

CHAPTER 1 - THE ONE-TWO PUNCH

If this were any other weeknight, Ethan would not have minded driving a katana through a Wraith's forehead.

The general public didn't know where these man-eating demonic Wraiths had come from. All they knew was that anyone could *be* one of them; a creature that twisted and deformed to consume their unsuspecting prey.

Ethan was aware that they needed to be slain, but if he could be doing anything else right now, he would not be on a night patrol. All he could think about was studying for the Economics test he had the next morning.

"Wish I wasn't here," he muttered too loudly.

Someone on his earpiece heard him. "Keep the coms clear!" hissed his field leader. "Don't make me tell you again, Ethan!"

"Sorry, ma'am," Ethan replied as politely as possible, despite his antsy mood.

Ethan sat perched at his post, almost begging for something to happen. He kept his sights on the narrow alley below him. His job was simple: wait for a Wraith to show itself.

At least these patrols were more tolerable when conducted with his teammates, but he was specifically instructed to stake out here solo, not in the warm patrol car with the others. He pressed a finger against his earpiece. No response. The radio clipped to his ballistic vest remained silent.

I have a goddamn Econ test to study for tomorrow, Ethan begrudgingly ruminated in the safe part of his brain. That's going to be fun.

"Where are they?" his field leader inquired.

"Intel says we have a herd on Main Street," said a deep man's voice. That was the second-in-command of his team. "Ethan? Where are you?"

Ethan flipped the switch back on his radio. He pressed the piece in closer to his ear. A katana, the curved steel blade Japanese samurai used, was ready in his other hand.

"I'm in position. Watching from above an alley."

"Let's go," his field leader replied. Echoing over the radio was the distinct roar of an engine revving at full gear.

Ethan remained in position atop the roof with his eyes to the ground. His jet black hair was cut short and gelled back. He wore the gray/blue uniform all EU trainees had to wear and a Kevlar vest with the label A.X.E.L. painted on his back. The NYPD patch was pinned to his chest, just to show he was one of the good guys-in-training.

They're almost here, he thought.

Ethan took a sharp breath. He really didn't want to fight tonight, but he might have to in a minute. His orders were to keep watch while his supervisors engaged first. Typical. They wouldn't want the kid swinging his sword yet.

"How many are we looking at?"

"Pack of three," his field leader replied.

A single star and moon dangled in the otherwise vacant sky above the city. This was the best time to track down Wraiths because they would emerge from the woodwork to try finding prey. He was ready.

"You're clear," said Ethan.

"Engaging."

Tires screeched. Their engine revved up to maximum speed. While he couldn't see it, Ethan knew a chase was underway. A low rumble shook the ground like the march of large animals rushing away from danger.

"Four more!"

"I see 'em!"

Bang! The sound of thunder shot through the night. Gunshots in the distance. Ethan kept his eyes on the area where he knew the car was driving.

"We have a straggler coming your way," the woman yelled over her roaring car. She was in charge but put plenty of trust in Ethan.

The alley below Ethan's nesting spot was open except for a dumpster. Ethan kept his eyes to the street where the Wraith might come from. If the straggler was coming, this was a good place for it to hide.

Plenty of shadows covered this alley. Anything could slither between the cracks and into the pale moonlight. Ethan could feel it before he saw the creature. Something lurked in the cover of night like a predator waiting for its morsel.

Ethan spotted it coming his way. "I see it."

The Wraith was on ground level. Ethan forced himself to scan every scaly detail of the Wraith's body. That ungodly creature had hidden as a human before, but now its extra scorpion appendages protruded like cancerous new limbs.

There was no mistaking a beast, born of human flesh and sin, hiding in human skin. The torso remained "human," but this Scorpion Wraith grew new claws and a barbed tail to become the ugliest variety of scorpion on Earth. And it looked hungry.

Ethan braced himself, readying his katana so he could do away with the monster.

The Scorpion Wraith clicked its teeth together to find prey. It sniffed the ground and turned its eyes to a dumpster across the alley.

Ethan peered over the roof to look at the Wraith. He could ambush it from his position. Ethan reached for the *tsuka*, or hilt, of his katana. He glanced away from the monster to check his landing spot, but then he saw someone who wasn't there before.

There was a woman hiding behind a dumpster. She was caught outside during the citywide curfew. From the looks of it she was rushing home after an emergency run to the pharmacy. A plastic bag of medicine was in her hands.

The Wraith was right across the alley from her. She wouldn't make it.

Ethan took a deep breath before wrapping his hands around the handle of his blade. He unsheathed his sword and closed his eyes. Reaching into the deepest part of his mind, he summoned his inner spirit. His Sol.

A biting chill took over Ethan's body, but this was the price to pay for summoning his Sol. He quickly condensed the water in the air to freeze a needle projectile.

THWACK. A shard of ice formed at Ethan's eye level and shot out like a bullet. The new projectile planted itself close to the Scorpion Wraith's face.

This was a warning shot. The Scorpion Wraith looked up.

Ethan rose and stood above the Wraith. Behind him was Gabriel, his guardian spirit, ready to fight alongside its host.

Gabriel was clad in metal armor and a full chrome helmet. Blue streaks of energy lined Gabriel's body. Black rime stuck to his face and breastplate like ash from a bonfire. Gabriel mimicked Ethan's pose and brandished a straight sword that thirsted for fresh blood.

"Looking for someone?" asked Ethan.

The Scorpion Wraith shrieked. It used its barbed feet to scurry up the side of the building to attack Ethan. Ethan conjured more magic projectiles, and Gabriel obeyed. Shards of ice materialized and fired at the Wraith. Some hit their mark, while the rest either bounced off the hard shell or missed their mark. But the Wraith closed the gap rapidly.

The Wraith reached the top of the roof and swung for Ethan's legs. Ethan darted back and countered with his sword. Gabriel whipped out his own short sword and they attacked in unison. If the Wraith stabbed at Gabriel, Ethan attacked, and vice versa.

But the monster wised up and made a wide swipe to hit both. Ethan tripped over the rigid appendage and hit the ground with a thud. The Wraith raised its barbed tail and brought it down.

Gabriel used his free hand to form a barrier of ice around Ethan. The Wraith's tail was caught in the new formation.

Ethan rolled back onto his feet. He vaulted over the protective wall and brought his blade down on the Wraith. The Scorpion Wraith shrieked even louder, but it was too late.

Ethan pulled out a small piece of paper from his pocket. On it was an exorcism rune with archaic etchings burned onto its surface. He brought it down on the Wraith's forehead.

A flash of light filled the entire rooftop. Ethan looked away. The light faded as holy fire burned the wicked creature away from the inside out.

He had won.

All that remained of the Wraith was its host, a man with his sleeves and trousers destroyed by transforming into such a horrid creature. His body had returned to its natural state, but a vacant, glassy-eyed expression remained on his face.

Was the man still alive?

Ethan checked for a pulse. Nothing. That was the tragedy of Wraith possession: the hosts most likely died if not exorcised in time.

“Did you get it?” his field leader demanded.

Ethan dismissed Gabriel, and it faded into dust. “Yeah, he’s down,” he replied bluntly. He rubbed his hands together to put some heat back into his fingers.

“The rest of the herd has been dealt with. I’m afraid we lost two hosts.”

Ethan took a look at the Wraith victim’s face. He opened the eyelids. Both eyeballs rolled back into their sockets and showed no sign of rolling back into position.

“The Wraith ate this host too,” Ethan replied.

“Three hosts,” the woman muttered. “But it could’ve been worse. Now get some rest. You have a game tomorrow, don’t you?”

Ethan slid his sword back in its sheath and checked down the alleyway. The woman who was hiding before was gone, evidently running from the monster that chased him.

It wasn’t exactly Ethan’s priority to find her, but at least she wasn’t dead.

CHAPTER 2 - EMERGENCE

Ethan could barely breathe.

The air in the court was hot and stuffy. Sweat beaded down his head and neck. Ethan must have looked awful from a distance, but he had no time to worry about appearances. His team was about to lose.

This game had been going for too long, and he hadn't had a chance to stop since halftime. His heart pounded harder than a Wraith hitting him in the chest, and he was at his wit's end.

Two basketball hoops hung overhead. A scoreboard ticked away at the last thirty seconds of the game. Loud cheers from the bleachers dulled out all other sounds. Now the score was close. 17 to 19.

Ethan's basketball team was dangerously close to losing. They needed one good shot to change that.

The ball went up into the air once more. Ethan dashed forward. He swept and took the ball. The other player tried to get it back, but Ethan twisted his body to avoid that. He ran for the basketball hoop.

A sense of dread came over him. Ethan couldn't shoot to save his life. Especially not under these conditions.

"Ethan!" shouted a voice. "Pass it to me!"

Ethan turned his head. He knew that voice. Hector Wright was in position. But had he been in the game this whole time? Or did he get subbed in while Ethan wasn't looking?

Ethan didn't have time to consider that. He passed the ball to Hector.

Fifteen seconds left. An opposing player intercepted Hector.

Ten seconds. Hector darted around and rushed past the half court line. Ethan held his breath.

Five seconds. Hector made it to the three-point line. He kept running.

Hector shot. The ball soared in an arc up in the air until it sank through the hoop. Cheers erupted from the audience as the final score came in: 20 to 19.

The horns blared. Time was up. The home team had just won with the final shot. The game was over.

Ethan finally slowed to a halt and bent over to catch his breath. He peeked out of the corner of his eye to see Hector shine with glee.

Hector threw his arms in the air and hollered with all the energy he had. The crowd cheered harder.

“What now?” Hector yelled. “What now?”

Ethan mustered a smile, despite his sour mood.

* * *

The next morning, Ethan finally felt the soreness.

His eyes struggled to peel themselves open. A grating alarm bleated into his ear all the while. The same tone, like a metronome, hammered at his eardrum and stirred him out of his sleep. Ethan had to shut the alarm app off of his phone before the noise could kill his brain.

The A.X.E.L. initiate fumbled about for the phone. Was it still on the floor? Ethan’s nails grated across the cold concrete until he found the phone’s charging cable.

“Finally,” he muttered grudgingly.

Ethan tugged. Like a fisher reeling in his catch, Ethan pulled his phone out and up to eye level. His eyes flickered open and adjusted to the all-too-bright screen of his handheld device.

His next lecture began in an hour. Ethan finally snapped awake and rolled out of bed.

His calves, thighs, upper back, and shoulders ached from overuse. How hard had he pushed himself that night? Patrols usually didn’t take this much energy out of him.

But how hard was I going during the game? Ethan wondered to himself. As with all intense sports, the pressure of doing one’s best seemingly acted like a painkiller. Now that the thrill was gone, Ethan could feel all the muscles that he pushed too far.

He peeled his face out of his pillow and adjusted his eyes. This was the West Dorm; the cheapest one, which was the best Ethan could afford. Cinderblock walls lined the room. White and beige colors bleached everything that wasn’t fixed to the ground.

Ethan fished a fresh pair of trousers and a shirt out of his wardrobe. He quickly slipped into clothes that didn't have the musk of adrenaline. All the while, Ethan glanced around his room very quickly to see if he was missing anything else.

His room was lit by fluorescent lights straight from the creepy dentist's office. No one was allowed to put up decorations or their own furniture, and cameras in the corners kept tabs on all students if they broke the house rules.

The only decorations Ethan could manage were the Gundam model kits he kept in his wardrobe. His best one was from the limited Thunderbolt series, a special season of the long-running show that really got him interested in collecting them in the first place.

Collecting Gundam models was a hobby. It gave Ethan a reason to keep that small part of his room tidy.

Wonder when the next model is coming in? Ethan wondered. *Sometime next week?*

Tracking that package could wait. He had half an hour to get ready for the morning lecture.

"I love eight o'clock lectures," Ethan grumbled.

He buttoned the last part of his shirt and lumbered over to his sink and checked his reflection in the mirror. A scrape was festering just under his left cheekbone. Nothing permanent, but it would leave a noticeable mark for the next few days.

Ethan remembered hitting the rooftop while fighting the Wraith. At least this wasn't the worst injury he could have gotten. He quickly brushed up his hair and washed his face.

Morning prep was easy. Nothing fancy, just a bar of soap to cleanse the grease. Give or take five minutes, and he looked like he wasn't a slob. Now he was ready to indefinitely pass out during the lecture.

He plucked a banana from his desk. He had to get some nutrition in before that lecture in Economics. Ethan could wait at least a day before his dreaded results came back. That test was yesterday morning, wasn't it? He had forgotten about it after such an exhausting game last night.

If he only had to do one, he would have worked his ass off just for the game instead of doing the same for the test.

Ethan put on his backpack, rushed out the halls, down the stairs, and right past the front doorman. Ethan shoved past the front doors with one hand out and emerged out of EU's West Dorm.

Today was a new day. He had to make the most of it, despite how sore every square inch of his body was.

A familiar waft of urban smells penetrated his nostrils: garbage, gasoline, street food, and grease. Not all at once, but the stench was unique for this part of Manhattan. The smells would get more tolerable after he rushed to campus.

Elysium University was located in Downtown Manhattan, and a reasonable walk from the auditorium hall. Pedestrians populated the streets right now, filling the space that was previously empty two nights ago. Everyone was in a rush to get somewhere.

He then saw the biggest billboard of a baby-faced model with tattoo sleeves sporting tightly-whiteys over everyone on the street. Nobody paid the ad much mind, perhaps because they didn't want to look at a half-naked baby-faced man.

"That's new," he mused.

Ethan walked past the open sewage drains and piles of garbage waiting around the corner. Good old smells of New York. With twenty minutes to spare, he was out of the proverbial woods.

He finally made it to EU campus, and thankfully, it was cleaner than the rest of Manhattan. Other students walked onto campus with light backpacks in hand and in a rush to get to their next lectures.

Ethan took a sharp breath. *Let's just get through today.*

He made his way to the auditorium. The room was semi-full. Students came in and took seats wherever they wanted. While there were more than enough seats to fit three hundred people, the class made sure to spread as far from the professor as possible. A wise choice.

If there was a class to slack off in, it was an Economics lecture. Not everyone in class wanted an A.X.E.L. license. There was more than one degree to graduate with from EU.

The only thing uniting them was the requirement to take an Economics general education course. Which no one wanted to do.

Ethan wasn't interested in being punctual, but he did prefer to choose his own seat rather than squeeze between complete strangers for a whole lecture. He glanced around for any vacant seat where he would be most comfortable.

"Ethan!" shouted someone. "Over here!"

He turned. Sitting on a side aisle seat was Nora. She was small and unassuming. Her blonde hair could have been better combed this morning, but it hung mangled over half of her face.

Nora was almost always mistaken for a kid by strangers. Her face was round enough, so no one could really tell if she was in college or middle school. No one would know she and Ethan were A.X.E.L. initiates either.

The petite girl smiled and pointed to the empty seat beside her. He quickly shuffled over to her side.

"Morning."

She smiled back. "Congrats on the win yesterday."

Ethan took his seat. He set his bag down and sat back into the cushions. Nora looked at him expectantly. Ethan finally looked back.

"Um, thanks."

Nora lightly shoved Ethan in the shoulder. "Come on. A win is a win."

"Yeah, I guess."

The doors opened once more. Hector swaggered in, still basking in the radiance from last night.

Bristled brown hair stuck out like a pineapple's leaves off his scalp. Hector dressed to impress with an open blazer and tee with a star on it. A few students who recognized him from the game waved. Hector smiled back and cocked a finger gun back at them.

He then noticed Ethan. Hector walked over and offered a handshake. "Hey, man," he chortled.

Ethan reluctantly smiled back. "What is it?"

"Just wanted to see what's up," said Hector. He was too ecstatic to stop smiling. "Cheer up! We won!"

"Yeah, yeah."

Hector looked up and waved his hand as if he were looking at another crowd of cheering fans. But he was already there in his elated mind. He even forgot that Ethan didn't accept the handshake earlier.

"Just imagine it," Hector said in glee. "Next week's game. Spotlights. Screaming girls. Speaking of which..."

Nora watched as Hector turned his gaze to her. She smiled back, but only out of courtesy.

"Want to take some dunking lessons from the pro?" he asked.

Nora hid behind her notebook. "Maybe later."

Hector flashed his perfect white teeth. "No need to be shy. I'll be gentle."

"Down, boy," Ethan warned.

Hector stood upright to find another seat. He whipped out his phone and checked the time. Only a minute before the lecture started. Then everyone could go back to being indifferent.

"See you at practice, Ethan," said Hector.

It was then that Ethan's eyes caught it: wisps of something black coming from the ground.

He turned his eyes to the floor. All around Hector's feet was a ring of black mist. The mist was subtle but clear to Ethan. And that was a bad sign.

He turned to Nora. She poked her head out to see the mist as well. Nora and Ethan locked gazes. They had seen this before, but not on Elysium campus.

The doors opened once more. The Economics professor walked in with glasses and folder in hand. He took his place, and the whole auditorium quieted down.

Hector quickly found his seat. He hadn't noticed a thing.

"You saw it too, right?" whispered Nora.

"Yeah," Ethan noted. "We need to bring this up with the others."

Nora whipped out her phone. She began texting the rest of their team. With any luck, they could deal with the problem before the end of the day.

At worst, they could have another Wraith on their hands within school grounds. Hector may have been in control, but that emerging Wraith was a disaster waiting to happen.

CHAPTER 3 – BAD PROMISES

This empty auditorium was a good place as any to conduct A.X.E.L. business.

Ethan and Nora remained a few minutes after class ended. The Economics professor trailed off nearly halfway through his own lecture before deciding to end it early. At least that gave them more time to deal with the Wraith. Hector left with the massive crowd of students, but they would find him soon enough.

Now the whole place was empty except for two people: Ethan and Nora. Their field leader Iris entered with a suitcase in hand.

She was tall, sturdy, and an intimidating young woman. Silky dark hair laid over her shoulder, and a wall of bangs aesthetically draped over her forehead. Despite appearances, she had a glimmer of unforgiving cruelty in her demeanor. One look at her and anyone would know she could easily call the feds on whoever crossed her path. This had happened before.

“Morning, Iris,” Ethan declared.

Nora nudged her cohort’s elbow. “Morning, *ma’am*.”

Iris smiled coldly to Ethan and Nora. They smiled back, albeit with some fear. Iris dressed casually, but her fine cotton suit meant business. And thanks to her picture-perfect hair and box glasses, she could have been the secretary of a supervillain.

She also knew every rule in the book to defend her livid demeanor all the time. Speaking of which, she was looking irate right now.

“You’re lucky I brought my materials,” she replied curtly.

Iris put her case down on the professor’s podium and opened it. Arcane powders and runes were within; all the tools needed to make a talisman, an exorcising sheet of paper.

A cheat sheet of necessary runes was clipped to the roof of the case. Iris scrolled through them with her finger. She pulled out a sharpie and began to draw on a post-it.

As she etched the runes, she chanted in Latin. Iris’s eyes hazed over as her pupils clouded white with the mystic powers she drew from within her spirit.

*“Regna terrae, cantata Deo, psallite
Domino qui fertisascendit. Super
Caelum caeli ad Orientum. Ecce
Dabitvocisuae. Vocemvirtutis,
Tribuitevirtutemdeo. Amen,”* Iris chanted.

The regal young woman popped open a baggie of fine powder. She poured it atop the talisman, and the powder immediately ignited into blue fire. Ethan and Nora watched the fire subside until ashes remained where the new runes were drawn.

“That still freaks me out,” Ethan whispered.

“Aren’t you used to exorcisms by now?” asked Nora.

Ethan mimicked pushing his palm onto an imaginary Wraith host’s forehead. “I find slapping the talisman on a Wraith less weird than making one.”

“You can never go wrong with powdered salamander tail,” said Iris as she blew off the residual ash from the talisman. The regal young woman picked up the talisman for all to see. “This will expel any Wraith from Hector.”

The doors to the auditorium opened once more. Dense footsteps scaled the stairs and nearly kicked down the last door into the place. In came Liam, a burly young man with a brown mullet and beard.

Liam was dressed more like a laid-back jockey than an aspiring Wraith hunter. If he were born in the eighties, Liam could fight Apollo Creed in the boxing ring. If anything, the way he slouched was a clear sign of his non-graduate status.

“Hey, Liam,” said Nora. “We just got started.”

Liam smelt the ash in the room and grimaced. “Who is it this time?” he asked.

“It’s Hector,” Iris answered. “He’s going to become a Wraith soon.”

Liam rubbed the back of his neck. His shoulders were sore. “Geez, another one?” he asked. “I still have scrapes from last month.”

Iris folded her arms. “Calm down. They were flesh wounds.”

Liam plopped down in a seat and put his feet up a chair. "I swear if I have to be tied to the bumper of your car again..."

"Enough!" she spat with a scowl.

This wouldn't be the first time Liam gave her a piece of his mind. Unfortunately, it wouldn't be the last.

"Guys," Nora piped up, "we're going off topic."

"Did it start today?" asked Liam. "'Cause we can exorcise it the easy way."

"Knowing our luck," said Ethan, "it's never the easy way."

Liam stuck a finger at the talisman. "So sticking a magical sticky note on him is the best way to go?"

Nora rolled her eyes. "It's called a talisman, Liam."

"It's still a sticky note," Ethan retorted.

Iris held up the talisman towards Ethan. "This is serious," she declared. "Any Wraith will be a menace until exorcised."

Ethan checked the time on his phone. It wasn't even twelve o'clock. Chances were that he would go to basketball practice before the afternoon, but that was assuming he didn't decide to go home early.

"Just call him in after class," said Ethan.

"His professors say that Hector isn't punctual about attending office hours," Iris rejoined. "Any other suggestions?"

Ethan leaned back and tried to think of something else he could suggest. This wasn't the first time that Iris had shot down her teammate's ideas, but they had to think of something that the whole group could agree on.

Nora balled a fist and lightly pounded her other palm. "I got it," she said. "Hector goes to basketball practice every day. We could exorcise the Wraith then. I could do it by myself."

A strange chill crept up Ethan's spine. He felt his heart skip a beat. No one else noticed it, thankfully. But Ethan could sense something was amiss. They were being watched.

He peered out of the corner of his eye. Standing beside him was a boy with frazzled black hair. The boy was barefoot and dressed in rags. He had an uncanny blue hue to his eyes. To Ethan's dismay, the boy was looking straight at Ethan.

“No,” Ethan tentatively objected. Ethan’s words came out antsier than he would have liked. “We need more guys.”

All eyes turned to him. Ethan sucked up his nerves and tried to put on his least worried face. Unfortunately, no one was convinced.

“What’s the matter?” asked Liam.

Ethan shrugged. “I mean, just sending one person?” he said. “We should be careful about that Wraith. It may have already possessed him.”

The mysterious boy smirked. He was getting a kick out of watching Ethan squirm.

“I’m sure it will be an easy job,” Nora chirped.

“But—”

Iris snapped her fingers. “Go together,” she commanded. “This should be easy, but the two of you will be more than enough.”

Ethan fell silent and looked to his side, but the mysterious boy had vanished.

“Ethan?” asked his field leader. “Any objections?”

Iris walked down and handed the talisman to Ethan. All eyes watched him as he was face-to-face with Iris. She stared him down expectantly. Ethan took the talisman.

“Works for me,” he acknowledged.

“Get to it,” said Iris.

Iris picked up her suitcase and clamped it shut. She quickly vacated the room. Liam followed her out. Nora glanced to Ethan. They both rose and immediately vacated the auditorium. Liam and Iris stayed behind, and they began to discuss more internal affairs within the Anti-Xenospecies Extermination League. Their voices faded as soon as Ethan rushed down the stairs to the first floor.

But when Nora went one way, Ethan darted the other. A bathroom was waiting at the other end of the hall.

He needed to talk to Gabriel.

Gabriel wasn’t the subtlest ice spirit. To everyone else, Gabriel was invisible until he felt like appearing. No one, not even Ethan’s team, was able to see Gabriel in his human form. Only

Ethan could, and that led to some awkward situations like the one he narrowly avoided.

Ethan quickly retreated to the solace of a public bathroom to talk. Gabriel had a way of getting under his skin until he finally took the time to talk to the mischievous spirit. Better now than during a critical mission when he needed to focus on fighting.

The bathroom was dim, with the only lights above the bathroom mirrors. This was good. Sometimes Gabriel wouldn't appear solid unless he was in the partial shade.

"You there?" Ethan hissed.

"Are we alone?" Gabriel asked back.

Ethan checked the only two stalls. No feet dangled underneath the doors. Chances were that he really was alone. Or else someone else would "see" him talk to nothing.

"Yeah," he replied.

Sure enough, Gabriel walked up beside Ethan's shoulder. He came in the same form as a boy with rags. The mysterious boy glided across the floor with bare feet barely touching the ground. But Gabriel was an ice spirit and not a relatively harmless human.

"How long were you listening?" Ethan said.

"The whole time," Gabriel replied. "What's the matter?"

The faucet squeaked as Ethan twisted it. He put his hands in the running water and began scrubbing them. Gabriel watched all the while.

"You're planning something," he replied. "That's what."

Gabriel folded his arms. He tried to make an intimidating face, but the face of a child could only be as scary as a teddy bear.

"In any case, you've got a job to do. One you're not comfortable doing. How unfortunate."

The ice spirit then decided to try touching a paper towel dispenser behind both of them. His fingers passed through the dangling towel, but the piece of cheap paper barely moved.

"You're the reason why I'm in this mess," said Ethan. He twisted the faucet back. After a drawn-out creak, the water stopped running.

Gabriel turned back to Ethan. "Water under the bridge," the mysterious boy replied with a smirk. "Just let it go. But you can't deny being afraid, can you? Your Sol knows what you want."

The air grew cold. Ethan could see his breath in the chilling air. Gabriel pointed to the bathroom mirror. Ethan had little choice but to look.

A thin sheet of frost appeared over the surface of the bathroom mirror. The ice coalesced to create a frosted silhouette of Gabriel's other form: the knight with a sword in hand. This was the form everyone else knew was his Sol.

The Sol was his inner spirit, and that gave him the benefit of seeing Wraiths in disguise. Everyone else needed special training to spot a monster in human skin. Sol users had a talent for magic as well.

Everyone in Ethan's family knew a magic trick or two. But Gabriel was a strange case, and Ethan was not keen on letting anyone else know why.

"My Sol is a part of me," Ethan muttered. He repeated it for the thousandth time, like a mantra, to keep his sanity. "It's just for beating down Wraiths."

"But he could be better," Gabriel replied. "Stronger."

The frosted figure of Gabriel's silhouette mutated in shape. It grew jagged wings and widened in size. The image quickly expanded upon the mirror it was drawn on, and nearly jumped out at Ethan.

Ethan quickly slapped his hand against the mirror. Room-temperature water ate away the soft frost. He melted away the cold silhouette, wings and all.

"I can't let him loose," said Ethan. "Not again."

Gabriel walked up to Ethan. Ethan dared not look him in the eye. But Gabriel stared anyway.

"How much longer can you keep me down? And you can no longer be denied what you need."

Ethan sharply turned away. He snatched a paper towel and wiped his hands dry.

"Great," he mumbled. "I'm going nuts 'cause a kid in my head is talking to me."

He crumpled the towel and dunked it into the trashcan before leaving. The ice spirit watched him all the while but didn't bother forcing his message any further. They were bound together whether Ethan liked it or not.