

OF DREAMS AND DRAGONS

Chapters 10-12

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Chapter 10

REAPER

"The screaming stopped five minutes ago," Pike says. His words are calm. Smooth. As if he exerts no effort hacking through a man's arm. "He is only tentatively hanging onto consciousness now."

"Let him go!" I roar, my voice tearing through the room. It shakes the glasses in the sink, but Pike doesn't even blink.

He looks back down at his handiwork. "In a moment. Once the deed is done. You see, Pat would not give up a child. He had forgotten about his bargain, it would seem. But pain can be a potent reminder." He pauses, his expression thoughtful, as if mulling over a complex math problem. "About halfway through the process, he finally

surrendered, finally owned up to his end of the deal. But, I'm afraid it would be wrong to stop cutting now. The reminder would feel unfinished, and I despise leaving things half-done."

He resumes sawing at Pat's arm, the bone crunching sound reverberating through the small space. My stepfather drools, his eyes half-closed, his body limp, his arm held up by the force of Pike and nothing more.

The sheer horror of it all dulls my mind for a moment, but then his words fall into me one by one, until they form a complete thought. He finally surrendered, Pike said. Finally owned up to his end of the deal. The deal to give up one of his kids. One of *my* kids.

There are no more rational options left to me. I cannot talk my way out of this. The police cannot help. I have but one choice. I reach for the leather cuff around my wrist, and I pull--

Pike throws up his hand, and a screech fills the air. It drums in my ears, pounding into my skull, into my blood and bones, pulsing in my heart, like a hammer beating down on me. I fall to my knees and try to cover my ears, but I can't move my arms. The sound is too loud, too encompassing. I can't reach over to pull off my wrist band. It's like trying to move the earth.

Pike smiles, completely unaffected by the sound ripping apart my insides. This is how it all ends, I'm convinced. This sound is the end of it all. But Pike, he continues his gruesome task of sawing Pat's hand off. "Do not worry, the children will not wake. I have made sure their night is restful."

My eyes widen and Pike chuckles. "Oh, they are not harmed, have no fear. Only sleeping." Pike looks down and smiles a satisfied smile. "Ah, there." He pulls the saw across Pat's arm once more and Pat falls to the ground, his body limp and draining of blood on the tattered linoleum floor. Pike holds the severed hand up triumphantly like a crimson trophy from a macabre game. He examines it briefly, a clinical expression on his face, then tosses it aside. "Now, it is time I had what I came for."

He wipes down his saw with a kitchen towel, then sheathes it back into the cane until it once again looks innocuous. He walks around the puddle of blood pooling around Pat, and passes me. "I am sorry you had to see that. It was not necessary. You should have stayed away. It was none of your concern after all."

None of my concern? *None of my concern!*

He heads upstairs, to the children's bedroom. To take one of my kids.

I will not let this happen. I will protect them with everything I am. I swore this to my mother. To myself. To them.

With all the strength I have left in me, I fight this force that's paralyzed me. Despite the crushing weight pinning me in place, I stand. Slowly. Painfully. It feels as if every bone in my body cracks from the effort. Every muscle tears at the strain. But I push through it.

And I manage to get to my feet. I grab the kitchen counter for support as I push my legs to move. One step. Then another. One more.

But I'm taking too long.

The stairs creek and Pike descends, a bundle of blankets in his arms.

No.

"What beautiful eyes she has," he whispers, smiling at me.

And then he leaves out the front door. And the screeching sound in my head is nothing compared to my own pain exploding from within.

My baby. He took my baby.

Kara!

I try to scream her name, but no words leave my mouth. Instead, there is the roar of a beast, the roar of my

spirit fighting to be free.

And with all I have, I charge outside, following him into the dark street. He's already down the road. "Give her back!" I yell, my voice carrying far, the power of my spirit strong.

He stops and turns to face me. He looks impressed despite himself. "You resisted my power. How interesting."

Branches snap to the left of me, and I see a man running towards us, from the park, a red scarf waving behind him.

Kaden.

But... how?

He notices me, then shifts his eyes to Pike, but I don't have time to think about him, or what he's doing here.

I grab my wrist band, knowing I must end this now.

"No!" yells Kaden. "He's not like us. You can't fight him."

It doesn't matter. Nothing he says matters. Because I have no choice. Even if he's right and this is a fool's hope, it's the only hope I have.

Pike raises his cane, and then... he changes.

His eyes turn red. His face sinks into itself, his lips pulling away to show teeth and gum and bone. His

cheeks become stretched tight over his skull. Even his clothing changes, his robes turning to torn rags, as if he is decomposing in front of me.

His walking stick extends, pulsing. The crystal orb at the top explodes into pieces and red steel pushes through, turning the cane into a scythe. He's using his spirit, changing like I did, but this seems different. Wrong.

His ragged robes reveal his pale skin. Crystals jut out from his chest, his arms, his shoulders. Red gems that look as if they've been impaled into his body.

They glow, and that glow spreads through his flesh, beneath his eyes, throughout his whole body.

I'm mesmerized by his transformation, by the power he wields over me. It all happens in a blink, a moment severed by a split consciousness as I register what's about to happen, unable to prevent it.

In an instant, Pike stands before me, moving through the air as if he's one with it.

I don't even feel his scythe as it slices upwards.

He missed, I think.

But even as I think this, I collapse to the ground, my body catching up much faster than my mind as my feet buckle under me. My jaw hits the hard concrete. My body rattles from the impact.

A spray of crimson rain splashes around me, and it takes another moment to realize it is my blood in the air.

Then the pain hits.

Brutally. Fully. Completely. I scream, and it is the sound a deer makes when it's being attacked by a mountain lion. The primal scream of prey helpless against the predator.

My eyes search my body for the source of all this blood, and I see it. He's cut through my Achilles tendons, cut them open. Cut through muscle and bone. One ankle barely remains attached to my body. The other is half torn off.

I reach for my foot, my mind frozen, my body in shock. And I scream again. My fingers are gone, my hands now just bloody stumps.

I'm done. I never stood a chance. He will take Kara, and she will be in the clutches of this monster, and I will have failed her. Failed my mum. Failed myself.

I know the killing blow is about to come.

And then I hear the crash of steel behind me. Kaden stands between me and Pike, his sword locked with the scythe.

"We meet again, Ashlord," Pike says with icy calm in his voice. "Let's see if you've learned anything since our

last encounter." He pulls away and strikes.

Kaden throws up his arm and something black and thick, like dark steel, grows over his hand, down to his elbow. The scythe hits the hardened skin and ricochets off.

I need to help, but I'm losing blood so fast. Pike doesn't need to strike me again to kill me, I can already feel myself dying. But I still have power in me. Power untapped. Unused. Raw and untrained, but still... it's all I have left.

Through agony, through the most pain I could have ever imagined, I lift my severed hand and hold my wrist to my mouth. With shaking teeth, I tear at the leather strap around my wrist, then pull it free, revealing the symbol beneath, unleashing my power.

Kaden said it could be dangerous, using my spirit form again, but I don't care. I need to save Kara.

My body fills with light, my skin turning ivory, my hair turning silver. I feel my muscles knitting back together, healing. No less painful than when they were severed, but some strength returns, and I roar with all the fierceness I've left buried in my soul. I roar with all the pain, all the fear, all the outrage of this unjust world. I roar as a body forms around me... scales, claws, wings, teeth. I see my spirit materialize, roaring along with my

rage. Sparks fill the air... lightning, not from the sky, I realize, but from me. From my spirit. It strikes out left and right, tearing apart the earth wherever it lands, ripping jagged wounds into anything it strikes. When it hits near Pike and Kaden, they break apart.

It is only then that I hear the voice. A whisper on the wind. "Sky... " Too late, I turn and see him. Kyle stands outside the house, his face drowsy. He looks at me with worry. With fear at the horrible sight before him.

And I see the lightning, now out of my control, unwieldy in its wildness, turn on him.

No. No! Noooo!

I will it to stop. To end.

But even I cannot contain what I have unleashed.

The lightning strikes towards Kyle. The darkness of night fills with unnatural light.

And then he is there.

Kaden.

He rushes forward, faster than I've ever seen him, and somehow... somehow he outruns the lightning. He grabs Kyle, pushing him out of the way just as the lightning strikes them both.

I hear Kyle scream in pain.

And Pike escapes into the shadows, holding Kara close

to him.

My baby.

Is gone.

I remember her baby breath on my face as I held her close to me.

The way her tiny hand squeezed my finger.

The weight of her against my chest at night while we slept, in between midnight feedings and diaper changes.

How exhausted I was those first few months, dealing with the loss of my mother, a newborn baby to care for, and Caleb and Kyle, in their own grief and anger.

The joy I felt at her first word, her first tooth, her first attempts at walking.

And I remember my very first words to her after our mother died. My promise to her. "I'll protect you."

Kara is mine.

And this bastard isn't getting my daughter.

I will not break that promise.

Kaden has Kyle.

I need to get to Pike before he's gone.

My feet and hands have healed themselves, and though pain still floats in me like an ever-present houseguest, I push myself to stand and force myself forward.

I run through the shadows, through the dark streets, as fast as I can. Faster than I have ever moved. So fast everything around me is a blur.

I don't have a weapon, but I think back to what Kaden did, how his body transformed. I concentrate, and my arm changes, my hand extending, turning into a crystal claw. I stare at it a moment, in awe of what I'm doing with these new powers, flexing and moving this weapon that I now wear as a second skin.

Pike won't get away.

I catch up to him, surprising both of us I think, as he turns to see me, shock in his eyes.

I strike, ready to kill him with my crystal claw, preparing myself to grab Kara before she falls, but Pike is too fast.

He slashes up with his scythe, a trail of fire in its wake.

It takes me at my legs, slashing my body in two.

The scythe cuts through my neck.

And everything goes black.

Chapter 11

SANCTUARY*

The shock of coming to consciousness is not one I can easily describe. I thrash about trying to feel if my whole body is still complete. It is. Was I having a nightmare? Am I dreaming now? The pain of my evisceration is still heavy in my mind, but as the millisecond pass, the memory flees, as if it was only an imagined thing. My eyes spring open, and I search around, looking for something familiar.

I am surrounded by a field of grass so green it looks painted. Of trees so lush and bark so thick and rich that it is more real than anything I've ever seen, so real it seems fake in its aliveness. Nothing in my life has ever held so much life, so much presence, so much *realness*. Flowers bloom around me in pinks and purples and reds and blues. A vibrant garden that renders me unable to imagine anything more beautiful or visceral. The fragrance of such flowers overwhelms my senses with honeysuckle and lavender and the scent of roses so pure my mind is spinning.

I can practically taste the smells carried on the warm breeze. I look down at my body and see it is healed, the blood gone, though the memory of being severed in pieces still lingers, like a bad odor. In the distance, a grassy

hill rises to the too-blue sky, and on it grows a silver tree, with branches and leaves that glisten their metallic beauty in a sun I don't see but still feel the warmth of.

In all of this beauty and wonder, in all this majesty, it takes me a moment to notice the slab of gray beside me. A grave stone, so like the one I visit regularly to commune with my dead mother. But this one does not bear the name of Laura Knightly. This one bears a name much more familiar.

My own.

And there are two, side by side. Both with my name.

"I'm sorry I couldn't stop him." The deep voice surprises me and my I turn to see a familiar face.

Kaden is standing, his silhouette against the light of the invisible sun.

"Am I... dead?" I ask. I can think of no other explanation for this discombobulated experience.

"Yes," he says, tilting his head, his black hair falling once again into his too-blue eyes. "And no." He walks forward, leaves crunching under his boots, until he stops before my headstone. "Remember what I said earlier? You are of two worlds now. The seen and the unseen. Even with your body gone, your spirit remains."

"What is this place?" I ask, though some part of me surely knows. I've been here before, after all, but my

memory eludes me.

"The spirit realm. Well, a part of it, at least. Your part. Your unique space, made by your mind alone." He looks around, smiling. "You have a gentle soul. A kind and protective one. You'd be surprised to see what others form for their realm. Some call it a sanctuary. Others a dream. It is a place Ashlords can go at will. And a place we all go in death."

I died, I think, though the memory is separate from me. I was sliced in half by Pike, even as he held my baby Kara in his hands. My heart breaks and I fall to my knees. She's gone. My baby is gone with that monster. The tears come, then. Unbidden but full of fury and rage. I dig my nails into the earth, squeezing my hands until they hurt. "It's over then, isn't it? Pike took her."

"He did." Kaden walks towards me and kneels before me, his hands on mine. "But there wasn't anything you could do. Anything either of us could do."

I look up into his eyes, the blue of them even brighter in this realm. "Are you even real? Or just some phantom conjured to make me feel better?" If I am dead, the thought occurred to me that this could all be in my mind. An endless cycle of pain and false comfort.

"I'm as real as you," he says, smiling with a hint of

his dimple showing. "With enough practice, Ashlords can visit each other's sanctuaries, at least while in close proximity, and while the sanctuary is being manifested. I saw you come here upon death, and so I followed. I thought you could use the guidance. You could try to get rid of me, of course. Each person is quite strong within their own sanctuary, and each visitor quite weaker."

I try to process all he says, but my mind is on one thing. "Is there a way back?" I ask. "A way back to the real world?" I have to find Kara. I have to save her, and protect Kyle and Caleb.

"Yes," he says, but he pauses, his voice hesitant. "In time, your body will recuperate, but it will be weak for days, at least for someone as untrained as you."

"How long?" There's an urgency to me, now. A hope. A burning need to set things right.

"A while here, but not long in the physical realm. Time moves differently here, you see. Slower. Every world, every dimension has its own way of gauging time, which is, after all, just an illusion. Time itself doesn't really exist. It's a construct we use to measure the unmeasurable."

I can't process everything he's saying, but one thing sticks out. I will recover. I will get my life back. "So..."

I can't be killed?"

He cocks his head, thinking. "If only it were so... All Ashlords can be killed. First, you must destroy their body. Then you enter their sanctuary and kill their spirit."

"But... if I'm stronger here, and you're weaker, how does that work?"

"You are stronger," he agrees, "which would make it difficult. But I can assure you, Pike would have no trouble destroying you."

My bravado fades at the mention of Pike. He bested me so quickly. So easily. And he took my baby. "Is he coming? Here?"

Kaden looks to the trees, a frown on his face. "I doubt it. He seems to be leaving us alive. I don't know why. Perhaps it's part of his code."

"What code?"

"Whatever code he abides by. Think about it, he must have one. You've seen how powerful he is, and yet he only takes children as part of a bargain. He could, theoretically, just steal them. No one would be able to stop him, and yet, he insists a contract be made and honored. That the debtor pay voluntarily, though how voluntarily is debatable given his methods. Still, it's

curious, isn't it?"

"Not exactly the word I'd use for it," I say, as I remember Pat's hand being cut off... as I remember how my cat looked in that bag, dead. And how Kara looked in that monster's hands as he killed me without remorse.

Kaden nods his head. "Of course. Apologies. You see, I've been hunting Pike for many years now, and yet his ways seem more and more mysterious."

"Hunting him? Is that why you were really here, for him?"

Kaden is still. Quiet. I hear only the sound of a gentle breeze blowing through the flowers as he contemplates his answer. "Yes. I was tracking him. But then I found you, a Broken One, or so I thought, and suddenly I had two matters to deal with. I did my best to keep you safe. Perhaps I focused on you too much." Kaden frowns and rubs his face with his hand. "Enough to let Pike get away."

"You could have stopped him?"

"No." He frowns. "I couldn't have stopped him. Not alone. If I find Pike, my orders are not to engage. Instead, I'm to call for reinforcements and attempt to set a trap."

"And yet, you helped me. Me and Kyle."

He folds his hand into a fist. "I wasn't about to stand there while he hurt you and the children," he says.

My voice softens and I reach for his hand, laying mine on top. "Thank you," I say, my mind spinning with all the new information. "You said you've been hunting, Pike, right? Then there must be a way to find him. A way to find Kara."

"Maybe, but tell me... even if you could catch Pike, how would you defeat him?"

"I..." I pause, stumped for a proper answer. I don't know how I'd stop him. I gave all I had, and Pike killed me in one blow, as if breaking a toy...

Kaden puts a hand on top of mine, squeezing gently, his eyes pleading with me. "Come with me," he says "to the place where Ashlords are trained, and I will teach you how to fight."

I hesitate, not sure how to react to this offer. "You said even you can't beat him."

"Not alone, but maybe we can together."

I can't leave, I can't leave the children... but I can't abandon Kara either...

"You know," says Kaden, his eyes intensely holding mine. "I take back what I said. You are the strongest untrained person I have ever met. And if you don't take

control of your abilities, it's only a matter of time before you hurt someone again. Maybe kill them."

"Kyle..." My hands fall away from Kaden's as I remember the lightning striking my brother. Kaden pushed him out of the way... risking himself. But Kyle didn't escape unscathed. The lightning hit his arm. Burning him. He yelled. Screamed in pain.

"I need to help him!" I pull myself up, and realize I feel no pain. My foot is truly healed, my body mended.

Kaden stands before me, holding his hand out in caution. "You will, soon. Your body has almost regenerated."

I look around at this beautiful world and realize how empty it feels without those I love. I nearly killed Kyle, but only because I unleashed whatever spirit is inside me. "I'll go back. I'll wear the leather band my mother gave me. I'll keep the kids safe."

"But for how long?" asks Kaden. "Your power keeps growing. Right now, you seem a Broken One while wearing the band. How long until you seem a full Ashlord?"

"What will you do," I ask, "if I don't join you?"

He holds my eyes with his, his face chiseled from stone. "Traditionally, I would have to kill you, but I won't do that. Not to you. However, consider what will

happen if you don't come with me. Even if by some miracle you don't lose control of your powers, it will only be a matter of time before another Ashlord finds you. And I promise, they will not be as considerate as I am."

I bite my lip and frown. "Maybe I'll fight them off."

"You wouldn't even know how to enter their sanctuary. You would never be able to kill them."

"So what then? My only choice is to die or go with you? To train somewhere to be this thing you call an Ashlord?"

"Put simply, yes. Come with me to the Cliff, and train to be an Ashlord. It's your only chance of saving Kara someday. Or don't, and wait here to die, hoping you don't hurt anyone before you do."

This choice seems like no choice at all, but I must consider everything. What will happen to Caleb and Kyle if I leave? How do I keep them safe then?

I look to the gravestone... a sick reminder of the lives that hang in the balance of my decisions. "If this is my sanctuary, why do I have two gravestones here?"

"It's not uncommon. Usually, they represent the number of times your physical body has died."

That takes a moment to sink in, and I step back, shocked. "So you mean, I've died twice?"

He shrugs, as if this is all very normal. "It appears so. The first time must have been when you were young, if you can't remember, that is. And if that's true... you must have had your spirit for a long time. Rare, but not impossible. Some people are born Broken Ones, you know. Kara was one. I suspect it's why Pike wanted her."

"Kara... how?" And then I remember her traumatic birth... how the effort ended up killing my mother.

"Of course," continues Kaden. "As I said before, a Broken One has not yet bonded with a spirit. Often doesn't until they reach adulthood. But there are a few exceptions. Like you, apparently."

"What does Pike want with her?" I ask. "What does Pike want with my baby?"

"I don't know," he says. "We've never found a child he's taken. But he always takes them alive. One would assume he's keeping them somewhere, but for what purpose, I do not know. You could help us find out. If you came with me."

He's good at the bait, I'll give him that. "All these things you don't know. How am I ever supposed to get Kara back, even with your help?"

"Just because something hasn't been done yet, doesn't mean it can't be done. I'm not one for giving up, and I

suspect you aren't either."

No... My entire life I've kept going, even when some days all I've wanted to do is give up... but I keep going... for them... for Kyle and Caleb and Kara. For my mum.

I sigh, knowing I have very little choice in this. "Tell me what I have to do. How do I get out of here?"

Kaden rolls a silver coin over his knuckles, the metal glinting in the sun. "It's a lot like waking up, actually. You just have to decide to do it."

I close my eyes and imagine this place a dream. I think of home... of days cuddled up on the couch with Caleb, Kara in my arms, Kyle sitting next to us on the floor as we watch an old movie together and eat buttered popcorn.

I open my eyes... and nothing has changed. The trees still sway around me, the gravestones cast their shadows.

I sigh, letting my head fall, and then I see my hand... breaking apart like burning paper... specks drifting off in the wind.

"Good," says Kaden, a smile in his voice. "You're learning. When you get back, remember my offer. I must leave soon, and if you wish to have a chance of saving Kara, you must leave with me."

I nod, and then my body turns to nothing.

Chapter 12

DEATH BE NOT PROUD*

I wake up on wet asphalt still covered with my blood. I check my body for severed parts, but it seems that once again I am whole. Everything is healed... physically at least. My heart is still bleeding out. My daughter is gone.

I call for her, but I know Pike took her somewhere I can't hope to reach on my own. Somewhere not of this world. And then I remember Kyle, and I jump up and run back to the house.

It's as if no time has passed. He is laying on the grass with Kaden, who stretches to help him up. There's an angry burn covering Kyle's right arm, and tears stream down his face. He clenches his jaw, groaning in pain. "It'll be okay," I tell him, as I lead him into the house. I examine the wound, and it's not as bad as I first thought. "We need to run it under cold water, then put clean bandages on it."

I tell Kaden where to get my first aid kit as I take care of Kyle. "Where's Caleb?" I ask, trying to distract him from the pain as the cold water wakes up all the nerves in his arm.

"Sleeping," he hisses through his teeth. "Sky, what happened?"

He glances at the blood in the kitchen. At Pat passed out and missing a hand.

"Don't look." I say. "Let's just take this a moment at a time. Keep your arm under water. I'm calling this in, okay?"

He nods and I step away and use my phone to first call 911, then Blake. I make a tourniquet for Pat's arm, to stem the blood flow. I find his hand and put it in one of the kids' lunch coolers with some ice, hoping it's not too late to save it. I have no idea how much time has passed through all this. There's too much to do and only one of me. I don't know how to help everyone. I don't know what to do about Kara. I'm lost.

Kaden returns in a flash with clean bandages, and I dress Kyle's wounds and lay him on the couch with an ice pack on his forehead and some pain pills to take the edge off. "Stay here. Don't move. Don't look at anything. We'll get through this."

He grunts, and I know when he's recovered from this he'll have questions, but for now, he's too out of it to notice that his baby sister is missing. That Pat could be dying. That I did die, but somehow didn't.

Death be not proud... the first line of an old sonnet by John Donne flits through my mind, and I can't recall why I know it—likely from an old English class, but the words settle into me, helping me process what I just went through in a way my own words can't. "*Die not, poore death, nor yet canst thou kill me.*" Death. The one thing you can't walk away from. And yet I did. I walked away from death. Death cannot kill me.

A strange euphoria stirs in me, and I'm torn between this indestructible power I feel, and the pain and grief of losing my child. What is happening? Nothing makes any sense in my mind, but somehow, I still have to operate in the human world, with human rules and human laws.

The paramedics arrive with the police. They triage my uncle and brother, getting them settled into the vans as Blake arrives.

"I have to go with Kyle," I tell the police, who have questions I can't answer. Kaden stays, surprising me. His hand rests on my back, his eyes unreadable. Blake looks to me, then him, his face full of confusion.

"What's happening, Sky? Who's he?" There are questions beneath those questions, and I know it. He knows it.

"I can't explain everything now. Will you go with Kyle? Keep him safe? Caleb is still sleeping."

He nods, then kisses my forehead. He side-eyes Kaden again, then leaves with Kyle in the ambulance.

The police question me and Kaden. He answers more than I do, and seems to know how to navigate human procedures. A missing person's report is filed. An ABP put out for a man matching Pike's description.

All the things that a cop in this town can do are done, and none of them will be enough. They're wasting their time, but I can't tell them that.

Dean, of course, is one of the officers taking my statement, and he can't seem to stop himself from glaring at Kaden. "Who are you again?" he asked, several times.

Each time Kaden patiently explained he was a 'good friend' of mine in from out of town. Surprisingly, he was able to provide proper identification and an address located in Swords, England. I raised an eyebrow at that, but said nothing.

Eventually they left, though I could tell Dean didn't want to leave me alone with Kaden. I would have laughed, if my heart hadn't been so broken.

And so here we are. The two of us. I've checked on Caleb at least six times, but he's sleeping peacefully. I woke him once to make sure he wasn't in a coma, and he moaned about being tired and fell back into bed. I kissed

his cool forehead and pulled the blankets more snugly around him, tucking him in for what would likely be the last time.

The sun is starting to rise, and I can't believe how long I've been awake, and how much has happened.

I died.

And now I live.

And Kara is gone.

My mother knew this would happen. Or at least, something like this. But how? Why? I need to know.

Kaden picks up his coat and slides it on and says he has to leave. "I have a few things to handle. But tonight, we must leave. Meet me at this address," he says, handing me a slip of paper with the name of a winery in Healdsburg. "By the fountain. I'll wait as long as I can. If you don't come, worse things could happen to you and your family."

"Are you threatening me?"

He frowns. "No. Some might say I've lost my edge around you, that I'm failing at my job by giving you an option. But I believe people are capable of making the right choice, and in so doing, they have more power on their path." He looks deeply into my eyes. "I hope I'm not wrong about you."

I watch him walk away, and I pull my sweater around me

as a sharp wind digs into my skin. "You're not," I whisper, though I know he can't hear. But still, his head tilts, and he looks back, just once, and just for a moment, and I wonder if maybe he did hear, because there's a small smile on his face, before he turns away once again.

I have no choice. Not really. My only chance of finding out what happened to Kara, is by going with Kaden. I will save her if I can, avenge her if I can't. And I will learn to control my powers.

If Kaden hadn't been here last night... I shudder to think what would have happened to Kyle. He would not have come back from the dead as easily as I.

I spend the next several hours scrubbing blood out of our floors, trying to make the house as comfortable as possible for my little family.

I try not to cry. I try not to think about what I'm about to do. About what I'm losing by making this choice.

Everything.

Everything I have ever cared for. Everything I have ever known.

When Blake and Kyle return from the hospital, I hug

them both, my eyes swollen from tears that refuse to stay contained.

Kyle pulls back eventually, his eyes tired, his face gaunt. "What was that... outside?" he asks. "I saw you... glowing." He whispers the last word as if scared I will tell him he's crazy, and he takes a strand of my brown hair in his fingers, looking at it, studying it, wondering—very likely—how he saw my hair turn silver.

"It's not something I can explain," I tell him.

He scowls. "Why? Because it's grown up stuff?"

I almost laugh at that, because what I wouldn't give for a normal grown up problem right now. "No, not at all," I say, looking him straight in the eyes. "It's because I don't understand it either. But once I do, I'll tell you everything, okay? Pinky promise."

His eyebrows shoot up in surprise, but he holds out his pinky and nods, and we lock fingers.

I ruffle his hair with affection. "It's time for bed now."

He's about to do as I say, but then I see his face change. I see him remember everything else that happened. "Where's Kara?"

I glance at Blake, who looks as gutted as I feel. "She's... " I don't know how to say this. "She's... gone,

Kyle."

"Gone where?" His eyes roam the house and fall on the blood stains I'm still struggling to get out of the floor.

"Did that man take her?"

I can't shield him from this. If it were Caleb, I could frame it differently. But Kyle is a teenager. He's not stupid. He knows what he saw. So I tell him as much of the truth as I can. "Yes, he did."

Kyle's eyes widen. "How do we get her back?"

"Not we. I." I let my words sink in, as I frame my next thought carefully. "I don't know where she is. But I swear to you, I will find her. One way or another, I will find her." I don't promise to bring her back, because I can't. I'm not sure I'll find her alive. But I will find out what happened to her. And I will make Pike pay for what he's done. That I promise.

Kyle nods. "So you're leaving?"

"I wish I didn't have to, but yes. I'm the only one who has a chance at this."

Kyle hugs me again, harder. When he pulls away, his face is older. This night has aged him. "Go. Do what you have to do. But catch the bastard who did this to my sister. Promise me, Sky?"

I nod, swallowing my tears. "Blake will take care of

you two while I'm gone, okay?"

He nods again, his eyes filling with tears. "Will I see you again soon?"

"I..."

His voice breaks. "Will I ever see you again?"

He feels the weight of what I'm doing. We all do.

"I hope so, kiddo. If I have anything to say about it, you will. We will be together again."

After getting him to bed, Blake and I sit on the front porch as I get ready to explain everything to him.

But before I can say a word, Blake looks down at my wrist. "You're not wearing your band."

"Then you understand," I say, realizing I don't have to explain it all. Not to him.

"So it's like we always thought, then? You're not the only one."

"No..."

He nods. "Well, that explains what Kyle told me he saw."

He puts his arm around me and holds me close. I know Blake will take care of my kids. I know he'll keep Pat in line. I know he'll keep my secret.

Because when we were kids, we made a vow to look out for each other. And when we sat alone in Blake's treehouse,

behind his parent's home, I took off my bracelet, and I showed him what I could do.

Back then it wasn't much, but it was enough to astonish him, and convince him I had power. He was the only one I ever told. The only one who ever saw my true self.

We each held each other's secrets, when the world would have turned on us. When his parents turned on him for being gay. When Pat turned on me for being different. We were each other's safe harbors.

Leaving him is almost harder than leaving my whole life.

"I'll take care of them, Sky. Don't worry about the boys. I got them. You find our girl."

The tears flow, and I wrap him in a hug. "You've been a brother to me, you know that, right?"

"I know that, sis. We're family. Now and forever."

Before the kids wake up, I kiss them each, saying silent goodbyes. It's better this way. Caleb is too young to understand what's happening, and Kyle already knows. Even still, Caleb's eyes pop open as I adjust his stuffed bunny next to him. "Why you cry?"

"I've got to leave for a bit, little guy. To help Kara. But Kyle and Blake will be here to take care of you, okay?"

He doesn't understand what I'm saying, but he snuggles closer to me. "Love you, Sky."

"I love you too, Caleb."

With one last hug for Blake, I turn away from my home, from everything I've tried to build in my life, from my work as a firefighter, from my kids, from my best friend, from a step dad who made my life hell... I say goodbye to it all.

I know what this decision means: I will be a suspect in Kara's abduction if I disappear. I'll be replaced at work. The kids will miss me. Maybe hate me.

But it's the right choice.

The only choice.

I can't keep living as if I'm an ordinary girl.

I'm not.

It's time to claim my power and save my daughter.