

Chapter 9

CONNOR

With Ethan gone, now somewhere in the depths of the house, Connor finally had a moment to think. The man's heavy boots thudded against the wooden floor, receding down the hallway and already out of sight.

He needed to survey the scene in the field and, if possible, find answers as to who Otmund really was and what he ultimately wanted. He also needed to find the ghoul—or, more likely, find a way to avoid it altogether. If it had warped Henry's mind, like the stories claimed, he didn't want to give it the chance to corrupt him, too.

Last night, the monster had driven its black sword through man and boulder alike with astonishing ease. To an enchanted creature like that, perhaps mortals truly were inferior.

And, now, it had marked him. He ran his thumb over the dark scar on his chest, and it glowed briefly green through the fibers of his shirt.

Connor stretched. Though the room briefly spun around him, he kept his balance. His joints popped as he regained his composure, and a flood of relief washed through him.

The clean pants Kiera had offered still lay on the mattress, along with a few remaining crumbs from the bread he had devoured. As he tugged off his bloodstained pants and pulled on the clean pair, he eyed the crumbs and pitcher.

His stomach still growled, and even crumbs looked tempting.

Ignoring the ache for more food, Connor walked down the hall and rounded the corner to find Ethan waiting in an empty kitchen. The unlit stove in the corner was stained black with soot. Half-burned logs sat in a pile of ash, the embers long dead despite the lingering scent of burning wood in the air.

A long, hand-carved table with inlaid designs along the edge took up most of the room. To Connor's relief, his pack and empty sheaths sat on its surface, along with a pile of his daggers. A stool lay on its side in the middle of the walkway, and Connor stepped over it as he snatched his bag off the table.

It only took a few moments for him to buckle his crisscrossed sheaths to his back and rifle through his bag to ensure his meager possessions hadn't disappeared overnight.

His coin pouch. His supply of dried venison. His flask. To his surprise, nothing had disappeared.

For now, he slipped the various daggers into the bag. He could take the time to hide them on his body later, when he didn't have an audience.

“You don’t travel light,” Ethan said, his gaze locked on the bag of weapons over Connor’s shoulder.

“Can’t afford to.”

“Fair enough. I suppose a drifter can’t be too careful. That’s a hard life to choose.”

“Never said I chose it.”

Connor grabbed the last dagger from the table’s surface and shoved it into his bag. Beneath the weapon, an elaborate tree had been etched into the corner of the wood. He brushed his thumb along the artwork, momentarily stunned by the intricate craftsmanship.

The artwork continued down the edge of the table, and he ran his finger over the magnificent carvings. Trees. Acorns. Fanged deer. He had seen these ornate pieces of art in a few of the wealthier taverns he had visited, but never in a home.

Only rich men could afford something like this.

“Did you buy this?” he asked.

“No, I carved it.” Ethan gave a modest little shrug. “We can’t move it with us, but I was a carpenter by trade. I’ll make a new one.”

With that, the stocky man opened the door and stepped out onto a makeshift porch. As they walked outside, a gust of wind blew through the trees, and the house swayed gently beneath Connor’s feet. He frowned, the sensation eerily similar to standing on a boat, and his childhood on the sea kicked in as he intuitively leaned into the shifting porch under his feet.

A large, perfectly square hole in the porch revealed shifting patches of the ground below, and Ethan sat at its edge. Without warning, the massive man slipped through it, disappearing in an instant. Connor peered through to find Ethan carefully climbing down the ladder nailed to the trunk as the house swayed in the gale around them.

In the sky above, a hawk cried before diving through a gap in the trees, and Connor’s newly enhanced eyes caught every movement. Though his body still ached with every step, he crossed to the edge and studied what he could see through gaps in the canopy.

The lone spire of the ruins stabbed at the sky, its crumbling white stone covered with ivy. Sunbeams illuminated an idyllic field below, and only the occasional dark brown stain on the white boulders served as grim reminders of what had happened in the night.

Even from up here, everything seemed clearer. He peered across the canopy, his vision sharper than ever before as he scanned the miles of forest beyond.

“You going to stay up there?” Ethan shouted from the ground, a hint of impatience in his tone.

“Not a chance in hell,” Connor muttered.

With a few stiff and unstable steps as the strong winds shifted the porch beneath his feet, Connor made it to the hole and tenderly sat at its edge. His muscles screamed, but the more he moved, the less they hurt.

Only the searing wound in his side truly throbbed.

He grimaced as he slipped through the opening and gripped the wooden ladder nailed to the trunk, taking each rung carefully as he eased himself toward the ground.

From the occasional fight with bandits to being ambushed twice in his sleep, Connor was familiar with pain. Whatever Otmund's weapon had done to him, however, was different than anything he had experienced in his life. He wouldn't be able to walk this one off—he had to heal, and that unfortunately meant rest.

Damn it.

On the ground, Ethan leaned against a nearby tree, arms crossed as he studied Connor's every movement. A smirk tugged at the corner of the man's mouth, like he couldn't quite believe this was the hero that had saved his family.

"You try getting stabbed with a cursed dagger, and we'll see how quickly *you* recover." Connor winced again as he reached the last rung of the ladder. His boots hit the dirt, and the wound in his side ripped open. He grimaced with discomfort and pressed his hand against the injury.

"Fair point." Ethan chuckled as he kicked off the tree and strode into the meadow.

As they stepped through the trees and into the decimated field, Connor paused. Patches of dark red grass baked in the sun. Handprints covered the white boulders, smeared and faded from whatever had licked them in the night. A dozen swords littered the ground, along with the occasional golden breastplate or helmet.

But no bodies.

Around him, the gore-soaked grass trembled in a light breeze as he stepped into the overgrown arena where he'd fought for his life. Where a nobleman had come to kill a king. Where a specter had stalked through the shadows.

Where his life had changed, possibly far more than he could fathom.

Connor retraced his steps from the onslaught, surveying the path his battle had taken across the ground. The boot prints in the dirt. The broken stems. The flattened grasses where he had been knocked on his back.

A golden helmet lay in the center of the meadow, streaks of dried blood along the dented nose plate. Beneath it, a small pool of slobber drowned the crushed weeds.

The blightwolves had feasted.

In the sea of glinting metal that littered the field, one weapon caught his eye. The first sword he'd lost in the battle lay on the ground nearby, its simple iron hilt only a shade darker than the blade itself. He braced himself as he reached for it, but the wound in his side stung even more than he'd expected. With a pained grimace, he slid his tailored sword into one of the twin sheaths on his back.

With every step, Connor's muscles screamed a little less. His world steadied a little more. Out here, the scent of grass and honeysuckle floated on the air, more vivid and beautiful than it had been yesterday. More breathtaking than it ever had been before.

It was as though he could smell them all for the first time, as if he finally saw the world as it was supposed to be seen—as a vibrant cacophony of experiences lingering on the air.

Either the vividness was the ghoul's doing, or it was just the effect a near-death experience had on a man's mind.

A long streak of the king's blood led into the ruins, and Connor followed it. As he reached the time-stained boulders along the edge of the cathedral, his second sword gleamed in the sun. He reached for it, his body shouting again as he sheathed his second blade.

Along the nearest wall, a long streak of blood dragged across the crumbling ruins. More of it caked the grass, almost black as it baked in the sun. He paused at a red handprint on the white stone of a nearby wall and held his palm up to it.

It matched perfectly.

Death itself had nearly taken him last night.

Determined to find something—anything—that could explain what had happened, he followed the streak of blood into the ruins, deeper and deeper along the route the nobleman had taken to escape him. Though Ethan and Kiera were worried an army could come through at any moment, he doubted it.

If soldiers were going to rush through, they would've done it by now. A few dozen men had waited on the other side for the portal to close, a warning to him should he try to enter, but they had never so much as inched toward the opening.

Their fear held them at bay, and though Connor hadn't seen the ghoul since he'd woken, he knew it was here. It had to be.

Waiting.

The long streak of blood ended at the large green circle of gemstone embedded in the grass. He knelt, examining it, wondering what this could possibly be. Last night, the nobleman had sliced a man's throat to open it. Though red streaks stained the pebbles beside the green stone, the circle itself showed nothing. Not a drop. Not so much as a smear, as though it had absorbed every bit of the blood spilled on its surface.

As Connor knelt before the pedestal, an elaborate circle in its center caught his eye. Five small divots lined the ring, and a small green stone lay in one of them. He tried to lift the tiny gem, but it wouldn't budge.

A Rift, the ghoul had called it. A portal of immense power that could effortlessly take a man from one place to the next, and yet it lay abandoned in an empty field.

Connor drew one of his swords and dipped the blade along the side of the stone, wondering how deep it went. The blade slid into the grass, screeching as it scraped against the perfect stone, and he buried his blade to the hilt before the screeching stopped.

It went on forever.

He wondered how the hell this thing worked. It was a portal to another part of Saldia, that much he knew, but that was about it. This was ancient magic, far beyond anything he'd ever seen.

Boots crunched the grass, the now-familiar heavy gait trailing behind him. Connor looked over his shoulder as Ethan rounded the corner, wrinkles creasing around the burly man's eyes. "Wesley and I tried to lift that, once."

Connor frowned, sheathing his sword as he stood. "What happened?"

Ethan chuckled. "It zapped me. Hard. Knocked me out for an hour and scared Kiera half to death."

"So, it can't be moved?"

"Doesn't seem like it can, though I'm not sure why we would want to."

"It's a portal to other parts of Saldia," Connor said with a shrug. "That could prove useful if I ever figured out how to use it."

Ethan huffed. "A portal that could bring your enemies to your door."

"Or you to theirs," Connor pointed out, lifting one eyebrow to make his point.

The burly man sighed. "Don't go hunting for them. You don't know what you're up against."

Connor frowned. "Do you?"

"No," the older man said with an irritated glare. "That's the point."

Connor chuckled, cracking his neck again as he studied the portal, still wondering if it could be of any use. Apparently having had his fill, however, Ethan muttered under his breath and retreated into the ruins. Connor debated staying and studying the ground for clues or something he might've missed yesterday, but the blightwolves had eaten his evidence. He could've stayed here all day and not found a damn thing.

With an irritated groan, he stood. The walls around him blurred as he lost his balance, still disoriented from his wounds, but he set one hand on the wall until his world steadied. His vision sharpened once more, more quickly this time, and he followed Ethan out of the once-great cathedral.

“I’m grateful the blightwolves only hunt at night,” Ethan confessed as Connor reached him.

“You and me both. Listen, Ethan. You and your family gave me food, kindness, shelter, and clothes. A good deed for a good deed, and I consider any debt you had to be paid. This is where I let you go back to them, and I go on my way.”

The man laughed, the slight wrinkles in his forehead more pronounced out here in the brilliant sunlight. “I can’t make you do a damn thing. We both know that, but here’s what you haven’t considered. Hell opened up on you last night. You’re in the middle of a war between king’s guard and rich men and who knows what else. No one should go through that alone. Sit at my table, eat my damn food, and heal yourself before you go off on some reckless journey to figure out what’s coming for you. You hear me?”

Ethan paused, quirking one eyebrow as he dared Connor to disagree.

He didn’t.

The carpenter prodded Connor’s shoulder. “And I have to add that if you *don’t* come back with me now, Kiera will hunt you down. You have no idea what that woman is capable of.”

With that, Ethan walked off into the forest, chuckling under his breath.

Connor hesitated, his hands on his hips as he watched the man walk away. He shook his head, not entirely sure what he wanted to do.

He’d saved their lives, but they had also saved his. They brought him into the safety of the trees and out of a blightwolf’s jaws, and they clearly didn’t pose a threat to him.

If they had wanted him dead, they would’ve left him for the blightwolves to eat.

To follow them, though, to take more of their food—it didn’t feel right. He’d lived this long on his own, and it was the only life he knew.

As he rubbed his jaw, lost in thought, the wound in his side bit into him again. A torrent of pain shot through his body, knocking him off balance. His shoulder rammed into a nearby boulder, which shot another tsunami of agony down his spine. He hissed through his teeth. The pain rattled his mind, and he bent over, resting his hands on his knees as he rode out the wave.

Otmund—whoever he was—wanted Connor dead. The nobleman had managed to kill a king, so he didn’t seem like the sort to give up easily. Living with the Finns for any amount of time would endanger them.

As another gale whipped through the woodland, the treehouse swayed in the corner of his eye. He studied it, a home buried in the trees, hidden almost perfectly amongst the canopy. Only the occasional window or plank of wood peeked through gaps in the leaves.

These people weren't stupid. They fought with the blightwolves on a regular basis, and they had chosen to live in the freedom of the woods, same as him. They had an inkling of the danger he was in, and for whatever reason, they wanted him along regardless.

With one last look at the blood-stained field, he made his choice. Healing from a battle like that could take ages, and strangers showing him kindness was a nice change of pace.

"Fine," he muttered as he followed Ethan's path into the quiet forest. "You win, you stubborn old coot."