

runebreaker



the runebinder chronicles
book two

Alex R. Kahler

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part one

to be a monster

*“Repent
and pray our Lord will forgive.*

*Repent
and bathe thy darkest sins
in the fires of His mercy.”*

Sermon of Brother Jeremiah, 2 P.R. (Post Resurrection)

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one

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Fear pulsed through Aidan as he knelt by the grave.

Fear, and something darker. Something stronger.

Power.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I’m sorry. I’ll save you.”

He pressed his hands into the soil while lightning strobed above and rain lashed against his skin. Pressed his hands and reached deep into the Sphere of Fire burning within his chest, that magical center of energy that guided him forward like a second conscience. Power blossomed within him, flooded him with heat as flames wrapped through his veins and twined down his fingertips, traced crimson lines across the rumbling earth.

Not just rumbling.

Screaming.

Distant screaming. Begging for him to stop.

He couldn’t stop. He had to save her.

He had to bring her back.

Aidan reached deeper into that damnable light within. Power reached back. Fire burned through him, cast away all doubt, all fear. In Fire’s embrace, he was omnipotent. He was a god.

“Stop!” the boy called.

Aidan ignored him. Barely heard him through Fire’s siren song. Why should he stop, when he was so close to getting everything he’d ever dreamed of? Why should he stop, when he was so close to making things *right*?

“Please!” the boy called. Closer, but not close enough to douse Aidan’s flame. Closer, but only enough to be a nuisance. Fire raged that this boy—this *nothing*—should try to stop him. Nothing could stop him. No more.

Not even death.

Aidan looked up.

The boy ran toward him, and in that moment Aidan knew the boy was a Hunter like him. From the accent, American—like him. The boy wore the same blacks, albeit a different cut.

Water pulsed in the boy's gut, sending thick rain drops whirling around him. And he carried a bladed quarterstaff.

Aidan knew something else in that momentary glance.

The boy wanted to end him.

The boy was too late.

Lightning flashed and the ground rumbled, graves spilling forth bones as the soil before him churned. Power was everything. Fire was everything. And there, deep below the earth's surface, he felt the power connect. Felt the spark of life flare.

Felt her awaken.

A hand shot from the earth. Black nails. Soot skin.

Fire pulsed in his heart. Victory. *Victory.*

"No!" the boy screamed.

Aidan narrowed his eyes. Felt the words of Fire coil around his tongue.

"You are too late, Tenn," he spoke in a voice that was not his.

Aidan raised his earth-covered hands. Reached deep through the flame within while the buried woman pulled herself from her grave.

And when he sent his power forward, a billow of hellfire and rage, he saw the boy try to defend himself. A shield of water, hissing and steaming against the flame that burned brighter than a star. His water was no match for Aidan's fury.

There was no match in the world for Aidan's hate.

Fire burned through Aidan. So bright he was a sun. So bright he felt nothing but flame, but ecstasy. So hot, he was no longer himself. No thing but power.

He gave in to that glorious heat, that terrible strength, and poured every last piece of himself into the fire burning against the intruder's shield.

He felt the barrier disintegrate. He felt flame ensconce flesh.

And then, like music to his ears, he heard Tenn scream as the boy's veins boiled to ash and steam.

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Ash and steam

Ash and heat and steam.

And screams.

Aidan woke covered in sweat, his dream burning as awareness broke through the haze.
His room coiled with flames.

Fire licked up the walls, curled over his bed like crimson petals. Billowed from *him*.

He stared at his hands in distant fascination as fire curled around them, making his tattoos writhe like serpents on his skin. The tattoos on his knuckles: BURN THEM. A promise. A demand.

Another scream, and he looked up.

Someone stood at the foot of his burning bed.

Someone covered in flame.

The figure before him screamed out again, clawed at the flames eating his skin alive. Fire billowed from Aidan, cocooned his room in heat, in ecstasy. Curled against the intruder like a lover.

Aidan wondered if this was another dream.

It had to be.

There was no way his Sphere had opened up in his sleep. No way Fire had acted without his will guiding it. This was a dream, his subconscious acting out, because the alternative was beyond impossible.

He watched. And he waited for the dream to end as some small part of him wondered, idly, who the burning figure was, and if it mattered when it was all just a metaphor.

It was only when the figure dropped to the floor and the scent of burnt flesh finally slugged through his nostrils that Aidan realized it maybe wasn't a dream.

Realized he wasn't waking up.

And when Fire winked out from his chest and the flames disintegrated like an afterthought, Aidan realized he had killed someone in his sleep.

Maybe it was the trace of Fire still burning in his veins, but he also realized, deep down, that he didn't truly care.