

THE WAYMAN'S CODE

AWAKENING

R.J. WILSON

BOOKTORCH PUBLISHING, LLC

Copyright ©2021 by R.J. Wilson

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

CONTENTS

| | |
|--------------------------------|----|
| Dedication | IV |
| 1. Invisible Watchers | 1 |
| 2. Emissary from Another World | 12 |
| Afterword | 23 |

"For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places." Ephesians 6:12

CHAPTER 1

INVISIBLE WATCHERS

“LISTEN TO MY WORDS carefully,” I said, trying to maintain a whisper, “it’s absolute suicide. Don’t make a fool of yourself.”

Dante leaned back in his desk chair, folding his thick arms. His green eyes narrowed as he looked towards the fluorescent lights, considering my words. I could see the gears turning in his mind.

I peeked over the backs of heads of the other students, stealing a glance at the beady eyed Mrs. Pickering, pacing, she droned about Homer. She had not yet spotted that we were committing the unforgivable sin—talking while she lectured.

“I have it all figured out,” Dante said, finally looking at me. He flashed a smile that made his light moustache curve over the edge of his upper lip. “Number one, my baseline is a fifty-fifty shot where the worst she can say is no. Number two, the girls at the top tier never get asked, which means she probably won’t have a date. That means my chances are higher than fifty-fifty. That means it’s Dante time.”

I chuckled, shaking my head. Lysa’s brown hair swept over Dante’s desk as she turned to stare at us.

"Shh. You guys are going to get us in trouble," she said, bright blue eyes darting between us.

"No Lysa," I said, "I'm trying to save him from trouble. Did you hear his plan? He's gonna ask Estrella Acevedo to her senior prom. Senior prom!"

Lysa's forehead wrinkled, the concern about the wrath of Mrs. Pickering appearing to be forgotten. "Dante, she's the cutest girl in school and a senior. Why would she want to attend prom with a random sophomore?"

Dante gasped, clutching at his heart.

"Lysa, I'm hurt. How could you say such things?"

Her eyes widened, face becoming a tinge of pink. "Well, I didn't mean... I wasn't saying you look... your odds are bad, that's all."

"I'm kidding," he said. "I know you secretly think my plan is awesome, so I'll take the compliment."

She rolled her eyes.

"As awesome as your plan is, there is a flaw," I said. "Senior prom is still a month and a half away. Someone else has plenty of time to ask her."

Dante scoffed. "Let me remind you of the math—,"

"Mr. Cirelli... Mr. Warden... Ms. Lyles... you three care to enlighten the class as to what could possibly be more exciting than ancient literature?"

Mrs. Pickering stared, lips pursed, eyes like daggers only magnified by her wire frames. The rest of the class silently turned as one, smelling the blood in the water. Heat grew behind my ears.

"Nothing ma'am," I said, "I was just telling Dante that Odysseus was a man's man."

A few snickers broke the tension.

"That he was," she replied, still staring like a hawk, "so let's focus more on his story than your own."

"Yes ma'am," I replied.

She resumed her lecture and pacing. The students returned to their notebooks, bringing about the scratching silence of studious note taking.

"See," Lysa accused in a hoarse whisper, "I told you."

"I don't care what she says, my chances are still at least fifty-fifty," Dante said to me, pressing his finger on his temple like he did whenever he thought he had figured it all out.

English Lit moved at the speed of molasses. Staring at the black and white clock only made it appear to stand still, so I stared out the window instead. A nice blue sky broken up the white wisps being pushed along by the wind. The homes in the distance across the street were still and peaceful, absent from the chaos of the children who were still in school.

A black car reversed out of the driveway of a small white house. The red brake lights glinted in the sun as it backed. Glinted like little red eyes. Red eyes that were coming closer. Closer. Staring directly at me through the glass now, the eyes were set in something black and out of focus. Something like concentrated smoke but in the shape of a face.

My heart leapt into my throat. I couldn't breathe. I stared at the disembodied pair of red eyes set in a face of black smoke and the pair of eyes stared back. They blinked. Narrowed. A crack appeared on the window and carved across the glass like it was being sliced by a sharp knife. The floating, smokey face bared long yellow fangs.

The bell rang and I jumped.

"Not so fast, Mr. Warden," Mrs. Pickering called. "Everyone, remember that your report on chapter three is due Monday. Now you can go." The silence of the class was broken with groans that soon morphed

into excited conversation, shuffling chairs, and the gathering of belongings.

I glanced back at the window. The face was gone. Jessica, sitting next to where the face appeared was busy placing her blonde hair into a ponytail, completely oblivious to what just happened.

Or didn't happen... I rubbed my eyes.

"By the end of the week, I'll ask her," Dante said as he packed up his belongings.

"Are you still on this prom thing?" Lysa snapped, "and today's Thursday, there's not much time left."

I walked over to Jessica's desk. She looked up.

"Hiya Maleek."

I opened my mouth to respond but immediately closed it. The crack in the window was still there.

"Maleek?"

That was impossible. It must have been a daydream. An Odyssey laced hallucination. There was no way a floating face appeared. Yet, here was the crack, running six inches across the window. I leaned over and brushed it with my fingertips. Smooth on the inside. That meant the crack was on the outside.

"Maleek."

"Huh?" I looked down to realize I had leaned over Jessica's desk and much too far into her personal space.

"You alright?" She asked, eyebrow raised, "you look like you saw a ghost."

"Sorry," I apologized, backing up quickly, "it was just... did you see..."

She continued to stare like I was a babbling mad man.

"Never mind. Sorry." I backed away from her while she studied me. Embarrassment now overtook my curiosity about the scratch, and I returned to my things. I needed to shake it off. Forget about it. When I

approached my desk, Dante and Lysa were still arguing over his failure of a plan.

"By the end of next week," Dante said, "she'll be putty in my hands."

Lysa sighed.

"Where did you go?" She asked and peeked over at the now departing Jessica.

"He obviously was inspired by my bold plan and went to shoot his shot with Jessica," Dante explained, "how did it go, young Padawan? You score a date?"

"What? No, it wasn't like that," I said, "besides, anytime I shoot my shot, I like to make sure it's going to go in the basket before I toss it."

Dante laughed. "That's cold man. Just you wait."

"Well if you two are done, we should hurry, I have student council in a few minutes," Lysa crossed her arms, "then I have this paper to do and-,"

I drooped my head and snored as she talked. She slapped my arm. We left the class, now being the last ones left, and headed to our lockers.

"Ok then Mr. Fun, what will you be doing?" Lysa asked.

"I actually don't have too much homework," I replied, navigating through the sea of students in the hallway. A shirtless round boy darted past me, brushing against my right side while yelling the word "purple" at the top of his lungs. Down the hallway, a group of guys snickered and high-five'd each other in what I assumed was a dare.

"Greta will be at the house tomorrow," I continued, "so I'll have to spend most of the day getting my clothes together and doing that pre-clean of the house."

"If Greta cleans anyway, why does your mom make you pre-clean?" Dante asked, as we descended to the first floor.

I shook my head and threw up my hands.

Lysa tsked. "It's a common courtesy, Dante. Should he leave more of a mess, just because someone else will clean it?"

Dante shrugged. "Seems reasonable to me."

Lysa rolled her eyes. "My meeting is going to start soon, so I should get going. Text me." She pivoted right and hurried down the hall.

"I would kill to have someone else do all my household chores," Dante said, "you're winning all day with that one."

Something inside my chest tightened, and I shot him a look before I could stop myself.

"Oh, sorry... you know I didn't mean..."

"No, it's okay," I said, looking away. "I know you didn't mean it like that."

"It's been a year now, right?" He asked.

I nodded, fixing my eyes down the hall. "A year ago, tomorrow."

The rest of the journey to our lockers was completed in silence. I traded the books that I didn't need for the ones I would need to take home, placing them in my backpack.

"Crap."

"What?" Dante asked.

"I think I left my Spanish book back in Pickering's class. I have to go back."

Dante laughed.

"I'll wait for you here. I'm not walking back up those stairs."

"Fine, crybaby," I turned around and hustled back through the hall and up the stairs. The second floor was mostly deserted, allowing me to reach the classroom with relative ease.

The classroom was empty, much to my relief. I approached the window near Jessica's desk. There

was no crack in the glass.

Impossible. The crack was there before, I was sure of it. Was it possible that I imagined the whole thing? Of course not... I know what I saw.

Just put it out your mind, I told myself. Navigating through the chairs, I approached my desk. Sure enough, my yellow and red Spanish book sat on the tray under my chair. As I reached for it, the hairs on the back of my neck stood. The room had been empty since I walked in. Now I felt like the empty space was closing in on me. The air felt thicker. My heart began to pound. I scanned back and forth across rows of empty desks feeling as if the red eyes from before would show up at just the place I wasn't looking.

The side of my face grew tingly as if someone were staring at me. Something moved at the edge of my peripheral vision. I whirled around towards the windows. Nobody was there.

"Get it together," I scolded my brain, "I'm just freaking myself out."

I swallowed and walked to windows. Nothing but the regular outside world sat below. An outside world that was completely unaware of my presence on the second floor. It was impossible for someone to be watching me from down there. Besides, the sensation had felt closer. Much closer. Like someone had glued their eyes to the glass to study me in my captive habitat. The mere thought of it sent a chill down my spine.

"I need to calm down," I said out loud to reassure myself, "it's just an empty room."

Though my nervous sweat was harder to convince.

I exited with haste and entered the stairwell, eager to put distance between me and the room.

"Hey!" Came a startled cry, followed by the sound of shuffling that came from the floor above me.

"Stop," the same voice cried again.

I crept up the stairs to the right, leading to the third floor. My steps muffled by the black rubber that covered the linoleum as I ascended, the sounds of the conflict becoming clearer with each step.

"Let me go," the voice whined.

"Relax," said a deeper voice, "we're only trying to help."

I reached the landing in between floors and looked up. The view straight ahead was clear. Shuffling and scuffling sounds came from further down the third floor. Ascending the rest of the stairs, I reached the floor and peered from behind the wall.

Four guys cornered some unlucky soul against the lockers, a few doors down.

"You got to stand up for yourself, Shawn," said one, "or else people will keep screwing with you."

The others laughed. Their chuckles carried down the hallway, boiling my blood.

They stepped back and allowed a wiry boy, clutching his books, to climb to his feet.

"There you go—don't back down to anyone," said the guy furthest from me, who I recognized now to be Elias.

Great.

The tall, muscular, and arrogant Elias, who never failed to seize the moment to tell anyone about the difficult boxing lessons that his father enrolled him in the year prior. This boast alone made him untouchable.

The boy next to him was Alex. I barely knew him but could recognize him by his cauliflower ear. He reached into his back pocket and removed a bottle that was sticking out, with a disgusting dark liquid inside. He spit into it and stuffed it back in his pocket.

I looked carefully but couldn't recognize the other two.

"Good... good," Elias said as Shawn stood. Even from my distance, I could see Shawn visibly shaking.

"Look, I need to go, or I'll miss my ride," he said, voice cracking.

"Understood," Elias said. "But what if someone stopped you from leaving?"

Alex shoved him into the locker. Shawn crumpled into it, hugging his books so they didn't spill.

"To clarify, I would never stop you from doing that," Elias said. "The boys and I are just preparing you for someone else who might."

They laughed.

I dug my fingernails into my palm and exhaled. What was I getting myself into? Four of them and one of me. Well, technically two of us- but I didn't know how much I could count on Shawn. He looked like he had never thrown a punch in his entire life. No, jumping in would be foolish.

Maybe I could call a teacher? No... a teacher's arrival would only make things worse. The more I racked my brain, the more I realized I had no available options—other than suicide.

"Sorry Shawn," I muttered, "I wish I could do something."

I leaned against the wall. The sound of a body hitting the locker a few times and Shawn's cry for help rattled my bones and I cursed under my breath.

"Let's get going, we'll be late," one of the members said.

"Yeah, you're right," another said, "later Shawn."

The sounds of their footsteps grew fainter and fainter.

After a few moments, I peeked around the corner. The others had left and Shawn desperately tried to

wrangle his scattered papers and books.

I entered the hallway.

"Let me help," I said, bending to pick up scattered assignments. Shawn jumped at my voice but didn't say anything. It took a few minutes to gather all his papers and books together.

"Yeah, that Elias guy is pretty lame," I said, "him and all his cronies."

"Thanks for the help," he said, avoiding my gaze, "but I had them on the ropes." A wry smile crossed his lips. He adjusted his glasses, but they were hopelessly askew.

I laughed. "Here, let me see."

Removing his glasses, I bent them as best I could. "My dad used to have this problem all the time with his glasses. He'd fall asleep with his hand against the frames and mangle them all up. After a few times, I became pretty good at... there."

With the glasses as straight as I could get them, I handed them back. He placed them on his face.

"How does it look?"

"Like a million bucks," I said, slapping him on the shoulder, "like a million bucks."

When I exited the school and began to cross the asphalt parking lot, Dante approached.

"You get lost on the way up?" He asked. "I was on my way to see if you had fallen in a toilet."

"Just ran into Elias and his goons trying to intimidate someone," I replied as we walked to his car.

"That guy, boy I tell ya..." Dante shook his head. "He was like that last year during football. Always trying to mess with the little guy."

Dante continued talking about how he'd like to go toe-to-toe with Elias but a strong prickly sensation went up my spine and I lost track of his words. A

sensation that felt like someone's eyes burning into the back of the neck. Someone who was fast approaching. I whirled around and prepared to block the disembodied smokey face with red eyes darting forward for an attack.

It wasn't there. I scanned the lot all the way back to the school. Except for a few dawdlers, there was no one. No threatening figure. No lion in the tall grass. Absolutely no one.

"You good?" Dante asked.

"Yeah..." I replied, "I just thought someone... it's nothing, let's go."

Dante stared at me for a few seconds, eyebrow raised. He shrugged, "if you say so."

I did say so, but I wasn't sure it was correct. The only thing that I was sure of now, more than before, was that something was watching me.

CHAPTER 2

EMISSARY FROM ANOTHER WORLD

THE CEILING FAN ROTATED, humming above me. The sound brought me relief, but the pool of sweat on my back still caused the bed sheets to stick to me. I lay in the darkness, just as awake as I was when I first laid down hours before. Moonlight streamed through the blinds, washing over the left side of my face, and casting ominous shadows against the wall.

I turned my head away from the window. The red digits on the bed side clock displayed that it was a quarter past one. One hour into the anniversary of dad's death. The day he became an icon of selflessness. Others constantly told me how proud I should be of his legacy. How proud I should be that he was a hero. What they didn't understand, though, was that heroes never survived in the end.

Images of the black clad mourners offering their condolences flittered through my mind. The only thing I could pay attention to as a revolving door of people approached, was the smell of the fresh, velvet, carpet. I did find it helpful when others approached me to recall a good or funny memory between them and dad. It gave me a chance to laugh. To feel a brief

relief from sadness. When they approached mom, though, she would smile in response, but it was strained. I noticed that this was her response each time someone came up to her. A strained smile and a certain look in her eyes that made me wonder if she was hiding something. Of course not, she was just in grief, came the rational thought, as it always did, when my mind dared ask the question.

I threw the covers back and swung my legs over the side of the bed, planting them on the cool wooden floor. The air from the AC unit in my upstairs bedroom had a knack for hovering ice-cold around my ankles but never climbed any higher. Pulling on my shorts, I slipped out of the room and into the pitch-black hallway.

I eyed Mom's door at the end of the hallway to the left. Was she still awake, tossing around old memories? Maybe she was thinking about the Cancun trip we went on for their anniversary two and a half years ago. She still had horn he had won from the mechanical bull riding contest.

No, in all reality she was probably sound asleep—her new favorite activity.

I walked down the hall, scolding myself for thinking too harshly of her. His death had affected us all differently, who was I to judge?

Even so... it would have been nice for her to be herself again.

The stairs leading to the ground floor opened into the spacious living room that was as dark as the rest of the house. As soon as my feet hit the floor below, the pitter patter of paws scratching tile and then wood approached.

Jax, our stocky brown and white bulldog, trotted happily over to me, burying his face in my leg.

"Okay boy, you can come with me," I scratched him behind the ears. I walked through the living room, into the kitchen, and out the sliding door onto the back patio. Jax trotted at my heel. Crossing the planks, I leaned onto the banister. A warm mid-April breeze blew, bringing sweet relief, in direct contrast to the upstairs hotbox that was my room. Jax trotted into the yard, sniffing at various pieces of dark grass before finally finding a spot and raising his leg.

I gazed into the sky. A starry night gazed right. It was peaceful out here during the wee hours. Out here, no one bothered me, or tried to ask me how I was doing, or tried to tell me that the pain would pass. Out here, late at night, was simply Jax and the quiet.

A shooting star shot across sky, disappearing as quickly as it showed up. Maybe I should make a wish? I chuckled at my own lame joke.

Grrrr.

Jax stood, facing the trees at the back of the yard. Legs stiff and shoulders squared, he growled again.

"What is it, boy?"

He barked. Barked again.

"Jax."

He barked a third time and tore across the back yard.

"Jax!" I dashed after him, deeply regretting that I neglected shoes. He was fast but his legs were short, hopefully that would work to my advantage. Jax disappeared into the trees and I crashed after him.

"Jax," I called again. No luck. I fumbled in my pocket for my phone and activated the flashlight, which produced a very weak illumination.

"Ouch."

The top of what I assumed was an acorn, rammed itself into my foot like a misplaced LEGO piece. I

needed to slow down.

The gaps in the trees narrowed as I ventured deeper. A branch grabbed at my shirt and I nearly jumped out of my skin.

Jax barked again somewhere ahead but I could no longer make out his little body shooting through the trees. I continued running. There was a blinding flash of white light. My foot kicked a root and I stumbled into a tree. Pain shot up my right leg and I yelled into the darkness. I rubbed my eyes, vision only returning after a full minute. Jax barked a few more times.

"Stupid dog," I cursed. My foot was now warm and throbbled as I continued cautiously past a few more trees and entered a small clearing. I froze.

Impaled against a tree, by a long black rod protruding from his chest, was a boy. His head, full of spikey silver hair, sat drooped over his all-white robe that gave an unusual glow. The boy's feet dangled a few inches above a deadly looking silver sword that lay on the ground beneath his left hand. He resembled a teenager, not much older than me. Jax trotted excitedly around him, sniffing his feet.

"Jax..." I called, voice coming out in a whisper.

Jax nuzzled the boy's foot, which didn't stir.

My first instinct was to run but my feet rooted me to the spot. I watched as wisps of light escaped from this boy's wound. Light instead of blood. Two realizations hit me like a punch in the gut—this boy was not a normal boy, and whatever he was, he was dying.

With my heart beating in my throat, I regained control of my feet and inched closer. Soft grass gave way to grass that prickled and poked. I shined the light down to see that charred black streaks that ran towards him.

I moved my light to his face. His eyes remained shut. Mouth agape. I placed my fingers on the side of his neck. His skin was unnaturally warm. Borderline hot. I waited... waited... waited... no pulse.

Jax buried his head into leg and began to lick his foot.

"Jax, don't lick that." I ordered, but he ignored it.

Ok... think... options...

CPR seemed foolish given the current rod in his chest and the fact that this boy seemed anything but normal.

His left arm stirred arm and I fell back. With his head still slumped and his eyes still closed, the fingers on his left hand, twitched. A spark of lightning cracked between his fingertips. The sword below him glowed faintly but then died. His fingers twitched again, arcing another spark of electricity. The sword glowed.

Were they connected? What if I placed the sword in his hands?

Crouching, I carefully grabbed the rough leather hilt and picked up the sword. The sword was warm and surprisingly light. With my own hand shaking, I placed the sword in his palm. His fingers clenched around the hilt and electricity traveled up his arm, sparking over the rest of his body. His eyes shot open, and he snapped awake, drawing a deep breath.

"They knew," he said in labored breaths, eyes darting around, "ambush..."

He focused on me as if noticing me for the first time. His eyes glowed silver around black pupils.

"Maleek... Warden," he said, reaching with his free hand into a gold satchel that hung on his hip. He pulled out a gold, tightly rolled scroll.

"Take this...quickly...before—,"

He stopped talking and stared at me. Beyond me. A feeling of nausea crept into the pit of my stomach and

the back of my neck burned with an uncomfortable feeling. The feeling of being watched. I whirled around to see something creep into the clearing. A creature with red eyes set in a black, reptile-like face. The creature wore a charcoal black colored armor that looked like hard leather over a black robe and carried a sword on his hip.

I stepped back and closer to the boy.

"Maleek Warden...take it..." the boy said, extending the scroll to me.

My hand moved almost independently from my brain and grabbed it while keeping focus on the creature in front of me.

"Don't make this difficult, human," the creature hissed. He held up his right hand next to the side of his head.

Run. The thought came to me again but my feet failed to listen. All I could do was stare into his red eyes which seemed to grab hold of my own and force me to remain. His eyes glowed brighter.

"Maleek..." the boy called. I snapped out of the creature's gaze in time to see a long black spear materialize in his raised hand.

He launched it. The spear sailed through the air, spiraling towards me. I was knocked to the side by surprising strength just as the wind from the spear zipped past my face, nicking the side of my cheek and drawing blood. The scroll flew out of my hands and landed on the grass. I scrambled to my knees. The boy had kicked me out the way. The boy had saved my life.

Jax barked, jumping up and down. With another bark, he tore after the dark creature.

"Jax...no!" I cried. Jax approached him, teeth bared. With a quick swipe, the creature lifted Jax by the scruff of his neck.

"So, this is what the Watch has been reduced to?" The creature snarled, "a messenger, a child, and a feral mutt?"

Jax frantically kicked his paws, whimpering.

"Let him go," I yelled, finding my voice.

The creature's eyes narrowed in on my own and he smiled with crooked yellow fangs. He tossed Jax into the air. Jax's yips grew fainter as his small body disappeared into the dark treetops.

"No!" I cried.

I looked down in time to see the creature launching another spear.

With a yell, the boy yanked the spear from his chest and dropped to the ground. In a flash of silver, he knocked the spear out the air with a metallic twang with his sword. In the same motion, he spun, drawing a second sword from above his shoulder and took aim. Blue lightning cracked around his blades and shot forth, striking the creature in the chest, knocking him backwards and into the woods.

In another quick motion, he sheathed his swords, crouched, grabbed the scroll and sprouted sleek white wings from his back. He took to the sky effortlessly.

I climbed to my feet and the boy reappeared in seconds. He landed, releasing a terrified Jax from his arms. Jax, yipping in high pitch, tore through the woods.

The boy folded his wings into the folds of his back behind his robe. He sank to a knee. The hole in his chest remained and continued to leak.

"Who-,"

"Maleek Warden," he said, cutting me off, "we need to go."

"What... what was that thing?"

"I'll explain-,"

His eyes darted to the side as he leapt up and pushed me back. A black spear sailed between us, slicing him across the stomach.

"Arrggh," he cried, sinking to a knee again. Silver armor materialized onto his body covering everything but his head and hands. He extended his wings.

"Jump on... quickly."

I didn't have time to second guess, my feet were already moving. Climbing on his back, I wedged myself in between his wings and threw my arms around his neck. With a single bound we soared straight through the trees. I buried my face into his shoulder to avoid taking branches to the face.

We weaved our way through the treetops and soared into the clear black sky, wind whipping over my head.

"What...what was that thing?" I asked, finally finding my voice.

"Persistent problem," he said with a painful grunt, "hang on." He shot forward so suddenly, I almost slid off his back. I chanced a glance behind me only to see a dark shadow growing.

"It's back," I called, voice a lot higher than usual, "it's gaining on us."

"I know," the boy said, "a little injured... I can't go faster with you astride."

I looked again. The creature, spear in hand, closed in. Down below, the treetops gave way to rooftops and city lights.

"I have a plan," the boy called over the wind, howling in my ears, "but... you have to trust me."

"I don't have much of a choice."

He dived, hurtling straight towards the earth with a speed that made my body lift. I peeked ahead and saw the homes grow larger. Larger still. The boy pulled up and hugged the street as two more spikes

pierced the blacktop, missing us by inches. He curved upwards and shot vertically through the air. My stomach turned with a vengeance, filling my throat with puke, so I choked it down. The boy climbed. The creature pursued.

"Let go on my command."

"What?" I pressed my head against his shoulder to stop it from spinning.

"I plan to catch you."

"You plan?!"

The boy turned. A spear shot past, missing his face by centimeters. "Now!"

"I can't," I said, desperately hating his plan.

"It's ok," he said, "just forgive me for the assistance." He reached up and wrenched my hands free.

I slid off his body and plummeted to the earth like a stone. Twisting mid-air, wind blasted my face, making it near impossible to breath. Lights from the city grew at an alarming rate. The city street grew closer, and I was still falling... falling... falling

Hands wrapped around my body, pulling me away from the ground before impact. We ascended, slower this time, away from the rooftops. After a certain altitude, he cruised towards my house.

"Told you I would catch you," the boy said. I couldn't see his face, but I could hear the smile in his voice.

"You weren't so confident before." I accused, "besides, where did that...thing...go?"

"That was a Shadiem," the boy said, "a dark spiritual creature. And he's gone now."

I opened my mouth to ask more questions but stopped myself in fear of hurling.

The dark patio in the back of the house came into view before long. We descended. Jax, at the patio door, jumped around as we came in. As soon as my

feet touched the wooden planks, I ran to the grass, fell to my knees and emptied my stomach of every meal I had ever eaten. Sour acid stung my nostrils as I wiped my mouth.

Jax barked.

"What now," I muttered. Forcing myself to my feet, I turned and froze. The boy had fallen to his knees.

"Hey, you alright?" I asked, moving over to him.

He looked up and smiled a ragged smile.

"Never better," he said, "I just need... to rest." A white glow surrounded him, and he began to transform. His armor and swords vanished. Now, he wore a white short-sleeved, buttoned shirt and tan shorts. His silver hair dulled into a white-blond color and he appeared to be a teenager now—with skinny, pale legs that appeared not to have seen any amount of sun ever.

He sat back against the house and unbuttoned his shirt. The hole in his chest remained. He held out his hand above the wound. Lightning arced from his fingertips and sparked over the wound.

I looked around. No more threats emerged from the sky. Not yet, at least, but I didn't want to be exposed.

"Come on, let's go inside," I said.

He looked at me with eyes that were now plain gray and out of focus but did not resist. Gingerly lifting him up, I leaned him against me. With great effort, we made it through the house and up the stairs, Jax hot on our heels.

"There," the boy said, wobbling as he pointed at the wall beyond the foot of my bed. I leaned him against it. He continued working his wound with his lightning while I went to the hallway to grab an extra blanket. When I returned, his head was drooped. The rise and fall of his chest let me know that he was not dead.

The wound itself was closed in a freshly cauterized scar that was no longer leaking any light. Jax curled himself up next to him. In a way, his trust in the boy brought me a small comfort.

I sat on my chair, not realizing how exhausted I was. Now that I was not under imminent threat of death, a million questions spun in my mind. Who was this boy? And how did he know my name? And most importantly...

I stared at the satchel that contained the mysterious golden scroll.

The boy didn't seem to be waking anytime soon, so my questions would have to wait—at least until morning.

AFTERWORD

Purchase the full-length novel in February 2022.