

LUCID

REM World Trilogy • Book One



L. R. Evans

1 HOSTAGE

REM: DAY ONE



JULIAN'S HEAD POUNDS, a sure sign he overindulged in the pub last evening. He cracks his eyes open a sliver, but shields them again in an instant. Is every damn candle in the room lit? Dragging himself upright, he presses the heels of his hands into his eyes and squints at the room.

Bookshelves line every wall. A thick, maroon rug with swirls of gold stretches beneath him. Near a fireplace, a few items of furniture gather round a short table. A settee, armchair, and overstuffed rocking chair match the high-polished mahogany trimmings of the room.

None of this is familiar to him. Where the bloody hell is he? He must've drank quite a lot for a stranger to carry him into this home. He raises to his feet and throws open his waistcoat. Digging in his pockets, he finds a modest satchel of coins. Nobody thought to rob him, then.

Where is the door to leave this room? And where is the master of this house? Odd of the owner to leave him laying on the parlor floor...

He freezes. A figure lurks beside the fireplace. Their skin shines like glass, striped brown and yellow. Light-green braids cascade from their head, tumbling past their shoulders. Beneath two green brows, eyes the color of dandelions stare at him.

It's a statue, he realizes with relief. It's a towering man of six feet, hewn of stone.

He looks closer, appreciating the sharp cheekbones accentuating the

deep set yellow eyes. The space under them is hollow, bordering on gaunt. A long, slender nose juts out over soft, beige lips. Brown leather trousers cover its lower portion, its maroon vest unbuttoned to reveal a chiseled stone torso.

The beauty's lost in the bizarre choice of rock. Marble or porcelain would've been better. And the *hair*. No accomplished artisan would affix such a gaudy wig upon their creation. Why on Earth would someone commission such a thing?

It blinks.

He feels sick, flushed and chilled. A sensation of pins and needles races across his skin. No, he imagined it. He's certain he imagined—

There! It blinks again. He tenses, as still as the creature. His breath comes in rapid pants, so fast and shallow he fears he may faint.

His body refuses to move. If he moves, the thing may take it as a threat. Did he not learn somewhere to never look a strange mutt in the eyes? Oh, but he dares not allow the creature to leave his sight.

"What do you remember?" The quiet voice comes from those stone lips. They move.

He can't process the question. The ringing in his ears is too loud, too overpowering.

The beast approaches half a step and he screams, stumbling to the floor. His gaze darts around the room. Bookshelves. Bookshelves everywhere! Where is the sodding *door*?

The creature steps toward him. Drawing a breath, he gives another shout, regaining his footing.

His back presses against something. Another blasted bookcase! Using the shelves to steady himself, he climbs to his feet. Books thud to the floor all around him, but he doesn't take his eyes off the figure.

The creature goes still.

His pounding heartbeat replaces the ringing in his ears. Sweat dribbles into his eyes, streaming down his neck. He can't breathe. He can't *breathe*.

The abomination's lime-green braids glow to life.

He shrieks once more, but it dies away after the first note. A sense of calm settles over him. Remaining plastered against the bookshelf, he trains his eyes on the thing. When it moves, turning to the side, he tenses.

"I will not harm you," it says, licking its beige lips. The tongue is pink, but the normalcy of it is somehow more grotesque. It would be better if

the thing had a forked tongue, if it were orange or yellow. As it is, it looks as if the creature took a part of a human's body and attached it to itself.

Abominable thought. He wishes he hadn't imagined it.

The rock monster speaks again. Its voice sounds deep, like a male. "My name is Jax. Please, sit and I'll—"

Julian jumps, yelling as a bookshelf swings from the wall to his left. An old woman enters the room. The skin of her jowls wilt like melting wax.

"And who might you be?" Her withered lips flatten in a regretful line.

Movement draws his attention. Jax sits in an armchair. He doesn't wear shoes, revealing feet much like his own except for horns growing from each heel.

Julian returns his attention to the newcomer. Her hair is like a cotton ball painted in rainbow colors. It's not its natural coloring, for her eyebrows are white. She's half a head shorter than him with a skeletal frame. Her lower lids pull away from sharp hazel eyes, as if weighted down by the puffy bags beneath them.

She appears in every way human.

Swallowing a lump in his throat, he takes the old woman's wrist in his hand and whispers, "Ma'am, now is our opportunity. We must escape this creature." The old woman watches him with vacant concern. Wildness overtakes him. "Do you understand me? We're in danger, Madame."

The lines around her lips multiply under a light-gray grin. One incisor crosses over her front tooth a little. "Jax is a clavo, sweetie. Nothing to fear. He's just not from Earth."

Utter disbelief chases away all his fear and urgency. She said Earth. Not from Earth. Is she completely off her trolley? "Of course he's from Earth. Did he fall from the moon?" He covers his mouth to muffle the words from Jax.

"He was born here in REM. Oh, don't look so worried. You'll learn it all soon enough." She gives him a warm smile.

Oh. Her mind is gone. She truly doesn't recognize the threat standing feet from them. His heart thunders against his ribs. It's a violation of propriety, but he takes hold of her and pushes her from the room.

She struggles against him, mounting protests, and he ceases his efforts. Jax doesn't so much as glance in their direction despite the commotion.

The old woman levels a disapproving glare at Julian. "Enough. Let's sit down and have a nice conversation." She swings the bookshelf back in

place. It must be on a hinge of some sort.

At the last moment, he stops it with his foot.

“Ma’am, please, it isn’t safe.” He catches her by one bony arm as she passes. She intends to sit with the monstrous thing.

The woman gives a soft laugh. “Sweetie, I promise you’re in no danger. Come on now.”

He resists her gentle pull. It’ll be difficult enough on his own. To attempt this with a woman who will fight him all the way will mean certain failure.

With regret, he considers the old woman. “Godspeed,” he mutters, giving her arm a squeeze.

Prying away from her, he bolts through the open bookshelf. His heart hammers, his every nerve ablaze. At any second, he expects the creature to tackle him to the ground. What if it possesses ungodly speed? Beastly strength?

The corridor is pitch black, but he runs at full speed anyway. The dim light of the candle sconces provides some illumination, but more than once he clips his shoulder on a wall. The place is medieval, like a dungeon. The walls are crude blocks of limestone, weeping with moisture. The floor is hard-packed dirt. There are no windows, no clear exits from the dank hell. Darkness swallows the ceiling.

The corridor forms a crossroad and he bears left with no thought to where it might lead. He takes a right, then another left. After running for so long he feels he may become sick, he collapses against a wall and fights for his breath. Sliding down to sit on the floor of filth, he tries to make sense of his morning. It is morning, is it not?

He’ll never drink again. He vows it.

“No, it’s definitely Geist.”

He launches to his feet. The owner of the gruff voice is around the corner, hidden from view. Hoofbeats ricochet off the musty walls, the man’s horse walking at a lazy pace. Panic closes his throat and his mind.

“We got eyes on him, but they’re waiting for backup.” His blood is hot and loud in his ears. “Send the catech to the fenral border and—*Stop right there.*”

He’s caught.

No. The man isn’t in sight yet. He’s not yet spotted him.

Darting down the corridor the way he came, he runs straight ahead.

Into a dead end. Where there should be more hallway, there's only a stone wall. He runs the other way, looking all over hell for an adjoining passage he may have missed.

"I said to stop your arguing, Felix. This is Geist, goddammit." The man is close. If he goes back, he'll cross paths with him. Trapped, he breathes much too fast. Perspiration cuts a line down his temple. "If you send your fucking bounty hunters in there, it'll be nothing but sport to him."

This is it. There's nowhere to—

There. The door almost matches the wall, but a slim line of warm light glows at the threshold. He fumbles for the doorknob, praying it's not locked. Stifling a cry of victory when the knob turns, he slips into the room and closes the door. The soft *click* sounds loud as a *slam* to his ragged nerves.

The hoofbeats grow louder, slowing as they pass his sanctuary. A series of beeps filter through the door, followed by a loud rumbling noise. "It's best if the catech doesn't engage with Geist unless forced. Dismantle his battalion and bring in his illegal NTs. There's no sense in..."

The grating sound overtakes the rest, but the man's voice is fading anyway. He cracks open the door, his curiosity besting him. The dead end is wide open, the stone wall lowering like a vertical gate. More secret passageways. Good god, where the hell is he?

He presses his forehead against the door, exhausted in every way.

A loud scraping sound makes him jump. Someone's in the room with him. A robed figure stands from their chair behind a wooden desk. The blue garment covers them head to toe, a hood concealing their face. There are no eye holes in the covering, but it isn't a veil as ladies sometimes wear. Honestly, they may as well be wearing a potato sack over their head.

He gropes for the doorknob. "Are you human?" The warble in his voice undermines his authority. They come to the front of their desk. "I asked you a question."

They reach toward him, intending to seize him, and he throws open the door. Speeding through the maze of corridors, his gait slows when he finds himself alone. Where on Earth is he? How did he get here? If he could remember, perhaps he could find his way home again.

Where is his home? He's so flummoxed, he can't even remember his own address.

“Sir?”

He prepares to turn tail in the other direction, but then he recognizes her multi-colored hair.

“You escaped.” He closes the distance between them with haste, standing with her at the mouth of a dark hallway. A brief scan of her person reveals she suffered no apparent harm. “Ma’am, please, would you remember how you came into this place? How might we return to the outside world?”

“This way.” She takes him by the arm and pulls him into the black passageway. It’s another dead end, nothing more than a small alcove. Before he can say a word, a large metal slab slams down and blocks them in. He struggles against it, praying for strength to lift it.

It proves impossible.

“We’re trapped.” He whirls on the older woman as a candle flame blooms to life. She keeps her back turned to him, hunched over and fiddling with something. The dim lighting of the candle sconce shrouds her expression, hides her intentions. “Ma’am?”

Beeping sounds through the small place, not unlike what he heard at the other dead end. Ice slips into his gut and sets his hair on end. Foreboding twists his insides until his stomach is a turbulent sea. “Madame. What have you there? I demand—” The wall before them swings open, revealing a familiar room.

“In,” orders the elderly lady, gesturing to Jax sitting on the settee.

“What is this? Why are you aiding this abomination?” He presses his back against the other wall.

At the slight lift in her brow, he glances to Jax. He stands now, glaring in their direction.

“Come in.” He folds his glossy hands before himself. “I will forgive your rudeness, considering you’re new here.”

The woman all but drags him into the room, but he allows her. There’s nowhere else to go. The fact she’s human is a comfort. Her hair is odd and she wears ankle-length trousers instead of a corseted dress, but she’s human. Isn’t she?

Jax takes several steps toward them and he panics. He must escape this place. He won’t be this creature’s hostage.

Hostage.

He seizes the old woman. She gives a little shout of surprise, but he’s

too desperate to allow his guilt to stop him. Pinning her arms with one of his, he grasps her neck in one hand.

Jax freezes.

“You’re working together to some end, are you not?” He squeezes the woman’s neck for emphasis. It’s like wrapping his hand around a pillow, it’s so soft and delicate. Remorse wars against his basic desire for self-preservation. He never looks away from Jax. “Are you a monster, as well, old woman? Or merely serving one?”

“I’m from Earth.” She wriggles in his arms. “I’m human, like you.”

Julian shakes his head, glancing down at her face, then back to Jax. “You’re mental, you are. Off your sodding nut. You mean to say this thing standing here is from some other world?” Nausea takes root and his head swims. This can’t be reality. None of this can be truth. “It’s a mere abomination of nature, nothing more. Has age so addled your mind you can’t—?”

“Lieutenant, your patience irritates me,” growls Jax. “Release yourself before I do so for you.”

“He’s new, Jax. Let him adjust.”

“Let him learn. There are consequences to his threats.” A thrill of fear weakens his knees, but he pushes it away. Jax growls, a noise like gravel and scraping metal. “I will not abide by specist rhetoric.”

“Captain, please.” The old woman’s brows turn up in the middle. At Jax’s stubborn glare, she touches her hand to Julian’s leg.

“Madame—” He gasps, quite shocked she would take such liberties with his person. Reaffirming his grip on her neck, he gives her a warning squeeze. “Please. I will back us into a bookcase and you will show me the way from this place. I have no desire to harm you.”

With a resigned sigh, she says, “I don’t want to hurt you, either.” Then a flash of violet light sends his legs buckling under him. He releases the woman with a sharp cry, pressing his hands to either side of the still sizzling wound. A jagged, charred hole in his trousers smolders, the edges red with embers.

2 NEW SHOES



“JAX, DO YOU MIND?” The old woman hoists him by the underarms, struggling to lift him from the floor. All she’s doing is making him shrug again and again.

“Leave it.” Julian waves her away, staggering to his feet. “I’ll call for a physician when I return home. And so long as you don’t bar my way, I’ll be gracious enough to not involve the authorities in this matter.” The threat sounds strong, but he can’t look at Jax and imagine what he would say to a policeman.

How did this woman manage to burn him so badly? There was a violet light, so it must’ve been an explosive. Yet she avoided injury. There’s nothing in her hands or on the floor, either. He should’ve heard something, but there was no sound at all. It doesn’t make sense.

“What a nice offer. Don’t you agree, Jax? Here, let me help you first and then we’ll send you on your way.” She leads him to the armchair, patting his shoulder. ‘Leading’ is a kind way of describing how she pushes him along. She takes advantage of his injury to force him in the right direction. He didn’t take her for such an assertive woman when he first saw her.

When she deposits him on the chair, she frowns before turning away. He can’t puzzle her together. Who the blazes is she? On one hand, her hair and clothing describe a wild lady. But the way she carries herself, holding her head as if balancing a book, tells him she attended school. Age doesn’t affect her back or, if it does, she ignores it. The woman is stern and warm, a gathering of unlike things.

It bothers him.

When she takes her seat beside Jax, Julian stands to fan out his coat tail. Smoothing his vest, he avoids looking at the rock creature altogether and sits on the edge of the plush armchair.

The woman smiles at him as though he's a willing guest. It's too strange a sight, the old woman sitting so close to the man made of lacquered rock. At least his hair no longer glows.

"Where are you from? Where on Earth, I mean." She pours a glass of water, handing it to Julian.

He receives the cup with a furtive glance to Jax, who glares at the floor.

"Oh, drink up. It'll make you feel better," she insists, waving at the glass.

He takes a cautious sip. It tastes like water. Perhaps they didn't meddle with it.

"There we go. Now, where are you from?"

"I..." Where? Where does he live? How did he even get here? "I don't know," he finishes, his mouth going dry.

The woman frowns. "That's alright, sweetie. What do you remember?"

A pounding in his head makes it difficult to think, but he comes up with, "My name. I'm Julian Desmond. I—I'm thirty-one years old. The year...the year is..." Why can he not remember? It must be the stress.

"Well, hello, Julian."

He shakes his head to clear it. Jax grimaces at him. The woman offers her hand, drawing his focus. "My name is Rylann Watts."

"How do you do?" He grasps the tips of her fingers for the briefest moment, inhaling a deep breath to steady himself. "I'm not sure how I arrived in this place. Where am I?"

"This is REM World." The words cling to her lips, as if unsure they want to leave her mouth. "This is the point where all worlds meet."

"Oh, would you come off it? As if there can be more than one world." He waves away the preposterous claim. Neither Rylann or Jax offers to retract the lie. In fact, they watch him as if waiting for him to accept it as truth.

He clears his throat, adjusting himself on the chair. "I'm still...very confused."

"You fell asleep on Earth and you woke up here, *Julian*," says Jax, breaking his silence.

What a petty fellow, spitting his name in such a way. Then again, he did call him an abomination.

No matter. Jax makes an excellent point. Of course none of this could be real. He must have caught fever. He's home in bed, fighting the chills and dreaming strange things.

But why is everything so clear, so vivid? He's dreamed before, but can recall no specific instances. Maybe this is natural.

"Well, then, I suppose there was no need for all the screaming earlier, was there?" He laughs, rubbing his jaw. "It isn't as if you could have done me any real harm, being a dream and all."

Rylann and Jax lock gazes, stiffening in their seats. Silence stretches between them. Is this because he realized he was dreaming? Did his subconscious freeze these people in place?

His relief fades as he realizes they *can* harm him. Or at least he can feel injuries they deal him. He glances to his leg, but finds the skin smooth and unblemished. Yes, right. The nature of dreams: Forget about it and it vanishes. His trousers are torn, but his flesh is intact.

He recalls a dream where he fell from his roof, breaking his arm. By the time help arrived, the injury disappeared. There was horror when he saw the injury in his dream, but the pain was absent. Perhaps the memory of the sensation faded, because it was so long ago?

His hosts' statue-like poses unsettle him. He considers trying one of the bookshelves, but then Jax finally moves. Shaking his head as if in response to something Rylann says, he crosses his arms. She cocks her head to the side, punctuating her point with a wave around the room. Jax narrows his eyes at her.

Shifting in his seat, he faces Julian with determination. The rock-man leans forward, resting horned elbows on leather-clad knees.

"Jax, no—" begins Rylann, but the creature—Rylann called him a *clavo*—shrugs her hand off of his shoulder.

"Here in REM, if you believe nothing else, believe this." His green eyebrows lift as he skewers Julian with an intense gaze. "Dreams are real and they can kill you."

Julian studies his human-like face, the words not quite processing.

Before he can work through it, Jax claps his hands on his knees and leans back against the miniature couch. He throws Rylann a triumphant look. "There. He didn't explode, now did he?"

She settles into her seat, crossing her arms. "Not yet, no."

His gaze drifts to the left, needing to focus on something other than the odd pair. These people say dreams are real, but they are dreams themselves. Their words hold little weight.

Taking another deep breath, he forces himself to relax. It's a dream. He'll wake soon and his memory will return. There's no reason for fear or panic.

He's at once aware of the texture of his clothing, how they brush against his skin when he shifts. His body registers the temperature of the room, as well. He swallows, pinching his own hand.

This is ridiculous. There's no reason why a creature like Jax should exist in reality. He won't think of it again. Adjusting his neckwear as a distraction, he pauses to examine the ruffles cascading down his chest. He doesn't remember dressing in these, but he must have done so. Why can he not recollect the previous evening? He should've dressed for bed if this is a dream.

Ah, but it's likely he was trolled after an evening of drinking. Perhaps he fell asleep in these clothes, too bone-weary to be bothered with changing.

But why can he not remember if he owns these clothes? Did he buy them? Or are they as fictitious as Rylann and Jax?

In any case, he approves of the dark navy linen. (It would be odd if he didn't approve, since he chose the clothing one way or another.) The design is simple, with no extravagant embroidery. The silver buckles of his breeches' hems are the only flair of wealth. His white linen stockings vanish behind the buckle atop his brown leather shoes.

His shoes niggle at him. They're so new, so unused.

"Well, I think it's best if he leaves REM for the evening. Any objections?" Jax straightens his maroon vest. It's coarse material, a contrast to the brown leather trousers he wears.

"None here." He sits up straighter at the possibility of his release.

"Oh, now you're asking my opinion?" Rylann levels a surly look at Jax, her chin tucked into her chest. If she wore spectacles, she'd be looking over the rims.

Jax sighs, weary. "Of course your opinion matters, Lieutenant."

This is the second time he calls her a lieutenant. They're part of some kind of military? He furrows his brow at them, waiting for further clues,

but they fall silent.

His mismatched companions stare at each other again, as if in deep concentration. It goes on so long, he becomes impatient and clears his throat.

With surprised expressions, as if they forgot he occupied the same room, they raise to their feet.

“Then I’ll leave him to you, Rylann,” grumbles Jax, spearing Julian with an annoyed look. “He seems more comfortable with a fellow human.”

Heat floods his face and he looks away. His reputation is one of a bigot and, what’s more, it’s an honest reflection of his character. Jax frightens him for no other reason than his appearance. He hasn’t done a thing to him to warrant this fear, this near revulsion. If anything, he should fear Rylann. She’s the one who set him on fire.

“Damn it, Jax,” snaps Rylann, glowering at him. “How else is he supposed to react? There’s only one traveler species in my world.”

Jax levels a dark look at her and she grimaces. Before she can speak again, he whirls on heel and starts toward a bookcase. When he exits the room, she releases a weighty sigh.

Julian feels a pang of remorse. But then he remembers this is a dream. These aren’t real people. It’s silly to worry about offending people he created in his own mind.

Unless this dream is warning him of his flaws in reality. Is he prejudiced in his waking hours? He tries to recall anyone he treated with such disrespect based on their race alone.

This reveals a more alarming issue. He can’t remember anyone. At all. Who is his mother? Is he married? What does the postman look like? Does he have siblings? Friends? Coworkers?

There’s nothing.

Rylann touches a hand to his shoulder, making him look up into her sad eyes. “Follow me. I’ll show you to your room.”

“Whatever for? Jax said I was to leave REM.” And go where? Back to what employment? What home? His temples throb, a headache threatening to take hold.

“You leave REM the same way you arrived.” A warm smile spreads across her face. A million small lines erupt around it like a halo. “When you fall asleep in REM, you wake in your own world—and vice-versa.”

“I must only fall asleep?” He raises from his chair.

“More or less.” She crosses the room and opens another bookshelf, different from the one they’d been using. He wonders if all the shelves are doorways.

A long narrow tunnel, lit by what look like candles, stretches into the distance. It’s a gloomy, foreboding sight. He frowns, the hair on the nape of his neck standing up.

“Are we underground?” He trails behind her, appraising the dark path ahead. It’s chilly and his stockings offer little protection. This corridor is like the one through which he attempted his escape, dank and dreary. He wishes he asked to sleep on the small sofa in the room where he woke.

“Yes, we built this stronghold decades ago. If Titans trek through here or fly overhead, they’ll see nothing but trees.” Rylann’s laugh echoes down the hall. “We’re still working on getting the other strongholds underground, but HQ is safe as houses.”

“Titans? HQ? What on Earth are you on about?”

She flashes him a broad smile. “I’ll explain everything tomorrow night if you’re still interested.”

Oh, he hopes he won’t dream of such things again. He keeps this wish to himself, following her in silence and occupying his mind with the lights they pass. They aren’t candle sconces, as he first thought. There’s no flickering flame, no wax. Only light. Small, hovering orbs of light.

Curious.

She opens a primitive wooden door set into the stone wall, leading him into a spare room containing a bed. The room is as cheerful as the tunnel. Another mysterious yellow orb is the one, dim light source.

He studies the door and then Rylann. There’s no locking mechanism, so they can’t mean to cage him. And even if he did try to escape, there’s some sort of trick to leaving this place. He would wander through these tunnels blind for hours and never find his way, he’s sure.

Squeezing his eyes shut, he pinches the bridge of his nose. He must remember this is a dream. “Thank you.” With a curt nod, he crosses the threshold.

“Goodnight, Julian.”

When she closes the door behind her, he wants to call for her to wait. There’s no reason to do so, except being left alone in this place frightens him.

A schoolboy’s cowardice. He holds his tongue.

Her footsteps echo down the stone corridor and fade away. Left in eerie silence, the frigid air of the room leeches into his skin. He won't strip down to his undershirt in these conditions, he's certain.

Pulling back a corner of the wool blankets, eager for their warmth, he almost gets into bed with his shoes. He kicks them off, the expensive leather heels thumping when they hit the bare stone floor.

Burrowing under the covers, his body aches with exhaustion. He should take better care of his shoes. His old shoes had been falling apart, the soles threatening to fall away as he walked. When he saw his new pair in the shop window, he decided to treat himself. He's always been a bit of a miser, he supposes, so he fought with himself over the expense.

He smiles to himself at the memory. There's nothing wrong with managing one's finances with a practical hand. His frosty body begins to thaw and he feels sleep pulling him away.

Then, he realizes: He remembered something. Propping himself up on his elbow, he peeks over the edge of the bed at his shoes. If he can remember buying the shoes, what else can he remember? The name of the store? The face of the shopkeep?

His brow furrows as he fights to reach another nugget of information. A sharp stab of pain shoots through his temples. It's so keen, his hand flies to his head without volition.

He closes his eyes, wrapping himself in the blankets. The missing pieces of himself are on the other side of this dream, in his reality. The sooner sleep finds him, the sooner his memories will rejoin him.

EARTH: NIGHT TWO

Rylann's Journal

Jax refuses to trust Julian. He's flushing the past five years down the drain. Five years of pulling Jax's ass out of the fire, but it all means nothing now? I could strangle him.

To make matters worse, I spoke with Tisdale today and ~~she~~ he did a complete one-eighty. He was so obsessed with Jodi's death, he took leave from the Somnium Institute. He couldn't even focus on his duties at the Resistance. Now he doesn't care at all.

Not about me, not about Jodi, and not about REM.

Between ~~her~~ him, Jax, and Julian, I might take a late retirement.

3 WHITE ORB

REM: DAY THREE



REPLAYING HIS SHOE-BUYING adventure again and again, he drifts off. It must be around the dozenth time he walks up to the storefront and stares down at his own feet.

He peers in at the shiny brown leather in the window, then bends down to examine the growing holes in the seams of his shoes. Poking his finger through the largest tear, he sighs. If he could avoid the expense, he would, but he needs presentable shoes.

Straightening upright, he resolves to enter the store, and...

He stands in a vast field, wearing the same clothes in which he fell asleep. Going rigid with shock, he blinks. The crushed weeds beneath his feet poke through his linen stockings.

The storefront is gone, the warm candlelight extinguished. Dark clouds roil overhead and patches of mist drift through the hills. Gray grass stands as high as his waist, glittering under silver moonlight.

There's no one else here.

This must be another dream. Instead of waking up in his reality, he transitioned from one dream to another.

Scanning the soft, rolling hills of the dream world, a chill streaks through him. It's unsettling to be so alone in such a large, open space. Vulnerability creeps down his spine and coils in his gut at the thought of being so exposed. Best to keep moving. Prey standing still is soon a carcass.

He climbs to the top of one of the hills, which are little more than shallow mounds. It's a good vantage point to identify any potential predators. Some of his fear abates, but then he realizes the tall grasses would provide good cover for lurking beasts.

Nothing stirs. The grasses are calm and still. The hills dip and rise in gentle waves, as picturesque as a painting. There are no trees, no buildings, nothing except a sea of gray grass. The small clouds of mist creates an ominous atmosphere. They drift across the land like spirits described in a playwright's tale.

He shakes it away. Superstition will be of no help.

Trying not to worry about the strangeness of the mist, he descends the hilltop. It's too uniform. It doesn't behave as ordinary fog, but collects in distinct, oval shapes. It's a field of ethereal orbs, all different heights. Some are over six feet tall and others four or five feet. Still more are so small they nestle in the grass and he doesn't notice until he's walking past them.

He scans the hills again, alert for any threats. There are none. What is he supposed to do here? Running his fingers through his hair, he pauses. It's shoulder length, maybe black or dark brown.

Struck with a sudden need to know what he looks like, know something, he explores his own body. The color of his eyes are a mystery, but his legs are long. His knees are knobby through his breeches. Gripping his upper arms under his coat, he flexes and almost laughs. There's next to nothing there. He must not work in a position requiring much physical strength.

Perhaps he's too poor to nourish his body. Concerned for his waking self, his hands press against his own stomach. It's flat, but soft and malleable under his vest. He can't feel his ribs when his hands travel further upward. He doesn't starve in his waking life, then. His work isn't physically demanding and he makes enough coin to keep himself fed.

Julian Desmond, thirty-one years old. He eats on a regular basis. One time, he bought shoes.

If this is the sum of his existence, he's unimpressed.

One of the collections of mist drifts close to him. With nothing else to do, he takes the opportunity to investigate. The easiest way to assuage his worries about the mist is to prove to himself it's harmless. As he moves closer, it maintains its form. Shouldn't the edges lose their definition? Shouldn't it become more transparent?

He runs his hand through it, certain it will pass without incident.

The mist dissipates wherever it's touched. There, see? Nothing extraordinary about it at all. He releases a bated breath he was unaware he'd been holding. Tension melts from his shoulders.

Is this the kind of man he'd always been, plagued with fear of the unknown? Or is he this way due to the nature of this dream? He doubts many men would be capable of trusting their surroundings after meeting Jax. A man made of rock whose hair glowed green. No, his misgivings of this dream are well founded.

What's there, at the center of the mist? It's something solid. Almost solid. He leans forward, squinting at the object. Then, before his eyes, the mist transforms from vapor to figure. A monster! A demon! A beast!

He gives a startled yell, staggering backward, but it's a human man. Well, perhaps. The hills and grasses bleed right through him. He's transparent, like a ghost. A spirit, as he feared. Yet it seems no more or less capable of harming him than any living man or woman.

On guard, he chances a longer look at the man. The stranger breathes deep and slow, his eyes closed as he hovers half a foot over the ground. He looks to be in his late fifties, judging by the thinning hair atop his head. Even while sleeping, wrinkles around his eyes and mouth are prominent. He can't tell if there's gray in his hair, as he's gray from head to foot.

A sudden idea comes to him, his skin prickling with fear. What if this man only looks harmless while he sleeps? Like a bear or a lion might? A vision of his eyes snapping open, mouth gaping to reveal sharpened teeth, sets his heart racing.

He strides away with his gaze firm on the ground, stomach churning at the thought. His hands are cold and clammy from his fright and his heart pains with each beat. It's a thick sort of beating, as though his blood has become syrup. The more distance he places between him and the phantom, the less his heart struggles.

He reminds himself, again, this is a dream. He's in no real danger.

The silver grass tickles his knuckles and he frowns. If not for the absurdity of Jax and the spectre, he would accept this as reality. If he can feel and breathe and live in a dream, then what makes a dream different from reality?

A bright color flashes in the gray expanse, like the warm glow of a fire. It gains definition, tiny flecks of light floating through the air in a long,

curling trail. It leads off over the horizon and disappears into the distance.

Taking a step toward it, an orange cloud engulfs him. He jumps and swats at the glowing trail, but to no effect. Surprising himself, he doesn't scream out. Perhaps he's growing more acclimated to the oddities of this dream world.

The orange light twists and winds around his torso like a python, but does him no harm. What could this mean?

"Julian!" calls a familiar voice.

Rylann runs across the field toward him. Where did she come from? She's spry for an elder! "What is this?" he calls to her, gesturing to the phenomenon surrounding him.

"What?" she calls back.

He watches the tendrils of light wind around him. "This light. What's this orange light?" It glitters like powdered glass, imparting spasms of warmth wherever it touches.

"What light?" she yells back, much closer now. He doesn't want to reply, basking in the warmth of this magical substance. His muscles relax and his mind clears, as though drifting into a deep sleep. He should follow the trail of light. There's something at the end he needs, something he's desperate to find.

Taking his first few steps after it, there's a pressure on his right shoulder blade. It's like a hand pressing there. It doesn't shove or try to hold him back. It's there as one might place a comforting hand on a friend.

He breaks into a run, certain now he must reach his destination. There's a voice, so faint he almost can't understand the words.

It's his name. Someone is calling his name.

Another hand is on his person, this time gripping and pulling at him.

"Where the hell are you going?" Rylann clutches his shoulder to brace herself as she regains her breath.

Tottering on his feet, as if recovering from a fainting spell, it takes a moment for his faculties to return. When he does recover, he turns to find the light again. It's gone, like his wound when he forgot about it before. Such a shame. It was a happy thing. "Why did you stop me?" he grumbles, bitter.

"Stop you from what?"

"From following..." It seems silly he would tear off into the strange realm in pursuit of nothing. "Nevermind."

She fixes him with a shrewd look before abandoning the subject. “The Rapture will be starting soon,” she says, still a little winded. “I didn’t want you to be by yourself. It can be scary at first.”

The word builds a great stone cathedral in his mind. “Will I never escape the church?” he mutters.

She laughs. “Oh, no, honey. Bless you, but you couldn’t have gotten it more wrong. You’ll see,” she promises, linking her arm with his. “It happens several times a night. It’s part of the process.”

He allows the contact, but remains wary. She did burn him in the last dream, after all. She’s the only other human he’s met, though—his one connection to normalcy.

“May I ask you a strange question?” He leads her down a low-grade hill.

“I’ve been traveling in REM for most of my adult life. There’s not much anyone can say to shake me to my foundations.” She laughs, as if he told her a joke.

Rubbing his jaw, he studies her for a minute. It’s as though he’s met two different people who share the same face. Trusting her feels a fool’s errand. She’s amicable in one breath and holding him hostage the next.

“I hoped you could tell me the color of my eyes,” he relents. Eye color is a safe enough topic even among enemies.

A brief instance of surprise streaks across her face. “Of course. I forget your memory is...” she whispers, releasing his arm. Then, flattening her expression, she says, “The lighting isn’t great here, but I remember from last night. They’re dark green, like oak leaves.”

“Green, then. Thank you.” But she stares at him, her lips parted as if preparing to speak. “What is it?”

“Nothing.” She offers him her elbow, averting her gaze. “You’ve got some five-o-clock shadow, is all.”

“Rylann, what is five—?”

“What did you do today after you woke up?” she says, rushing to interrupt. She drops her arm back to her side. “Do you remember?”

“I haven’t woken.” This is a dream. How did he forget again? She isn’t a real person. “How did you find me?” he demands, irritated with himself.

“I woke up here.” She shrugs, then frowns at the sky. “We must be close to each other on Earth right now.”

He looks away, gritting his teeth. Her blouse is different from when he

saw her with Jax, as if she changed her clothing. She's implying she woke up and returned to him a second night in a second dream. It's natural she would wear different clothing.

It means nothing, except his subconscious doesn't miss details. Much like how he doesn't miss details in his waking life, when preparing the dead for their final send-off.

He remembers the young girl in the casket, how he painted her face to erase the marks death placed on her. The blue tint of her mouth, the uneven complexion devastated by smallpox. He corrected it all.

Another memory! He almost leaps with excitement. "I own a funeral home in London." His pulse quickens.

"What?"

He waves her down, impatient. Glaring at the tall silver grasses, he fights against his own mind for more. The cathedral. The funeral home. The dead girl. Think, Julian. *Think.*

Laughter. A man laughs in his mind, bringing forward a grainy image. Blond hair, something blue on his forehead. He laughs with reckless abandon, a madman's cackle.

"Hey, are you okay?" Rylann is a muffled whisper under the laughter.

He wills the image to focus, ignoring the perspiration dripping from his brow. The sound of his own breath is close in his ears, scraping, grating. Think! His undershirt clings to his chest, saturated.

Something flashes, drawing his attention. Across the gray field, a blinding white orb hurtles toward them.

"Rylann?" he croaks, his mind muddy.

The orb slams into his chest, knocking him off his feet. His breastbone snaps, ribs puncturing his lungs. He howls in wretched torment, his flayed organs ripping with his next breath. Something pops inside his skull.

He feels nothing. His vision goes white.

Smashing into the ground, searing pain tears through his body. He screams in agony, writhing against the cool earth. His breath leaves him. He gasps, desperate to fill his broken lungs even as they beg for death.

The world darkens. A sense of tranquility settles over him like a cool sheet. Orange light glows in his muddled sight, taking the shape of a man. It's so intense, the figure is a faceless silhouette. *I bind you, Julian, as you have bound me.*

"Julian! Julian, what's wrong?" cries Rylann, her knees volleying into

the ground beside him.

Her fingers dig at his cravat as she tries to loosen it, but he can't move. He can't breathe. She sobs, beside herself with terror, but he's too afraid to give her any sort of sign he yet lives.

She tugs at his vest, unbuttoning it, and he prays it won't awaken the raw nerves of his injury. This numb, outside-of-himself sensation is much preferred to the overpowering pain of his broken bones.

She places a warm hand on his chest and he flinches.

He dares not draw breath.

She shrieks his name, panic-stricken.

His lungs ache for oxygen. The orange light fades and, with it, his precarious sense of peace.

Fighting a sob of terror, he braces for pain as he sucks in a deep breath.

No pain comes.

"Julian...?" Her voice wavers.

With slow movements, frightened it will renew his torment, he lifts his hand. Resting it over his ribs, he's overcome with disbelief. Tears spring to his eyes and he hyperventilates, grateful for the gift of breathing.

He is whole.

Rylann's hands are on him, helping him sit upright. Clutching his throbbing head, he ignores her insistent stare. She watches him with a face fit for his funeral parlor, her lower lip quaking with fear. He would comfort her, but his own hands yet tremble.

Staring through the tall grass concealing them, he avoids her hazel eyes. "The white orb, the man—" His stomach flips and his entire body feels weak. How can pain be so potent in a dream? "Was it the Rapture?" His voice cracks on the whispered word. She said the Rapture was a regular occurrence. She was worried it might scare him to experience it alone. Would it happen again before he woke?

"What white orb? What man?" Her brow furrows.

When he casts his eyes to the ground, she presses a cool hand to his hot cheek. He swallows. "I must have remembered something. I must have been in an accident. The injuries felt so severe..."

"Maybe." Her voice is too high. She twists her hands, fidgeting and looking away.

"What are you keeping from me?" He frowns at her guilty countenance. "Tell me about the white orb."

"I swear I didn't see it." Her eyes widen when he grimaces at her. "Please, I was as afraid as you."

Wetting his lips, he gives her a grim nod. "Very well. However, last night you said you would explain everything to me when I returned. You expected me to come back here, didn't you?" When she averts her eyes, he takes a steadying breath to rein in his temper. "Why can I not remember my life?"

"I can't explain." She rubs her eyes with undue aggression. "Jax has given his orders."

"Sod his damned orders. I have a right to—" A collection of passing mist shimmers gold and blinks out of existence. "What the dickens?"

Blue, pink, orange, red. Shimmer, blink, gone. All around him, the mist evaporates in a rainbow of colors. The once lackluster hills burst to life like an instant spring after a lengthy winter. Some of the colors blend together where they touch, creating a sparkling effect. Like diamonds caught in the sun.

"This is the Rapture." She smiles. "All these dreamers are going to their Safe Havens. Where we dream about happy things," she adds, seeing the question forming on his lips.

"Dreamers?" As soon as he asks, he remembers the old man sleeping in the mist, the one who frightened him so.

"When we sleep, we come here to the common realm. Each of these blobs of mist is a human being asleep in their beds on Earth." The bursting colors glint in her eyes, giving them a youthful twinkle. "We were them once, unaware of the world beyond this place. Now we're awake—"

"They're human," he breathes, relieved. "Not ghosts or demons or—"

"Your imagination is incredible," she laughs, shaking her head at him. "There won't be anyone other than humans or animals here. Each world has their own common realm." Her eyes skate upwards and her smile dims a shade. "Now, don't let the Sandmen scare—"

A heavy flapping noise draws his attention. He turns in time to duck as a tattered black cloak billows over his head. Every hair on his body stands on end, his heart squeezing.

"Don't be afraid." She touches a hand to his wrist. He snorts. 'Don't be afraid.' The last time something flew at him, it shattered his entire torso. "You don't remember your waking life, so you won't go to the sub-c."

"Let me guess," he says, wetting his lips. "The sub-c is where we have

nightmares?”

She smiles, her lips pursed.

One of the grim reapers—the Sandmen—drags a misty dreamer into the earth. It snatches at the vapor and the dreamer becomes as solid as Julian, though still gray. There's only time enough for the dreamer to scream before the Sandman plunges into the ground. The earth swallows them both, cutting off the dreamer's shriek of terror.

Thank the stars he holds immunity.

Skeletal fingers dig into his shoulders.

Going so rigid his every muscle aches, he holds his breath. The creature hovers behind him, breathing down his neck. Rylann gapes in mute terror.

The Sandman cranes its neck, showing him its gray face. Folds of unnatural skin droop from its jowls, the cheeks sunken. The bones around its eyes jut out so far it casts shadows in the moonlight. Its enormous eyes are black, save for a bold white ring in the center. A long, crooked nose the size of Julian's forearm lays flat against its face, the tip dangling past its chin.

But the mouth, the mouth is too round. There are no corners to its lips, or what passes for lips. They are thin and cracked and gray, having no true border. Tiny, translucent teeth revolve around its perimeter, like a wheel of broken glass. The mouth widens in a large O, then shrinks back and widens again. The stench of rotting flesh wafts from the grotesque opening.

He can't move, can't draw breath to scream his horror. Blood pounds in his ears, shaking his vision with its force.

“Rylann?” he rasps, refusing to look the thing in the eye. “What do I do?” He speaks as slow and quiet as possible.

Before she can answer, the Sandman pushes off from him. The force sends him stumbling back as the creature resumes its flight. He watches as it claims another victim, the sensation of its bony fingers still fresh on his own shoulders.

Rylann shuffles toward him and releases a long sigh. “Thank god. You haven't remembered enough yet. Lay off the memory recall for awhile, alright?”

He glares at her. “You said I held immunity.”

She shrugs. “You aren't in the sub-c, are you?”

“This is...poppycock. Yes. This is—I'm done here, do you

understand?" He shakes his head, walking away, but there's nowhere to go. Shaking his head again, he curses. "I must not tell Evelyn of this nightmare. It will become her favorite subject."

"Evelyn?" she prompts, squinting at him.

"My wife," he snaps, impatient. Then, "Oh. My wife. I have a wife." He grins again, relieved to feel some of himself returning. "I must be recovering from whatever accident befell me if I'm remembering so much, so fast."

She worries her lip, turning away to examine the clearing field.

"You do not look so pleased."

"You're already complaining about REM and the common realm. You keep remembering so much and you'll have a real nightmare." She crosses her arms, glaring through her eyelashes. "Stop trying to remember."

He approaches her, leaving an inch between them. "Nevermind what Jax has ordered of you or what you think is best for me. I'm not your captive and I will not obey either of you. I will recover my memories, despite any efforts to impede me. Do I make myself clear?"

She exhales a sharp breath through her nose, glowering at him. "It will kill you. If you fight too hard for your memories, you will die."

"This. Is. A. Dream." Taking a few steps back from her, he lifts his hands. "And you're not real. Why am I allowing you to ruffle my feathers in the first place?"

He walks off. If he doesn't, the pointless arguing will continue. She follows behind him, but maintains her distance in light of his cross disposition. As they walk, he ruminates on her warnings. Even if he couldn't die here, the pain feels real enough. If he fights for his memories, then perhaps the white orb will return.

Yet he can't help but think of his wife. Her image blossoms in his mind without coaxing.

Tight sunset ringlets frame a porcelain face. Freckles cross her nose and pepper the space beneath her eyes. Big, round doe eyes, the color of coffee with a splash of cream.

She paints.

But when he tries to remember more, the throbbing in his temples return and he freezes in horror. A shiver runs through him and he earns a worried look from Rylann. He shakes his head at her, dismissing it and training his gaze on the field ahead.

This is all there can be for now, though he won't admit it to Rylann.

Tiny white sparks erupt all over the landscape. His breath catches as the twinkling lights multiply. They're motionless, hovering above the tall grasses like stationary fireworks.

"These are the gates to REM," says Rylann.

Relief washes over him. They aren't harbingers of suffering, then.

The gates crackle and pop, reminding him of damp wood in a fireplace. A loud, low hum rolls through the hills. Then, almost faster than he can register, the sparks become thin bolts stretching from ground to black sky.

"Ready for an adventure?" At his reservation, her mischievous smirk falls away. "We can stay here in the common realm until you feel comfortable. The gates come every ninety minutes."

He sizes up the small, elderly woman, and makes up his mind. "Nonsense. I need to retrieve my shoes."

"Oh, I knew there was something I was forgetting to tell you." She laughs when she notices his predicament, covering her mouth. "Thank goodness you don't sleep in the nude."

"Indeed," he chuckles, giving up on his anger. He eyes one of the lightning bolts and clears his throat. "Very well. Let us go."

"Make sure not to let go of me."

"Why?" he asks, suspicious.

"Because I'm going to be escorting you through the gate." She leads him over to the closest bolt. She gestures to it, almost touching the gate as she talks. "Gates can only take you someplace in REM you've already stepped foot. If you're brand new, then you'll pop in around the Cenaculo, the capital of REM."

"But there are no other humans awake here." He licks his lips. "You couldn't have done this before. Will this work? I may well wind up in a strange city after—"

"I wasn't always alone," she says softly, silencing him. "There used to be a few other human travelers, people who went to REM with me." With a sigh, she frowns at the ground. "They're all dead now, though. I'm the only human in REM."

His ears grow hot. "I apologize. I had no idea—"

"Don't worry about it. They were fighting in the war." She sounds more like the woman who burned him. "We had the same four lieutenants for a decade. We've dropped to two in the span of a week."

“War? There’s a war?” he presses, alarmed.

“The gates are closing.” Her eyes narrow at the flickering lightning bolt. She takes him by the wrist and says, “On my count, charge into the gate.”

“When you say ‘war,’ what exactly—?”

“One.” His heart beats too slow, too hard.

“Because if there is a war—”

“Two.”

A hand rests against his right shoulder blade, beckoning him.

“Rylann, I really must insist—” There’s the orange trail again.

Come to me, Julian, a soft male voice whispers.

“Three.” He jerks from her grip. She leaps into the gate and Julian charges after the winding orange light.

He must reach the end. He must reclaim what he’s lost. The warm light fills him with joy, permeating his growing fatigue. Whoever he is, he doesn’t exercise much at all. But no matter, because a true gift awaits at the end of—

Everything flashes white. A weightless sensation overtakes him, as though gravity ceases to exist.

In his haste, he runs straight into one of the gates.

Oh. And he’s lost it again. Thoroughly disappointed, bordering on bereft, he almost doesn’t notice when his surroundings change.

It’s as if he travels through a long tube made of tendons. Massive ropes of shining gold, thicker than his body, twists and weaves to form the walls of the gate. Streaking through them like bolts of lightning are blue, pulsing forks of energy.

The gate is like a living being, the walls expanding and contracting. It mesmerizes him, the way it behaves as if it draws breath.

It’s gone, the weight returning to his body. He stands in a sparsely furnished bedroom, face to face with a centaur.

CAN’T GET ENOUGH? GET YOUR COPY
FIRST: [ADD YOUR NAME TO THE
PREORDER NOTIFICATION LIST TODAY!](#)