade, he pushes through the doorway's gauzy curtain to the sparse but elegantly furnished room he and Tirani use to conduct their business.

"Tirani, I found it!"

But Tirani isn't alone. Remy has a moment to take in the blushing couple sitting across from her—hands clasped, bodies pressed so close they might just fuse—before they scramble away and shriek at his entrance. He grimaces. She wasn't supposed to have any more customers today.

He sidesteps out of the doorway, lowers the knife, and adopts a more businesslike expression.

*Lord of the Empty Isles*

“Thanks for your patronage! May your bonds be forever strong and unbroken.” He slides the blade behind his back. “This isn’t what it looks like.”

It’s almost exactly what it looks like.

The setting sun makes something molten of Tirani’s hazel-brown eyes as she glares at him, her dense curls an inferno in the red light. They’ll have words later, clearly.

She arranges her face into a brilliant smile and returns her attention to the couple. One finger traces a line in the empty air between them—an affectation. She’s lucky. She can only see tethers, not touch them.

Her vision gives her insight, though, the kind that sappy young lovers pay through the nose for. They eat it up when she clasps their hands and theatrically describes the gilded glimmer and unbreakable thickness of loyal, patient lovebonds or the color-shifting blue of the piecebonds that link people with complementary skillsets. Tirani probably knows more flattering descriptors for hues of gold and red and blue and green than the most celebrated poets.

“Rest assured,” she says. “Your souls are aligned and the tether that binds them is thick as any rope. Please, finish your tea and be well.”

The young couple gulps the delicate floral tea and scrambles out holding hands, their footsteps an urgent drumbeat on the cobblestones outside.

Once the noise of their retreat fades, Remy summons an apologetic smile for Tirani. “Sorry, I can—”

Something flies through the doorway and nails him in the back. He stumbles forward, coughing, and twists his non-knife-bearing hand to pat at the point of impact between his shoulder blades. Hissing and pulling the curtains open, he finds a dirty shoe on the ground and an angry, hunched woman on the path outside. Age

has collapsed her into a compact ball of aggression, not unlike the ugly pseudo-moon she was named after. *Fluora*.

“Remy Canta, don’t think I didn’t hear that couple tittering! A knife? You’ll give us all a bad name.”

“You do that well enough by yourself,” Remy mutters.

Like Tirani, Fluora is a weaver, but she’s been plying her trade longer than Tirani and Remy have been alive. Where the outside of the home they share bears a simple, elegant piece of rope art in the shape of a star above the door, Fluora’s place of work is bedecked with tacky ribbons in gold, red, blue, and green that billow from the windows with every breeze.

“I heard that,” Fluora rasps. “Now you give me that shoe back, rotten boy.”

Remy snatches the mud-crusted sandal up. “You’re the one who threw it.”

He fights the urge to return it in the way it arrived, but this is the woman who took Tirani in when she had no one else. He can’t brain her with a shoe. Sighing, Remy lobs the sandal out onto the cobblestones, and with a conversation-ending *hmph*, Fluora wiggles her cracked foot back inside and begins her slow trek toward her garish shop.

“She’s right, for once.” Tirani paces over, leaning out the doorway to make sure Fluora gets home. Her eyebrow goes up, and with it goes the little mole beside it, like the world’s most judgmental exclamation point. “You’re lucky they paid before the consultation.”

Remy slips past her. On the wall behind the consultation table, a much larger version of the rope art star decorates the wall, with silken ropes in the four healthy tether colors tied to a central square. A pentagon of five nails representing the five connection points surrounds the square. Every tether at the center square loops around each connection point, creating a colorful

star. Remy plucks at a nail to hear it twang. “Were they really aligned?”

Tirani laughs. “Yeah, mutually-anchored. They’ll be fine.”

Lucky bastards. Anchored tethers connect at the hands. Of the locations tethers can rest—head, heart, gut, hands, and feet—anchored ones are the least likely to rot or travel. Once a bond has settled there, it’s likely to remain. Remy likes to think he and Cameron might have become anchored one day, if they’d had more time.

The embedded screen beside the door flashes red to scold him for failing to play this morning’s broadcast. He used to watch those things religiously, hoping maybe the next one (or the next) would be the one where the Chancellor announced the capture of his brother’s killer. But for all his paternal warmth and competence in other areas, the Chancellor’s awful at catching criminals.

But they have a plan, Andrew, the Chancellor’s Vice-Enforcer, keeps telling him. A *plan*, like that justifies five years of a killer’s continued freedom. Every time, it’s a different excuse.

*Delaciel was smart about it—his connection to Cameron’s death is tenuous. It’s been hard to make a case.*

*He has citizen support and acts outside the area we can realistically observe.*

*He uses banned tech. We were so damn close, but he slipped away.*

Stuff like that, every time. *But we’re turning the tide!* Andrew keeps saying. *The Chancellor has a plan. Just wait.*

Remy’s sick of waiting.

Tirani tucks a sweat-curled lock of hair behind his ear. “You’re a mess. I ate the last of your soup today, so I made stir-fry, but . . .”

Remy nudges the floor cushions back to order with his foot. “But?”

Tirani pauses long enough that he stops what he’s doing. Finally, she says, “Lara came.”

A grin stretches Remy's lips, his taut muscles relaxing. "Don't scare me like that! I thought it was something bad."

He pulls a bag from his pocket and drops the knife inside. He and Lara know the same pain. Her husband and Cam both passed in the same month five years ago. It's been their journey, these intervening years. "Is she still here? Lara!"

"I had her wait in the kitchen."

"Perfect." Remy sinks onto the embroidered cushions—tether colors in interweaving ropes—and fumbles into the table's supply drawer for the tincture that'll ease Lara's pain. Her tether, like Remy's, never faded like it should've. She must be here for her next batch.

His fingers find only empty space. The realization comes too slow: Lara is early. Very early. Her previous bottle should have lasted weeks longer. They shouldn't see her until fall.

"... Something happened?" Remy ventures. His hand clenches in sympathy over his sternum.

"Something happened."

Remy bites his lip. It'll take Tirani at least a week to prepare another batch—a week of pain for Lara. He heads to the wash-room, where his own tincture sits in a little glass bottle on the windowsill, and calls, "I'll give her mine!"

He already has it in hand when Tirani calls back, "What? No, Remy, wait! It's not—"

Clutching the bottle (translucent sky-blue with an iridescent glaze, like the plumage of the allura birds Cameron once lifted Remy on his shoulders to see) he hurries back out. "Not what?"

Two pairs of wide eyes pin him when he slides into his seat again.

Lara freezes in the middle of settling onto the cushions opposite Tirani.

“Perfect timing.” Remy holds the bottle out to her. “It’s not full, but it’s a really strong batch. It’ll last you a while.”

Lara just stares, stricken, at the dark fluid sloshing inside its glass cage.

“Remy.” Tirani’s hand falls on his shoulder, heavy like an urn.

Her touch would usually be comforting, but the tiny shake of her head and the way Lara’s hands lie palm-up on the table like dead spiders make a shiver scale his spine.

“She wants your help today, not mine.”

*His help.*

The skills Remy sells aren’t nearly so sweet as Tirani’s. He squeezes his eyes shut. Pulls the bottle back and drops it in the supply drawer with shaking hands. Something whistles in his ears, in his skull. “No.”

“His family visited.” The words tumble from Lara’s mouth like a plea. “His father looks just like him, but he’s nothing like him. His laugh is nothing like him. He doesn’t throw my boy up in the air like him. Please, Remy. It hurts.”

Of course it does. That’s the cost of loving.

“You’d cut him out of your life just because it hurts?”

She flinches like Remy slapped her.

“Remy!” Tirani growls. “You know it’s not like that.”

He most certainly doesn’t.

Tirani turns back to Lara. “Even a fully rotbound tether will attenuate on its own in a few months when the bearer is willing to move forward.” She slants a glance at Remy. “There’s nothing wrong with choosing to heal.”

Lara wilts in her seat. “But it’d be more likely to come back.”

“Healing isn’t always linear. In any case, it’d be easier to manage even if it did.” Tirani retrieves Remy’s discarded tincture, the potent mixture of medicinal herbs that dulls the pain from rotbonds and aids in healing. Remy doesn’t take it nearly as often

as Tirani thinks he should. “With these drops, you could keep it from ever fully rethreading.”

Lara looks to Remy instead. “Please. Just sever it.”

Remy can’t spin beautiful stories about tethers like Tirani. He can’t see them at all, but he can cut them.

“Find someone else.”

The widow seizes his wrist before he can stand. “There is no one else!”

Weavers like Tirani are uncommon enough, with just a handful in the city. Witherers are rarer still. “Why?”

“It’s been five years. It’s time. My baby can read now. He’s a whole person. I need to be whole for him, too.”

*Traitor.* As if severing herself from her love could ever make her whole. Remy would never cut Cameron away. Pain is a small price to pay for keeping this last piece of him close.

Lara withdraws a pouch from the pocket of her dress. Delicate blue-and-white flowers decorate the exterior. She opens it, and the fading light glints off coins stamped with the Chancellor’s striking profile. It’s nearly twice what Tirani usually makes in a month; benefits of being the only practicing witherer on the island.

“You want this,” he says.

The all-important question. If she doesn’t, even a severing might not keep her bond from rethreading forever.

“I need it.” Tired. Peaceful.

Remy wrenches the supply drawer open again to prepare for the ritual that will allow him to handle her tether, fingers freezing over the tins and bottles.

He wants to tell her she’ll regret it, wants to beg her to stop, or maybe ask what she had to do to steel herself for this—to forgive herself for it. It is not his business to ask these questions, but it is a business, so he presses his lips into a shape he hopes is kind and

pulls out a jar of raw honey, a pouch of ash from the corpse of the person he once loved more than life.

His eyes burn. His breath comes short. Swallowing the rock of sickness pushing itself up his throat, Remy smears honey over his fingers. He sprinkles his brother's ashes onto his hands, then uses the pad of his thumb to spread the awful mixture across his bottom lip.

It's a job. It's a job. It's a job.

He's severed tethers after nasty divorces, or when a bond was one-sided or unhealthy or unbalanced and began to rot. He's even severed a few tethers broken by loss. This is different. He and Lara have survived this pain together. He thought they'd survive it forever.

Needle-like tingling sweeps from his fingertips to his wrists. Remy can't see the spun gold of Lara's lovebond, but it's visceral; it'll be near her gut. He closes his eyes, rubs his hands to smear the mixture that allows him to touch tethers evenly across his palms, and reaches out.

*There.* Fever-hot like something sick unto death. Slick with rot.

It's not just half rotbound. It's decayed almost all the way to its anchor, nearly as bad as Remy's. Even after all these years, though, her orphan tether is more rope than thread. It must have been beautiful while it lived.

He follows it until his fingers skim the cornflower blue linen of her dress, then farther, until he's pressing against her stomach, where the spiritual knot that once tied her to the man she still loves pulses with a dying heart's beat.

He cinches his fingers at the base.

One brutal instant of intent and the whispered tune that makes it real. The honey heats against his hands. Sweet smoke blurs the air, and that thrumming knot, the last living evidence of Lara's love, dissolves like so much ash. Severing, with her will to lose the bond and his to break it, only takes a moment.

She sighs, like a baby sighs before falling asleep. Like a body before it never breathes again. But then Lara inhales. She presses her hands to her stomach and sobs.

“It’s done,” Remy whispers, voice raw.

She nods—fast, up and down—and keeps crying. If she’s gonna cry like that, she shouldn’t have made him do it.

“Can’t be *undone*, so don’t ask.”

“I know.” She stands. “My baby’ll be coming home soon. I have to . . .” She wipes her eyes, and she’s weak, but Remy can’t hate her for it, and that’s worse. She’s out the door before she can finish her sentence.

The coins glitter on the table.

“Remy,” Tirani whispers, reaching for him.

Remy pushes up and away, stomach twisting. In the wash-room, he hangs his head over the basin until the nausea recedes, then sets his cheek on the cold porcelain. His dirty hands find the frayed tether that once bound him to his brother, still as thick as it was in life. As soon as he washes off Cameron’s ashes, he won’t be able to touch it, so he holds it now and breathes.

*Grasping.* That’s what they call tethers connected at the heart, intimate and instinctive, loyal to the last. If he could see it, the bond would be rotbound-black through and through. It’s warm, though, with a beat almost like life. Heart- and gut-connected tethers like his and Lara’s—the hungriest and most emotional bonds two people can share—are also the most likely to rot. Anchored bonds, knotted at the hands, are the least, followed by the joyfully intellectual ruminant tethers that connect at the head or spine and reckless tethers knotted at the feet. How strange, that hands are the most willing to let go.

Remy twists away to avoid touching the living tether beside Cameron’s—thick and healthy, untouched by rot. Tirani talks

about that bond like it's his future, like there's someone out there waiting to fill the space Cam's death left.

Whoever's at the other end of it, Remy hates them. He hopes they never meet.

The anniversary of his brother's death is next week. It's funny—Cam used to say Remy's hands were for helping, for healing. If they ever were, they aren't now. He'll buy his healing in blood, like any good witherer should.

Severing, for all its quiet horrors, is benign. Legal. *Healing*. It only lasts if it's mutually desired.

A withering is unspeakable—lethal and illegal. It's what took his brother from him. A witherer just like Remy did the deed. Helpless while his brother died shade by shade for weeks, Remy offered a soothing tea, another pillow, a hand to hold. He should have sharpened himself like a blade instead.

Witherings don't need consent. They need blood.

Almost five years to the day, and he has the blood he needs on that knife. Tonight, he'll perform the ritual to kill the man his brother was building a case against when he was murdered.

Idrian Delaciel, Lord of the Empty Isles, a criminal who's crowned himself king of the cursed pseudo-moons that light the sky at night—and the man who ordered the withering that took Cam's life.

If he'd known it back then, Remy would have extracted the name of whichever witherer Delaciel paid to do the deed and killed them both. His brother would have lived.

A withering, after all, cannot survive the death of the witherer.

There are two ways to end one, and they both involve murder. The first, of course, is for the victim of a withering to personally kill the caster, but Cam was too kind to become a killer. He would never have hurt anyone to save himself, which is why Remy hung all his hopes on the second method: a close blood relative of an affected victim can act as proxy and kill the witherer

in the victim's place. Remy would have been glad to do it, even at fourteen. When Cam first fell ill, he begged his brother to give up the name of his killer—or a lead, or anything—so he could kill the witherer to save Cam's life. But Cam kept his silence. Only on the night before the end, far too late for Remy to do anything, did he confess his killer's name and press the pendant he always wore into Remy's hands like an apology.

Tirani waits in the doorway with his tincture in her palm, fluid already pulled into the dropper. "You want . . ."

He should. His chest throbs with every breath. "Not today."

The sun-powered hivelights overhead—hexagonal glass-and-solarfibre bubbles built into the ceiling to light the house from sunset until curfew—flicker on as the sun sinks.

"We can talk," Tirani whispers.

She'd listen. She'd run her fingers through his hair like he did for her when she confided that she'd forgotten her sister's face-splitting troublemaker's grin, her dad's booming laugh. She was barely three when her family abandoned her. She loses pieces of them one by one. The first thing she lost was her surname.

What a pair they make. She hurts because she can no longer remember; Remy hurts because he can't forget.

"I wish you could see it like I do. What you did for Lara, it's like cleaning an infected wound."

"You said you made dinner?" He angles to move past her.

Her shoulders sag. "Yeah. Lima and honey-glazed rib meat with smoked rama seeds over rice."

That sounds unexpectedly edible. ". . . You add anything else?"

"My turn, my rules." Her laugh is quiet but genuine. "I diced a rainfruit in for sweetness. And field onion—just for you—to balance it. Be grateful. And put down that *damned* knife."

Ah. It's still in his hand. Remy lifts it, purpose flooding his limbs. "Tirani, I found it!"

“Eat first.” She paces to the kitchen and he follows, filling a chipped bowl halfway with rice and picking around the spongy, whitish chunks of rainfruit to top it off.

“The knife,” he garbles around a bit of rice. “It’s Idrian’s blood. I can end it, Tirani.”

“Are you sure?”

It’ll be fine even if he isn’t. If the name Remy speaks and the blood he offers don’t match, the withering will fail.

“Pretty damn. The guy I bought it off had a recording.” It was the highlight of Remy’s day to see shaky footage of some guy stabbing Idrian Delaciel on one of the fringe islands. “Only way I could be more sure is if I stabbed him myself.”

“You know what I mean. Are you sure this is what you *want*?”

He gathers a perfect bite but doesn’t eat it. “I’m sure. I just need him gone.”

“And anyone he’s fatebound to? You’d kill them, too.”

Remy scoffs. Vital red, fatebonds are the strongest and rarest of all tether types, indicative of a perfect and complementary alignment of goals. Other tethers speak to relationships—enduring ones, passionate ones, selfless and dedicated ones—but fatebonds indicate not only a profound connection but one meant to transform the world around it. They’re the only bonds thick enough to carry a curse like an artery. Remy wasn’t even fatebound to his *brother*. “You think a bastard like that is fatebound to anyone? Please. You’re plucking at threads.”

“What if he has family, then? They’ll have to watch him die, just like—”

Remy drops his spoon and pushes back from the table. “Don’t.”

“—like you watched Cameron. Do you want to make another you?”

“I’m trying to prevent another me!”

“Remy, it’s been *five years*. I hoped maybe you’d . . .” Her fingers curl, bloodless, around her spoon. “Didn’t you use to like him when you were little? You can’t really want to kill him.”

Can’t he? So many things have changed from back then. The glow from the hive overhead ripples in Remy’s funneled vision. He snaps at the knife on the table. Misses. Grabs it on his second try. Stands, bowl spinning.

Tirani follows him into the consultation room. “You won’t be able to undo this if you get your head on straight later!”

“*Good.*” He stomps upstairs, grabs his heavy backpack from his bed, and stalks down again. “You don’t have to agree with me, just don’t get in my—”

“Remy?” A warm, deep voice stops him dead at the foot of the stairs, and Remy staggers back at the sight of a lean silhouette on the other side of the curtain. “Is that you?”

Shit.

Andrew Delacour, Vice-Enforcer to the Chancellor, a man with hound-like senses for illegal behavior. He always shows up when Remy’s planning something reckless. Tirani has to be involved, somehow.

An *officer of the law* is the last thing Remy needs. He has to get out of here.

“Tirani?” Andrew calls again. “We’re coming in, all right?”

*We.* He’s not alone. That’s worse.

Remy casts around the wide-open room—nowhere to hide.

The washroom. It has a window he can escape through.

Remy skids inside just as he hears Andrew bustling into the consultation room. He tugs the washroom’s window as wide as it’ll go and slips his pack from his shoulders. The window isn’t wide enough to let him through with it on his back, but he can grab it once he’s out.

He leans out the window, startling a fluffy gray stray cat from an acrobatic round of butt-cleaning. Grisly glares up with her one eye but doesn't move from the cozy bathing nest that's conveniently situated where he needs to land.

"Grisly!" Remy begs. "You need to move."

She slow-blinks and begins to purr, rolling to show him her belly. Remy groans. He grabs his pack and swings it above her head, hoping the motion might startle her, but she only watches it curiously as his elbow aches from the strange angle and the weight of the pack.

"Go on!" he pleads to no avail.

"Yeah, he's here," Tirani's saying from the consultation room. Loud. Too loud. A warning. "Maybe in the washroom, but I doubt he's in the mood for company. I can check on him and see—"

Remy pulls the bag back inside. He'll have to throw it, but that might break the raw crystal bowl he needs for the withering. He wrenches the bag open and grabs the bowl.

Footsteps pad down the hall. Remy's blended irritation and relief melt to terror when the approaching person speaks.

"Oh no, dear, don't trouble yourself. I need to wash my hands, anyway."

That familiar baritone. Those steady footsteps. Remy knows with sudden, numb horror exactly who Andrew's guest is: the Chancellor himself. Of course it would be him.

Gentle and cheery, the Chancellor always insists Remy call him Aram when he visits. He granted the Canta Manor to Remy after Cam's death in hopes of giving him somewhere he'd feel safe. He treats Remy like a son, but he still rules over the hundreds of islands that make up the Protectorate. If he sees what Remy has in the bag, he'll have no choice but to sentence him to death—or worse, to the Isles.

There's no time to think, no time for a careful descent. Remy flings his bag outside (thankfully, Grisly flees) and shoves the crystal bowl against his chest. He tips out the window backward, vision sparking with bright stars and air punched from his lungs with the impact. He grabs his pack, shoves the bowl inside, and yanks it onto his shoulders before he can catch his breath.

A knock sounds on the wall of the washroom as he finds his feet.

"Remy?" the Chancellor's voice sifts through the still-open window. "I was in the area helping with festival prep and wanted to see how you were doing. I know this time of year is hard for you . . ."

It takes everything inside Remy not to give into muscle memory and sink into the respectful bow Cam taught him when he was six: one closed fist behind his back for preservation, an open hand over his heart for progress. The Chancellor used to laugh when little Remy jumped into the formal pose every time they met. Even at nineteen, it's a hard habit to break.

He snaps himself free and flees around the corner just as the Chancellor's figure blots a dark line into the light pooling from the washroom's window.

None of the Chancellor's bittersweet stories, none of Andrew's tired pleas to *just wait*, none of Tirani's promises that he doesn't want to do this can stall him tonight.

Outside the home Remy shares with Tirani, the seaside city has grown cool with night, the octagonal hivelights' warm glow illuminating every tightly packed, brightly painted building, spilling light onto narrow, cobbled streets. The houses grow farther apart as Remy ascends the winding uphill paths and staircases toward the city's peak. Here in the Chancellor's cliff-side capital, rich and poor alike have solar-powered hives to light their homes along with the same restrictions on energy use. The currency of wealth is space to roam and permission to fill it. Remy was lucky to be born to high officials: his parents were

allowed a second child. When his mom died giving birth to him and his father followed five years later, he still had Cam.

The Empty Isles—the man-made moons Idrian Delaciel has claimed as his base of operations—loom over the Glass Sea as Remy hurries onward.

Alta, Fluora, and Toxys: for hundreds of years, they held Verdine's survivors while they watched their wounded planet heal from the damage its own people wrought. When the moons were abandoned to allow the survivors to return to Verdine, they became known as the Empty Isles: a reminder of the people's folly and a symbol of their promise to nurture their recovered world.

But in the century since Verdine's survivors descended, the Isles have turned from cradle to curse: the fading pseudo-moons are now a prison for those too dangerous to live on the surface, while criminals like Idrian gouge precious resources from the planet to keep the moons' inhabitants luxuriously fed.

Silvery and cracked with blue light, for years they've been a reminder of what Delaciel stole from Remy, but he looks up at them tonight without flinching.

White ribbons tied into bows on the guardrails brush Remy's fingers as he walks, a promise of the coming festivities: next week's centennial Resurrection Festival—a celebration of the planet's healing and a reminder of how close it came to destruction—will be the biggest Verdine has ever seen.

When selecting one of the archetypal masks for the festival each year, Remy usually chooses the mask of the Mourner, black and white with mirror shards and a tragically down-turned mouth. The Mourner: the one who saw the end coming but could do nothing but watch.

This year, once Idrian's dead, he'll don the mask of the Reveler—smiling and bright and many-colored, fringed with hammered coins.

This year, Remy will have everything in the world to celebrate.