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Republic of Mortals

Lex Legis trilogy



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INTRODUCTION

In a play of light and shadows, there stood five children forming an irregular circle under the weight of time, of which they had very little. The sun was just setting behind the oak trees of their secluded meadow, far enough that the flags adorning the high towers of the Palace were barely visible, but close enough for the children to break the circle and run if their presence became too noticeable. Still, their carefully outlined plan did not rely solely on luck, because among the towers of the Palace circled several chirping swallows that only seemed to be normal birds. Their true nature lay in the spell of a little girl, who had turned the sweet songbirds into keen guardians. Should anyone notice the children's absence from the yearly festivities, the swallows would notify her, and they would soon appear, excusing themselves with a spirited game of hide-and-seek that just happened to spread out to the area outside the Palace. A nervous murmur filled the small space among them as much as the guardian swallows duly filled the space around the tall towers.

"You start!" said a small, golden-haired boy, nudging his friend.

"Do I have to start?" piped in a girl with thick blonde braids and flushed cheeks, clearly irritated by wasting the time they had stolen.

"I'll do it," said the boy next to her, dressed in the festive colours of the Palace, visibly standing apart from the others in their simple, modest robes.

"No, Blaise, not you," came a gentle reply from a girl with long brown hair.

The boy named Blaise opened his mouth wide to protest, but was interrupted by a black-haired boy saying:

“Carmen is right, Blaise. You're Rector's blood.”

Now evidently upset, Blaise tore the decorative royal medallions from his chest and threw them to the ground. Under the shocked gazes of his friends, he lashed out:

“We cannot make differences between us, not now! How do you expect the bonding spell to succeed if we are not completely connected? *And what makes your lives less valuable than mine??!*”

The blonde girl reacted first by nodding her head.

“You're right, Blaise. Besides, you were the one who came up with the bonding spell.”

“Thank you, Onoria,” replied a slightly calmer Blaise, his face streaked with red spots of anger that had caught him for an instant. Although it was atypical for his benign nature, Blaise could not help himself; this was simply too great a moment to squander.

The rest of the group didn't speak up. With hopeful eyes, Blaise looked at the girl whose long brown hair reached her waist.

“Carmen?”

She looked at him under the lashes of her big eyes and softly said:

“I agree. You could start.”

Blaise thanked her, then turned to face the two boys, whose tense looks revealed the obvious uncertainty of this difficult conversation.

“Dexter?”

The golden-haired boy silently nodded his agreement. Blaise thanked him as well, then looked at the boy next to him, though he was already certain of the group's decision, since the majority had prevailed.

“Theo?”

Theodorus' black hair was covering his eyes even more than usual now that the situation required his courage, as if protecting him from the words that were about to fill this uncertain, juvenile circle. He allowed the silence to linger another moment, breathed in deeply, and finally expressed his opinion.

“I disagree.”

Surprised looks shot at his pale face, a stark contrast to his unruly black hair. Theodorus took a step toward the stunned Blaise, stood right before him, and looked straight into his eyes.

“You are too valuable to us, Blaise. You're the Rector's son. Imagine how many good deeds *you* can do that we can't. If... if something happens to us... Imagine how many things *you* can change in the Republic, elsewhere as well.”

Blaise was now thoroughly confused and dismayed by Theo's argument which was, slowly but surely, finding a sensible place in his head though his heart protested bitterly. He turned to the others to regain support, but found none. Theo's words seemed to have found a way to their deepest thoughts, and now they were looking at him apologetically, for Theo was indeed right. Blaise's life really was worth more. With noble blood, he had a background he could rely on – at all times, for any reason – and they were just plain, newly awoken sorcerers. Not only was their magical blood devoid of even a drop of noble ancestry, but they were orphans as well – this carried a certain stigma even in the harmonious world such as theirs, where sorcerers and commoners lived as brothers. Disbelief pressed hard on Blaise, making him question his self-worth and purpose. Finally, he plucked up some courage and softly voiced his inner concerns.

“What good is being the Rector's son if I cannot fulfil my purpose with a noble gesture?”

Before the group managed to exchange looks, Carmen had already approached her friend.

“This isn't the noble gesture you want, Blaise. This is our attempt to be connected by unbreakable bonds forever. Theo is right – in case something goes wrong if you start the spell, imagine how many *real* noble deeds you could be missing in life!”

Blaise realised she was right, but handing over such a frightening and unknown thing to someone else was difficult – not only because he felt compelled to justify his heritage, but also because he wanted to protect his friends.

“Maybe this wasn't the best of ideas...” he began, but Onoria's hand was already waving him away.

“Everything will be fine,” she silenced him firmly, “but *you* mustn't start.”

“I'll do it,” said Theodorus, back in his spot, “and we won't talk of it any more.”

The power growing in the boy who, like the others, had possessed the gift of magic for a few short years, was immeasurable but perfectly proportional to the amount of carelessness required to get involved in something so dangerous. For inexperienced sorcerers, casting a new, untested, and certainly strong spell of bonding like this could mean getting hurt or even killed, but none of that mattered to this group of twelve-year-olds who had grown up together in incredibly unexpected circumstances. The Rector's son and a handful of poor orphans being as close as siblings from a very early age was truly an unusual occurrence.

Carmen watched the black-haired boy as if seeking a moment to lock eyes with him, but when Dexter too offered to start the spell, Theo firmly shook his head. He was relentless. Seeing no other choice, Blaise reluctantly nodded to Theo, whose courage he admired

from the bottom of his young soul. Although he still believed *he* should be the one to start the spell, more so because he had been the only one to (hopefully) prepare it successfully, he had to admit that this venture carried a considerable amount of danger. And, no matter how hard it was to accept, he was in a significantly better position than his best friends.

His turbulent thoughts were interrupted by Carmen, who swiftly stepped out of their already proper circle, wrapped her arms around Theodorus' neck and buried her face in his chest. Her sudden hug surprised all of them, but him most of all. With a mixture of emotions on his face, most prominent being shock and fascination, he stared at her brown locks that now rested entangled in his small fingers. With a look of complete daze, he closed his arms around her, then his eyes, moved by unexpected emotions.

Blaise exchanged a mild look with Dexter and Onoria. Carmen and Theodorus had always been showing small signs of affection toward each other. They were probably not aware of it, but there was a certain bond between the two, separating them from the group – not in a way which would require them to be alone, but which made them gravitate toward each other first and only then toward the rest of the group. At the end of each month when, almost as a rule, the bread and meat supplies in the Orphanage would be almost depleted, Carmen would share her part with Theo. Whenever she would be exhausted by working the fields, so much that she would stagger among the rows of ripe fruits, Theo would take over and finish her chores, urging her to take a nap in the shade of the trees. Although all five were strongly connected, some bonds grew stronger naturally, while some had to be further strengthened. That had been the reason for coming here.

Carmen withdrew to her spot, sniffled quietly, and smiled sheepishly at the group, as if apologising for her behaviour. Theodorus, on the other hand, seemed disoriented. Dexter cleared his throat and returned their attention to the reason for this lonely

meeting, so Blaise forcefully blinked a few times to return his own focus to the task at hand.

“Ready, Theo?” he asked softly.

Theodorus spent a couple more moments observing Carmen, who smiled at him valiantly, then shook his head, blinked, and finally nodded. In a single synchronised motion, they took each other's hands. Blaise cast one last doubting glance at Theo, but his friend was not about to buckle. His dark eyes were filled with determination and courage that hardly seemed to belong on a twelve-year-old face.

“*Una vita pro alia.*”

The words slipped from Theo's lips lightly and steadily. To his left, Carmen spoke the same words looking firmly into his eyes. The others echoed them, and when it was Blaise's turn to fill their circle with the words of the bonding spell one last time, his lips were dry and his eyes moist.

Their gazes wandered hastily from one to another, expecting the worse. They watched everything closely, even the slightest changes on their faces or in their breaths, but nothing seemed to happen, least of all something deadly. Blaise was just about to let go of his friends' hands and disappointingly admit to needing much more research and learning at the Palace, when Theodorus suddenly hissed in pain. Frightened eyes turned to his hands, their hearts filled with the unwanted fear that had been looming all along, but his reaction proved to be caused by surprise, not pain. Slowly and elegantly as a painter's strokes, a golden, swaying thread appeared around his hands. As lithe as a snake, it started wrapping itself around his wrists and fingers, flowing toward the others as it branched into smaller, curvier, and prettier threads. Carmen let out a spellbound sigh. The golden threads entwined themselves around their hands as a morning mist, both visible and invisible at once, both warm and cold, simply stunning. The children were smiling at each other with a special kindness; not only had the spell worked, but it

had clearly nestled deep within them in the form of a bond that would bind them for all time. They could simply *feel* they had succeeded.

"Now we are siblings," Carmen whispered. "Forever."

The rest of the group shared her thrill at having their greatest wish come true, and nothing in the world could separate them now. After a few moments of fascination and pure happiness as they watched the golden circle binding their hands, when the threads finally faded, the children embraced with a torrent of laughter. Happy, satisfied, and utterly excited for the time they had secured in each other's company, they ran with all haste toward the Rector's Palace, before the guardian swallows had a chance to issue a warning – no one had noticed the absence of the Rector's second son. Behind their running feet accompanied by cheerful shouts there remained traces of embers and charred grass, but only for an instant, before disappearing into nothingness, taking away all signs of a new, powerful spell.

In another world of another time where Oracles pulled the strings of past and future events, precisely this moment slipped between their fingers as the one that changed history. The words that the children had just spoken awaited them again in the not so distant future, and the moment had been so disruptive and painful that it deeply touched one of the Creators from the Venerable Halls and prompted her to get involved, but the children... they had no way of knowing the spell had indeed bound them, in life, but in forthcoming death as well.

CHAPTER 1

THE FAIREST SIXTEEN

Left, right. Left, right.

Vita had, in her relatively short human life (compared to celestial standards), realised that many aspects of humanity annoyed her profoundly. For instance, concentration. As an Oracle she had never needed it, all her powers had been self-sufficient and functioned fine. On the other hand, that precarious factor was crucial to humans; they seemed unable to even walk without it! Thus Vita herself struggled with that darn concentration, constantly shifting in and out of focus with which she tried to maintain a healthy balance. Getting acquainted with her human traits over time, she realised focusing on small things distracted her from the larger ones. Eerily larger. She had been utterly surprised by the realization that simple tasks, such as counting steps or deep breaths, helped calm the noise in her head. More so because that noise was no usual accumulation of stress as with normal people – it was noise from the *other* side. Still, Vita had learned to recognize moments that required her full attention, so, with plenty of grumbling, she had adapted as best she could. Her human form was not the only thing she observed to gain new insight; she did the same regarding the Venerable Halls, in order to gather any useful information. In vain. Her sisters allowed no leaks of information, and Vita had never felt more human than now, when she was almost completely helpless.

Left, right. Left, right.

The dale she travelled through changed its familiar landscapes with every mile she passed. Vita had walked those forests and glades many times before, but never in this 'fragile' form. She could only

hope that her appearance would still be recognisable and that she wouldn't provoke more than the necessary reactions. Disturbing nymphs was forbidden – a known and clear fact to people of all sorts and backgrounds – but fortunately Vita had not been human this *whole* time. Sometimes she truly wished she were an ordinary human, but then she would see the pain that human life brought along and would silence herself. Being a former Oracle who had woven people's fates was a greater burden now that she personally came to understand human suffering.

The air suddenly thickened. Vita could feel it clearly on her human skin which irritated her constantly. She especially shrank from all occasions that made her skin bristle, or that sent shivers down her spine, due to the immense discomfort they brought. Sometimes during those moments, crazed by the feeling, she would twitch as if burned. The mere thought of that awful feeling just made Vita's skin bristle, causing her to jump out of her own shoes and curse herself. Recognizing the meeting point precisely by the dense air and the unusual feel on her skin, Vita extended the palm of her right hand and said:

*"I evoke sisters,
sixteen Plitvic,
Large oldest,
youngest Little,
fourteen remain
Lakes."*

The air density seemed to increase, but, other than that, nothing else happened. Vita frowned, wondering what went wrong. The answer came to her at once, as clear as the words she should have uttered, and she slapped her forehead in frustration.

“Darned human speakings!”

Although the active immersion into human lives during the last few months had significantly improved her speech, she still let slip some mistakes that were tolerated by most, even loved, but not by the Plitvice sisters. She had to really try to repeat the words in a proper, correct manner.

*“I invoke the sisters,
sixteen Plitvice,
Large eldest,
youngest Little,
fourteen remain
Lakes.”*

She moaned loudly from the anguish that came over her and wiped the sweat off her brow. This time the air density changed significantly, and everything around her started rippling and spinning in a vortex of colours accompanied by the sound of waterfalls. As was proper, Vita closed her eyes before the arrival of the sisters and opened them only when she could clearly feel their presence. Around her, seemingly out of nowhere, appeared sixteen fairest of the fair. The sisters formed a circle around their guest, as bright as the sun in high noon – partially owing to their gleaming golden hair, partially owing to dresses as white as if made of soft clouds. As usual, Vita was overcome by pride to be in their dreamlike presence. They were one of the Oracles' most beautiful creations, a gathering of sisters woven of extreme rarities.

“Oracle? Is that you?”

The voice of the eldest sister, known by the name Large, called to Vita as a gentle chime and interrupted the daydreaming that inevitably came over everyone in their presence. All sounds around

them vanished; their stunning presence seemed to stop time itself.

“Just Vita.”

“We would like to be sure of it,” the eldest sister replied softly, tilting her lovely head to the side. “Perhaps many can invoke us, but only a few can name us.”

The sisters had undoubtedly heard of her expulsion from the Venerable Halls, but these times required a dose of suspicion and mistrust towards everyone. Vita bowed her head slightly as a sign of understanding. It saddened her that the act was made necessary by the ever-present caution due to the impending war, but it pleased her nonetheless to show them such respect, since others usually bowed to her.

“Greetings, Plitvice sisters: Proska, Sigina, Okruga, Bata, Virovka, Galovka, Mila, Gradina, Burga, Kozina, Milana, Gava, Kaluda, Novaka, Little, and Large.”

As she addressed them by name, Vita bowed her head to each and every one. Turning thus in place, she admired the seemingly identical sisters anew. The Plitvice were the most famous and most beautiful nymphs in these parts of the magical world, but not everyone could witness their surreal beauty. The way in which Vita had invoked them was not known to many, but through the ages there have been a few lucky ones who had met them by chance, even commoners. They exchanged experiences, stories, and legends of their brief encounters with the sisters, and soon, as grateful and humble as they were, they started bringing them gifts. Since they never learned to call forth or see the sisters when they wanted, the commoners would most often leave their gifts inside the lakes, not knowing that they were in fact placing them onto the nymphs' laps. With those gifts they had unsuspectingly helped to differentiate the Plitvice sisters. Each of them stood before Vita with a piece of human golden jewellery on a different part of their body – from Large who had a tiara on her head, to Little who wore jewellery around her

naked ankle. Vita was impressed with the human creations, as well as with their final function that no one had expected.

Obviously convinced of the identity of the unexpected guest, the eldest sister stepped toward her with open arms. Vita accepted the embrace, the strange human gesture she had learned to love.

"Oracle, we are honoured," Large said warmly. "To what do we owe the pleasure?"

"I need help," Vita said clearly, having flinched, as always, at her former name.

Large opened her eyes wide and turned to her sisters. Although the move required minimal motion, it was accompanied by such grace and elegance that anyone with a sane mind would fall insanely in love.

"Oracle, we know a second war is brewing," she said quietly, returning her gaze to Vita. "My sisters and I have heard murmurs..."

She hung her head under the weight of the unspoken. Vita began to panic; another human emotion with which she had trouble dealing. Nymphs were extremely connected to nature, and their help meant a great deal. But, considering the past, no one could blame them for making a different decision.

"We will fight beside you."

Instant relief came over Vita, as well as gratitude for the lovely emotion that suppressed the previous one.

"However, we cannot guarantee for the other nymphs. Our sisters, cousins, many of them..."

She found it too difficult to continue. She bowed her fair head, struggling to utter what she had intended, as if speaking of it would reopen old wounds and hurt everyone present. Vita nodded, knowing very well it surely would have happened.

"We believe that, in these new bloodied times, there will be divisions again. Still, you must know, this time we will not ask any of our family to follow in our footsteps."

"We don't ask that of you," said Vita calmly. "You stand by us. Others we will personally ask. Let us carry that burdens."

Sister Large rested her hands on her chest and gratefully nodded, resembling a frail snowdrop barely protruding from the heavy coat of snow early in the spring.

"You can count on us, Oracle."

As Vita bowed deeply to each and every sister, they disappeared, one by one, seemingly taking along a piece of sunlight each time. Turning to head back the same way she had come, Vita passed the invisible border of dense air, accompanied by the returning sounds. She didn't doubt the Plitvice sisters, but times of war affected everyone differently; some would fly with a spear in hand although they may fall first, and some would, despite their great powers, hide in the depths of the safest dark. Vita cast a final glance over her shoulder. *We must be happy you always flies forward.*

Sighing profoundly, she started counting her steps toward her next destination, leaving behind the hidden deep forest filled with murmurs of the nymphs in their true form – the Plitvice Lakes.

