

OF DREAMS AND
DRAGONS

KARPOV KINRADE
Chapters 7 - 9

This is a rough draft subject to change.

Chapter 7

GHOST IN THE FOREST

I grab my pack, check to make sure it has all my supplies--water, power bars, a headlamp, change of socks, a GPS and my radio--and slip on a thick coat. I turn to Pat. "Stay here. Keep an eye on the kids. There's a patrol car outside for protection. I'm going to try to find Pike before he finds us."

Pat nods, and I wake Blake and show him the text.

We get to the staging area at the parking lot outside the park as others from the fire and police department show up to help. There's about twenty people total, which isn't a great head count but not our worst either.

It only takes a few minutes to get the basics. Teenage boy went hiking alone, never came home. This was his last known whereabouts. He's not answering his phone and the GPS tracker for the phone isn't working. We all take a map and a partner--Blake and I choose each other-- and head out.

It's a new moon, which means limited natural lighting. We both wear our headlamps to keep our hands free as we hike through the woods. It's late, dark, and the only sounds are the crunching of twigs under our feet and the calls of creatures in the night.

I explain to Blake what I learned from Pat and tell him my plan. Then I show him what else I brought in my pack.

"A gun? Are you nuts?"

Blake doesn't like guns.

"I'm going to find this guy. Before he takes my baby." Just the thought of losing Kara kills me inside.

Blake shakes his head. "That's insane. We need to let the police handle this."

"Like Dean?" I ask, knowing his answer.

"Well, not like Dean, but someone else in the department surely."

"Blake, something weird is going on. I can't explain it, and even when I do you don't seem to understand, but this isn't a normal guy we're talking about. I can't risk leaving this in someone else's hands alone. I'm running out of time. I only have a few hours before Pike said he'd return."

I stumble over a rock, catching myself against a tree. My limbs are too tired to be hiking tonight--I've already dealt with a head injury today, a fire call, and loss of consciousness due to smoke inhalation. I should be resting, letting my lungs and body recover. Instead, I'm trekking through a dark hiking trail, hoping the kid we're looking for is okay, and hoping I can catch Pike before he comes to collect my baby.

We've been walking for an hour when Blake stops, takes a swig of water, and excuses himself to find a tree to relieve himself.

I look down at the picture of the missing kid on my phone. Mat Parson. He's thirteen with a shock of bright red hair and a face full of freckles. He's from the same school as Kyle, and I think I may have seen them hanging out together. I try not to imagine what my little brother will have to go through if his friend is never found. I try to look for--

A twig snaps nearby.

I turn to the right, pointing my headlamp at the source of the sound. Nothing but trees and darkness. But... Wait. A sound. Whispering.

"Blake? That you?"

I look around but don't see anyone, so I creep forward in the woods, following the whispers. "Blake? Hello?"

It occurs to me it could be the boy we're looking for, and I yell his name as well. Maybe he's hurt and calling for help, but his voice is too weak to talk. I walk faster, suddenly certain he's close by. I pull out my gun, just in case I find Pike, and hold it securely as I pick up my pace.

The cold metal feels foreign in my hands. I've trained at a shooting range and have a license to carry a concealed weapon--not uncommon in the fire department--but I've never actually pointed a gun at another human. I hope I don't have to pull the trigger tonight, but I will if it means saving a life.

The path I'm on divides into two, and I travel right, where a dried-up stream used to live before the draughts and heat wave. Another whisper. A bitter wind.

I step onto a short cliff overlooking a clearing. I scan the area, my headlamp illuminating the broken trees and large rocks and--

There. Something

A body.

A boy.

Splayed unnaturally over a fallen tree. Limbs at odd angles. Someone stands over him. A man dressed in black.

I raise my gun.

And then I see it.

The wind catches his red scarf.

"Kaden?"

"Step away from the boy!" I yell, pointing my gun at him.

Kaden turns towards me, his blue eyes shining against the beam of my headlamp. "I didn't harm him," he says instantly, bending down over the body.

"Don't move!" My arms are steady, but my heart pounds against my rib cage. Sweat beads down my forehead. I unlatch the security on the gun and slow my breathing.

"Please," he says, his voice urgent. "I must finish cleansing the body."

"Don't move, or I will shoot!" My mind is frantic, trying to piece together what is going on. Pike isn't here. Kaden is. Is Kaden working with Pike? Is Pike at my house already?

"If I don't finish what I started, we will all be in danger," he says.

What is he even talking about? "Don't touch him!" I walk down the cliff, closing the distance between us. This is even harder than I thought; I try to push the thoughts away, but I can't stop my mind from recoiling at the thought of

hurting another person. A person I know. A person I was actually attracted to. I went into my career to save people, not kill them.

Kaden pulls back from the body and lifts his gloved hands in the air. "I know what this looks like, but you have to trust me. The boy's body must be purified, otherwise--"

A strong wind hits us. A stray lock of hair comes loose from my ponytail and flies around my face. His scarf flails about, but... it doesn't drift in the same direction as the wind. It's moving against it, to the west. This makes no sense. My eyes follow the direction his scarf is blowing and... I see it. In the woods.

A pair of eyes wreathed in flame.

Nostrils filled with smoke.

A razor sharp mouth.

It's just like my vision in the fire. But I was hallucinating. A side effect from lack of oxygen.

Am I hallucinating again? Am I more injured than I realized? Nothing about my life in the last twenty-four hours makes sense.

The creature glides out of the trees, its large red body half mist, half physical form. Its head is that of a wolf, its body that of a serpent.

I blink, expecting it to disappear.

It doesn't. It draws near instead.

My gun wavers in my hand. I shouldn't be holding a weapon if I can't even decipher fantasy from reality. What if I shoot someone innocent? What if none of this is happening and I'm just losing my mind?

My mum never said much about my father, but she did say he wasn't right in the head before his death. What if I inherited something from him? What if I'm

totally losing it? Where's Blake? I need him right now. I need him to tell me what's real and what's not. Because I don't even know anymore.

And then Kaden speaks, in a voice so low, I almost don't hear him. And I realize he's not looking at me anymore. He's looking in the direction of the monster. He sees it too.

"Run," he says. "Run now!"

I hear his words, but they become jumbled in my mind. I can't think. Can't move. I'm paralyzed by self-doubt.

And then the creature lunges forward.

And I act on animal instinct.

I fire my gun, aiming directly for the vision before me.

But the bullets do nothing. They fly through the creature as if it were a ghost. A spirit. As if it didn't exist at all. But this all feels entirely too real. And I don't think I'm imagining the body of the boy, or Kaden standing before me.

I brace for death, hoping that when it comes I'll wake up and realize this was all a nightmare.

Death doesn't come. I don't wake.

Instead, the creature passes me by. And heads straight for Mat Parson.

Kaden yells something I don't understand and jumps in front of the boy's body, but the spirit whips around him.

And slams into the corpse.

The creature vanishes, and for a moment, everything turns quiet. Even the wind dies down to nothing, the air so still it's stifling.

Then the boy gasps for breath. His chest rises and falls. Impossible.

I rush forward to help.

"Stop!" yells Kaden.

I follow his gaze.

And I see the boy's eyes. I see them roll back into his head until only the whites show. I watch as his hands and legs crack and move at odd angles, rearranging themselves to work again.

"It's too late," Kaden says. "It possessed him." He pulls something from his coat.

Something metal that glints against the light of my headlamp.

It takes my mind a moment to process what I see. A sword. The largest sword I've ever seen. I wonder how he even manages to hold it. The hilt is simple, wrapped in leather strips, made for large hands. The blade is bare, no markings or embellishments, the steel black as night.

"I'll hold it off," Kaden says, positioning himself between me and the moving corpse. "It will follow you, Sky. It will follow you until it kills you. Run. Run now!"

The boy stands, but his movements are awkward, as if someone wears him like an ill-fitting outfit. His eyes turn red as if they burn with flame. The boy roars, but the sound he makes is not human. It is guttural and monstrous, and it makes every instinct in me terrified. His young teen muscles expand, getting larger and larger, growing until his skin rips open, revealing raw, unnatural flesh. His jaw comes unhinged, then tears his face apart as a new head explodes from his throat, its giant mouth full of layers of sharp teeth, its tiny eyes at the top of its head like a deep sea fish. Its grown twice the size of any man I've ever known. It lashes out with a giant pink tongue forked like a snake's. Trying to grab something. Trying to kill something.

My body takes over as my brain freezes.

And I run like I've never ran before.

Chapter 8

BROKEN ONE

Lungs burning.

Feet pounding.

Heart racing.

I push my body to the limit.

I'm not fast enough.

The serpent-like tongue lashes out, grabbing at my ankle, pulling me to my knees.

Steel flashes through the air and Kaden cuts the tongue in half, freeing me from its clutches, but the severed part lives on. It jumps and wiggles and tries to wrap itself around my leg.

I kick it away and stand up, forcing myself to keep running.

Through the darkness I run, over stone and bush and underbrush, zigzagging through trees, twigs snapping underfoot, my body covered in cold sweat, the world around me a blur of blacks and grays.

Behind me, the creature cries out in pain from the blow Kaden dealt. The sound is like a dying deer, a blend of child and animal and fear and pain, and it chills my soul.

I have no idea where I'm going--the map I committed to memory long forgotten--but I know I'll reach the end of the woods soon. Will that mean safety?

Or will I be leading this monster towards a populated area, putting more people at risk?

I make a split-second decision and change directions, knowing I'm heading deeper into the woods, but away from anyone else who might be harmed. This new path is less traveled and the terrain more wild. I trip on the root of a tree and stumble. Something inside me snaps as I fall forward and pain shoots through my body. I bite my tongue until it bleeds, and tears well in my eyes as I cradle my right foot.

Despite the pain, I force myself to stand. My foot can barely handle my weight, likely broken somewhere. I look around, trying to figure out what to do next, and I see the creature and Kaden behind me.

The beast strikes with claws, a savage flurry of destruction, no pattern to its assault. And yet, Kaden evades each attack. He's fast, unnaturally so, but something about his movement is wrong. His left side is more agile than his right. His shoulder is stiff. Was he injured? Did the beast wound him?

Kaden told me to run. He said he had to purify the body. Did he know this would happen? That this monstrous thing would take the boy's corpse for itself?

If he knew... if he's here to help, then he wasn't the one who killed Mat Parson. And if Kaden is innocent, and he's in danger... I need to help him.

The creature appears more corporeal than before. Less smoke, more mass. I can use that to my advantage. I raise my gun and aim, hoping to get a good shot, but Kaden's too close. He's blocking my line of vision. I need a different angle.

I circle around the two of them, limping through the pain in my ankle, as I ignore my survival instincts. I've grown used to fighting my flight instincts as a firefighter. We run into the kind of danger most normal people flee from.

And so I do the same now. I take position against a tree--where I can remove all pressure from my foot, and I raise my gun and aim, my line of sight clear, my finger on the trigger.

The creature turns towards me, as if it knows my thoughts. My intentions. And it charges.

I fire as many bullets as I can.

Some of them strike true, taking the creature in the arm, the chest, the head.

Dark black blood splatters into the air. But the creature does not slow. It fills the night sky with unnatural sounds of agony, but it does not pause. It does not show any other sign that it feels pain in the least.

It closes the distance between us so quickly, I barely have time to think. To move. To react.

Kaden lands at my side, as if he flew or leaped to reach me. How he got here before the beast, I have no idea.

He pulls me into his arms, and he jumps.

We fly into the air, higher than many of the trees around us, moving so quickly the wind whips at my face, forcing my eyes closed. My stomach lurches at the change in motion, and I cling to Kaden for my life.

We seem to hover forever, and then we land.

The impact reverberates throughout my entire body, rattling my bones, shaking my vision.

Kaden doesn't slow at all. He carries me as if I weigh nothing, navigating through trees and rocky terrain, his boots barely touching the ground.

The beast gives chase, filled with a bloodlust that seems unstoppable. What remains of its tongue lashes out, cutting into the flesh of my arm, my blood

mixing with its own, creating a crimson mist around us. I hold in my cries of pain, knowing I dare not distract Kaden right now; He is the only thing keeping either of us alive.

I hold my trembling hand over Kaden's shoulder and fire more shots into the night. Whether my bullets make contact or not I cannot tell, but the beast is unfazed regardless. I need to find a weak spot, something that will stop it in its tracks.

The eyes. I need to hit the eyes.

I take aim, steadying my hold with both hands, as Kaden jostles us over rocky terrain.

My bullet errs to the right

The creature gains on us.

My next shot is too far left.

The creature continues gaining on us.

I close my eyes and slow my breathing. I remember my mother's words as she would guide me in meditation, as she helped me control my heart rate. "The physical form is controlled by the mind and the mind is controlled by the spirit. Center yourself in your truth, Sky. Center yourself in your truth, and you control all things."

I steady my breath, heed her words, and fire.

The beast recoils, clutching at its head with its monstrous hands. One of its eyes runs red with blood.

We begin to pull away, but the creature leaps forward, one eyeball dangling from its socket. It almost lands atop us.

Then Kaden drops, sliding through a stretch of mud, me still in his arms. We propel into darkness, and I realize we are passing under a bridge. Kaden moves one of his arms, gripping me with the other, and reaches into his jacket. He tosses something to the ground... a golden coin covered in symbols I can't decipher. It hits the ground at the edge of the bridge, and a wall of golden smoke fills the space between us and the monster.

The beast smashes into the smoke, then jumps back as if electrocuted, letting out a wail of pain and anger as the wall bursts with white light. Moving quickly, Kaden tosses another coin at the other side of the bridge. The beast leaps over us, searching for an opening, but it's too late. It hits the second wall and lightning flashes in the golden smoke.

Kaden falls back against a wooden pillar under the bridge. His breath is heavy and his body is covered in sweat. And then... he laughs. "Thought we were dead."

I slide out of his arms and sit down in the mud, keeping weight off my right foot. "What is that thing?" I whisper.

"A Fenrial Spirit," he says. "A corrupted one."

"A spirit... "

He looks at me, his blue eyes piercing. "It wants you. Your body, to be more exact."

My eyes widen. "What? Why?"

Kaden sucks in a breath, and his body calms as he replies. "There are people... people like you who draw spirits to them. You're like a conduit. You're not an empty shell, but you have an opening--a crack in your spirit. And your power, it leaks out, attracting them."

"What are you talking about?" Spirits, conduits, empty shells... My mind is spinning and I'm trying to grab hold of something that makes sense, but nothing does. Not the beast. Not the golden walls of smoke. Not the powers Pike displayed when I tried to use my phone or describe his appearance.

Kaden continues, his voice calm. "Spirits can't affect the physical world by themselves. They need a body. But they can't take one already occupied. They need one that's empty. They need someone dead."

"Like Mat," I say, things begin to click in my mind.

"Yes." He holds my gaze, his blue eyes pleading with me to believe him. "I swear to you, Sky, I found him already dead. I think he stumbled down the cavern and fell on the broken tree. One of the branches tore through his gut. He was stuck there, on the tree, bleeding out until he died."

I can't imagine his pain. His agony. His helplessness, as he tried to call for help. As his words were whisked away by an uncaring wind. As his life bled out of him. He must have been terrified. So alone. What were his last thoughts? Were they of fear? Of sadness? My heart breaks for the boy who died alone, and bile rises in my throat. I turn away, emptying my gut into the mud.

When I finish vomiting, Kaden continues. "Usually, bodies stay dead," he says. "But I knew Spirits were in the area. So I sought the boy out. I tried to purify his body before it could be possessed, but, well, you showed, and you know the rest."

"Purify? How?"

"With this," he says, pulling another coin out of his coat, this one silver, the symbols on it just as strange but different. "This is a talisman," Kaden says, shuffling the coin across his knuckles. "This one purifies a body to protect it from

corruption. The ones I threw earlier form barriers against unwanted spirits. They don't last forever, though."

He pushes himself off the pillar and hisses in pain, falling back down.

"You're injured!" I limp towards him. "Let me see." I have enough medic training to know what to look for, how to handle it.

He nods and pulls off his coat to reveal his shoulder. The cloth from his shirt is burned through, and his flesh is a seared red blister. "It's from earlier. Nothing I can't take."

"This is a third degree burn," I say. And then it hits me. "The fire! You were there, at the fire. You were the man I saw."

He rolls his shoulder, flinching so quickly I barely notice. "Yes," he says. "When the girl died amidst the smoke, I knew the Fenrial would come for her. I was too late, though. I fought the possessed body as best I could. Almost won, even. But... the house collapsed. I got out with the burn. The Fenrial got out too. They do that, leave a body if they must."

At mention of the girl, I am overwhelmed with fury. "If you were there, why didn't you save her? Why did you let the beast take her?" I expect him to strike back with words.

But his voice remains calm. "I didn't let her die. I wouldn't do that, but I have no way of finding those in danger." If anything, he sounds sad. Helpless. "I can only find those who are already dead. Or very near it. Only those who have opened themselves to the spirits."

"I see." Though I don't see at all. I don't understand any of this. I shake my head, looking around for anything I can use to help Kaden, but I don't have a med kit with me. I slump back down, shivering in the cold wind, pulling my jacket close.

Around us, the wall of gold holds strong, but I hear the beast, the Fenrial, behind it, pacing along the bridge. The night is dark, and getting even darker.

"You said the Spirits want my body. Why?" I ask.

"You are what some call a Broken One," Kaden says. "You draw spirits even though you live, because some part of your own spirit has fractured. It's not something you were born with, not usually. It manifests later, from trauma. Even then, it begins as a small crack in your spirit. A crack that grows over the years. Eventually, that crack spreads into a gaping hole that leaks enough of your own spirit to reveal a chasm that needs filled. Spirits are drawn to that empty space. And so are those like me."

Pieces of a convoluted and mysterious puzzle begin to fit together. A puzzle I didn't even realize I'd been trying to solve since I was a child. Ever since my mum gave me my leather cufflink. "That's the business you're in, isn't it? You're here because of me."

He nods without saying a word.

"So what? You protect me? And then you fix this crack in my spirit?"

He sighs. "Not exactly. I protect you, yes. But there is no way to fix the break. There is only a way to fill it."

"Fill it?"

He nods, a lock of dark hair falling into his eyes. "With another spirit."

"But... I thought the point was to not let spirits get those like me?" My eyes dart to the wailing beast and I shudder. Is that what he wants to do to me?

Seeing my fear and revulsion, he reaches for my hand. The contact shocks me. I'm so cold. So chilled to the bone and scared beyond anything I've ever felt. But

the feel of his hand, of his warmth, of the reassurance his touch provides, sends a calm wave through my body.

"There are two basic kinds of spirits, Sky," he says. "Those that are corrupted, like the one outside this wall. And those that are not. Corrupted spirits wish to cause chaos and destruction in the world. They seek out dead bodies, hoping to possess them. They seek out Broken Ones even more, hoping to overtake them. With dead bodies their time is limited. Decay and rot set in. If they can possess a Broken One, they can live forever. Over the years, because of the leak in your spirit, your body has grown closer to the spirit realm. And thus, you would make for a much more powerful vessel. If a Fenrial inhabited you, even I would have a hard time stopping it."

I squeeze his hand gently and glance at the fading barrier, the dissipating smoke. "Seems like you're having a hard time already," I say, my voice hopeless.

He nods. "Fair enough. But it's my shoulder. It's slowing me down. If I'd had a way to keep the spirit still for a moment, I could have ended it, but it's too fast. Well, too fast for me in this condition, at any rate."

I raise an eyebrow at that. "You seemed unnaturally quick. And the way you jumped, how is that even possible?"

He chuckles. "That's where the second kind of spirit comes in. The Pure Ones. They can bond with a Broken One, but they will not take over your will. At least, not if you keep them in line. Instead, they seek to establish a symbiotic bond with their host. That bond is the only way to make a Broken One whole again."

"So you have one of these spirits?" I ask. "A Pure One?"

He nods. "I do." He pauses, staring at the golden smoke, a thin wisp now. "How about I tell you more about this when we get out of here. That wall won't last forever."

"When? You're sure it's not if?" I eye the Fenrial prowling on the other side of the golden light.

"Come now," he says, grinning with such confidence I wonder about his sanity. "Pessimism never won any battles. I believe Eisenhower said that."

I shrug. "I wouldn't know. Public education around here isn't what it used to be."

He chuckles.

I can't help but smile too.

For a moment, we grin and snicker at our own foolishness, forgetting our impending doom. Perhaps that is why we laugh. To drown out our own despair.

Kaden's face grows dark. "I will admit, we aren't in the best of positions. The Talisman's weakening, and I don't have any more of their kind. In about two minutes the Fenrial will be upon us."

My heart races again at his words. We need a plan. "So these Pure Spirits. They give you powers? Abilities?"

"Yes," he says slowly. "If you know how to control them."

"They let you do things... things that should not be possible?"

He narrows his eyes at me. "Not what most consider possible, true."

I try to deny it, but the pieces have been coming together in my mind for some time, filling in so many gaps of my childhood. "I... I can help us," I say, holding out my arm.

He shakes his head, his eyes widening. "No. Before the barrier falls, we must run. I'm in no shape to fight off the Fenrial. It will consume you and kill me."

"No. It won't." I pull the leather cuff off my wrist, exposing the symbol beneath. The creature jerks its head towards me, its red eyes glowing.

"What are you doing?" Kaden asks, voice raised.

"I'm saving us," I say. And I hold my hand forward, revealing the secret my mother kept hidden for as long as I can remember. Adrenaline surges through me, and though I don't know what I'm doing, or how to channel what I've always known I have, I focus my thoughts and my feelings and my fears into one purpose. And as the golden hues that carved out the smoke walls fade, I walk forward towards the beast. My body convulses.

And I change into my true form.

Chapter 9

TWIN SPIRIT

Ever since I can remember, I've worn the leather band around my left wrist. If I ever took it off, my mother would scold me. If Pat ever saw me without it, he would fly into a rage that often ended in bruises. But in my most private of moments, I studied the mark on my skin that the band hid. The mark that made me different. The mark that made me move from one place to another in a blink, made water boil or freeze around me. The mark that made me powerful.

The mark that made me dangerous.

I don't know why the band is special. But I finally understand what my mark means.

Spirits are real.

And one lives within me.

A white glow explodes from the symbol on my wrist, consuming my body. My skin turns ivory, my hair turns silver and whips around my head in the wind. I feel lighter on my feet, as if I'm barely touching the ground. All the pain in my body is replaced by a euphoric feeling of endless power.

With the barrier down, we are vulnerable, but the Fenrial sees me glowing in the darkness of night, and it jumps back, hissing, as if realizing I'm not the host it was hoping for. I'm not a Broken One. I already have spirit. Now it's time to see what I can do with it.

I whisper something, then. Words I do not understand, but which feel part of my very soul. And the light from my body pushes outward, taking shape before me. Claws. Wings. Scales. Eyes of silver, glowing, like me. My spirit, in its own form. A silver, winged serpent, ready to defend me. Ready to fight.

It crashes into the Fenrial, biting down on the monster's neck and knocking it to the ground, pinning it with sharp claws.

Kaden rushes forward, leaping past me, and impales his sword into the Fenrial's neck. There is a bone crunching sound as Kaden saws through the creature's neck, cleaving off its head. It rolls away from us, with eyes still moving, tongue still lashing out. But then, as if realizing it's no longer connected to its body, it gives one last gasp and falls still. Its headless body squirms and shakes, the muscle and skin melting away, burning like a pile of steaming sludge, until only the boy's body remains, fully intact, and just as fully dead.

Kaden pulls two silver coins from his coat and lays one on each of the boy's eyes, then whispers words in another language.

"Alar argaris." A hissing sound rises from the body, then it goes quiet and Kaden sighs. "It is done. The spirit is purified. We will not see the corrupted Fenrial again."

The silver serpent that saved us vanishes, and the glowing of my skin fades to my normal cream. My hair darkens to its ordinary brown, and I fall forward, exhausted, and land on my knees on the cool earth.

Kaden kneels next to me, his eyes studying me. "You're a Twin Spirit. But how?"

I lean back onto my feet to face him, and for the first time I realize my ankle no longer hurts. "I don't know," I say. "Ever since I was little, I knew something

was different about me. But I never knew what, not until you told me about the spirits. Not until you showed me what you could do. I knew, somehow, I could do the same thing."

"Not the same. Not yet. Not without practice." He frowns. "This is strange. I could sense strength in you, but it was barely a sliver. The sign of a Broken One. And yet now I can clearly see the spirit within you. A Dracus, or Dragon, in your tongue."

"A... dragon?"

"It is said, all spirits were once living creatures. That Fenrial once hunted in the northern mountains. That dragons... well, dragons are another matter. You will see, in time." He pauses, and picks up the wrist band I wear. "I wonder... "

He hands it to me and I put it back on, a reflex so ingrained in me I don't even think about it.

Kaden nods, as if I've just answered a question. "I see. It appears this leather cuff keeps your spirit hidden, but not completely. It's leaking out some of your power, making you look to others like a Broken One."

"Do you have a mark like mine?" I ask.

He rolls up his sleeve, revealing a black horned serpent caged within a circle of flame. "It is the seal that makes a Broken One whole again," he says. "It's what makes one Arayel, or a Twin Spirit. Of the two worlds. That of the seen and the unseen." He pauses. "In simpler terms, it means that once you bear the mark, you are of the physical and the spiritual. Both together. At once. Never apart."

That doesn't really make it sound much simpler. It sounds unreal. Impossible. Fantastical. And for a moment I wonder if this is all a dream... a terrible game played by my imagination. But then I look at the boy, dead so young, a tool for the

Fenrial to get to me, and my eyes burn with guilt and grief. "Tell me truthfully," I say through a thick throat. "Did he die because of me?"

Kaden frowns. "Corrupted spirits have little power in the physical realm without a body. But the more ancient ones do have some sway. Enough to make a log roll out of a fireplace. Or to make a boy trip in the woods."

The tears I've been holding in are released, and I bury my face in my hands and cry. I'm the reason that girl died in the fire. The reason this boy bled out in the woods.

Kaden scoots closer to me, putting his arm around my shoulders. "You did what you could. More than I expected," he says softly. "You knew nothing of this world, of corrupted spirits, or the true nature of your mark. Their deaths are not on you, they are on me."

I can hear the pain in his voice and I look into his eyes, into the heartache etched on his face. "It is my duty, the duty of the Ashlord, to protect those who need protecting. To defend them from the spirits who seek to take their life. And twice today I have failed."

He swipes at his eyes and as suddenly as his sorrow appeared, it is gone, replaced by a cold determination. "Thank you," he says, "for using your spirit to help stop the Fenrial. But you must not summon your dragon again. Not until you learn to control it. You were lucky that your mother knew how to bind your spirit. Most of us suffer a painful fate when first we discover our powers."

"Why must I keep it hidden? My spirit did as I willed it to. I wanted to stop the Fenrial and I did." I've never felt that kind of power before. That kind of freedom. I realized in that moment as my spirit was unleashed that I've been living my whole life imprisoned by this wristband, a part of my soul chained by whatever my

mother did to bind my spirit and hide it. I know she did it to protect me, but I don't think she realized that in protecting me she was also killing me little by little. Sometimes a person needs a taste of freedom to realize they have never been free. After, they can never go back to being who they once were. They are forever changed by what could be.

"While it's true that your spirit did as your instincts commanded, it will not always be so. You were lucky. We were on a mountain, in the woods, with no one else who could have been caught in the collateral damage. But it will not always be so. You have power, Sky. I believe you are the second strongest untrained person I have ever met, and though that is a gift, it is a curse as well."

"I would never hurt anyone," I say. "Not unless I had to."

His eyes soften, but his voice is still firm. "I know that's not your intention, but intention is not enough. You need training." He holds his hand out to me. "Come with me, Sky. Let me train you. Let me show you how to control the spirit within. If you don't, it will only be a matter of time until you hurt the children you so desperately seek to protect."

I freeze, the blood draining out of my face. The children. "How do you know about my kids? I never mentioned them to you."

I back away from him, suddenly suspicious.

"Like you guessed," he says, dropping his hand, "I'm here because of you. At least, I am now. And it would have been foolish not to do research."

I feel violated. Lied to. And... panicked. How much does he know about me? About my kids?

This unease feels all too familiar, and I wonder... is he working with Pike? Was this a distraction to keep me away so Pike could go after Kara? I hoped to catch

him out here, but... Pike must have a spirit as well. That's how he did so many crazy things that made no sense. And if he does, the police will be no match for him. "I have to get home," I say, my mind focused only on my kids. "Now!"

"Sky, wait! I need to--"

His words hang in the wind, a distant echo, and I realize I'm no longer in the woods. I'm on a cold, dark sidewalk, one lone streetlamp flickering as if it's about to die at any moment. Across from me, shrouded in ominous shadows, is my house.

My vision spins, and I suck in the cold air as I attempt to still the dizziness threatening to overwhelm me. How did I get here? I was just with Kaden, on the mountain. This has happened in the past, where I find myself moving from one place to another in a blink, but never this far. Never to a place I couldn't have even walked. Something inside me is changing. I look down at my wrist, and see the leather cuff still in place. Either the power in me is growing, or whatever magic my mother gave me is fading.

I shake my head. I don't have time to figure this out right now. I check my phone to make sure I'm not late, then run to the police car parked across from my house. I gesture at the two officers inside. "We need to leave! Now! Help me get the kids out of the house and--"

I stop at the rolled down passenger window. The streetlight illuminates their faces. A red line across each of their necks, and a waterfall of blood spilling from their throats, their skin pale, their eyes open and glossy, unseeing. Dead.

My heart beats a frenzy against my chest and my gut twists as I dash across the street to my house. I can't be too late. I can't--

The front door is cracked open. I barge through it, into the living room. It's dark. Light from the street casts everything in a sickly pale hue.

From the kitchen I hear a whimpering. I take a step, then two, until I see a maddening sight.

Pat slumps on the cracked linoleum floor, his teeth shaking, his eyes bulging in fear and pain, his arm outstretched, pulled up so unnaturally his shoulder looks dislocated.

Pike stands over him, cloaked in black and wearing his hat. He holds Pat's arm against the kitchen table, and moves an object back and forth in the darkness. A long, thin saw, thin enough to hide in a cane. It grinds against Pat's arm, cutting through flesh and bone.

Pike looks up when I enter, a banal smile on his face. "Good evening Ms. Knightly. How good to see you again."