

Chapter 8

CONNOR

Connor woke with a start.

As he bolted upright, agonizing pain splintered through his body. Every vein burned. Every beat of his heart flooded his limbs with fire, like he was being roasted alive from within.

His leg. His back. His left arm. His shoulder. The injuries from his battle sizzled, screaming at him, and yet the injury in his side seared the most.

He let out a strangled groan of pain as he pressed his palm against the wound Otmund had given him with that infuriating little green dagger. Fates above *and* below—that hurt like hell. He fell backward and clenched his teeth to help him push through the pain.

Damn that rat bastard.

The haunting sensation of claws ripping through his chest followed shortly after, tearing through him just as it had when the ghoul first attacked him in the field. He sucked in a steadying breath, eyes shut as he tried to ride out the second excruciating flood that tore through his body.

With short and shallow breaths, he waited for the biting sting to subside. It gradually receded, and though it didn't fade completely, it finally reached a level he could tolerate.

At first, he simply listened to the world around him with his eyes closed. The heavy silence weighed on his chest like a soggy blanket. Birds sang, their voices muffled. A board creaked in the house. His back lay flat against a lumpy surface that scratched at his skin.

Instead of bolting upright this time, he merely opened his eyes and cast a wary glance at his surroundings. Wooden walls. Light pouring in from behind his head. A chair in the corner. A hand-carved dresser, sitting across from him with one of its drawers open and empty.

"Where the hell am I?" he muttered, running a hand through his hair as he tried to piece together the last fragments of memories from the night before.

The silhouettes overhead.

The hands lifting him off the grass.

The soft murmur of a woman's voice.

He adjusted his weight on the straw mattress beneath him, cursing under his breath with each ripple of pain that shot up his spine. Moving far slower than he would've liked, he finally managed to sit up and peer out the window behind him.

Daylight.

Judging by the soft sunbeams fluttering through the trees, it couldn't have been more than an hour after dawn. He cast aside the rough sheet covering him and swung his legs over the edge of the bed, but his entire body protested every movement with fresh ripples of pain.

As he stared down at his ripped and bloodstained pants, he paused to let the rush fade.

The wound in his side still ached worse than the other injuries, and the muscles in his back spasmed in retaliation to the pain. Whatever magic that glowing green blade held was cursed, and Connor never wanted to see the damn thing again.

If he did, he vowed to smash it with a rock.

With the sheet gone, the cool air brushed across his bare chest, and he looked down to see himself covered in blood-stained bandages. He rolled out his good shoulder, the muscles stiff and aching, and he cracked his neck while he slowly got his bearings.

A blurred shadow in his periphery caught his attention, and it took a moment for him to realize it was his own bicep. He hesitated, squinting at the massive muscle that couldn't possibly have belonged to him.

He poked it to ensure he wasn't hallucinating.

Solid muscle, and unmistakably *his*. Sure, his years in the forest had toned his body, but he'd never had a build like this.

Connor studied his hands, his forearms, his biceps, his chest. All his muscles had grown as he'd slept, now far larger and stronger than they'd been yesterday.

Either that, or he was delirious.

On his sternum, a thick black scar stretched across his skin where the ghoul had ripped into him. He ran his finger over it, and the patch of black glowed briefly green.

Last night came back to him in a rush.

The scream.

The green flash of light through the forest.

The dying man crawling from the ruins.

The royal guardsmen.

The specter, drawing a jet-black sword.

A brush with death, so close he could still taste the blood.

Yet again, he ran his finger along the dark scar. Beneath his touch, the mark glowed as brightly green as fresh spellgust ore.

Magic.

It had to be.

Nothing else in Saldia carried that brilliant light within it.

Magic—and in *his* body.

In a violent rush, his head cleared. His eyes glossed over with shock, and the weight of what this meant sank clear into his bones.

According to the ballads of Henry's twelve-year conquest of Saldia, the wraith had given the man unnatural power, far beyond what any potion master could conjure with a cauldron. His skill, strength, and unrivaled might had surpassed even the augmented soldiers he'd fought on the battlefields.

Entire kingdoms had crumbled beneath Henry's sword, all thanks to the phantom fighting at his side. No one knew what the wraith was or where it had come from—just that it fought like Death itself.

Last night, Connor had met that ghoul for himself and survived. It had clawed its way into his very soul, but it hadn't killed him.

I will make you powerful beyond imagination, it had promised.

Out there, in that field under the Saldian stars, Henry had died. As hard as it was for Connor to fathom, it seemed as though the wraith had already chosen its new master.

It had chosen him, and if that was true, he now had access to magic.

Real magic, not like the watered-down counterfeits sold in the southern towns.

Dark magic. The kind treacherous people usually wanted for themselves.

According to the stories, the wraith had been by Henry's side in every battle, in every interrogation, in every courtroom. Some said the wraith had corrupted Henry; others saw the specter as a blessing from the Fates, given to a worthy man so he could rule the unfit.

Everyone could agree, though, that Henry would've still been a merchant if not for the ghoul. They said it in hushed tones for fear of him somehow hearing, but they said it nonetheless.

If the ghoul had sculpted Henry into a king of kings, Connor now had the power of emperors and the undead at his disposal.

Flooded with the weight of it all, he let out a string of muffled curses.

He didn't even know what the hell to do with power like that. His whole life, he'd scrimped and saved to get an augmentation of his own, but he'd never pooled together enough coin. Like so many others, he'd always craved magic. He'd just never had the chance to wield it.

Until now.

And others would try to take it.

His ear twitched, picking up movement beyond the closed door. Labored breathing. The huff of air from lungs. The murmured voices of two—no, three people. Two men and a woman, from the tone.

“...asleep, yet...”

“...where are we going...”

“...not until I say...”

Snips and pieces of a conversation without any context, sure, but he could still hear words through a solid door. His hearing had never picked up a conversation from this far away. He leaned toward the voices, astonished.

Everything in him had been enhanced overnight. His vision. His hearing. His body.

“What the hell did that ghost do to me?” he muttered, staring again at his hands.

Quick footsteps pattered across the hardwood just outside the door, and seconds later, the entry swung open. A familiar woman walked in, her cheeks flushed as she threw two bags on the dresser and yanked open the remaining drawers. Her dark blonde braids circled her head, pinned to her scalp in elegant loops, and a loose strand fell across her face as she worked. A few tight wrinkles pulled at the edges of her eyes when she frowned. Muttering under her breath, she reached into each of the dresser’s drawers and carelessly shoved the rolls of fabric into each bag.

This was clearly the woman from the meadow—and she was very much alive.

“So much to do,” she whispered, her eyes glossing over as she worked. “Where did I put those—no, aren’t they in here?”

“It’s good to see you’re not dead,” Connor said.

The woman gasped and spun violently around, the bags thudding onto the floor as she pressed her back to the wall. With one hand on her chest and her eyes as wide as plates, her jaw dropped open. “You’re awake!”

“Did you do this?” He gestured to the bandages on his abdomen and thigh.

She shook her head. “My boy did. Wesley’s a bit younger than you, but I’d wager not by much. He’s quite the medic, that one. I’m Kiera. Are you thirsty? You must be. I’ll get you something to eat, too. We don’t have much, but what’s ours is—”

“Don’t,” Connor said on reflex.

He didn’t accept handouts. What he ate, he worked for.

“Hush, you, and lay down.” She waved him backward, lips pursed with impatience as she ordered him about. “I’ll get you something to eat.”

“That’s not—”

“How hungry are you?” she interrupted with a cursory glance over his torso. “You look like you could swallow several horses and still have room to eat the barn.”

“I—uh—thank you?”

“Hush, now, and lie down. You need to rest.” Kiera jabbed her finger into his chest, avoiding any bandages as she coaxed him backward and grabbed the sheet off the ground. With a flourish in the air, she stretched it out above him, and it gently settled over his body once again.

“Look,” he said as he tossed the sheet aside again. “You were kind to bandage me and bring me away from the blightwolves, but I’ll get out of your hair.”

He stood, wavering slightly as he got to his feet. He lost his balance, and he let out an irritated sigh as he had to sit back down.

With each movement, every inch of him roared in protest. Damn that stupid little green blade.

“Mm-hmm,” she said dubiously, crossing her arms as she studied him. “Excellent fighter or not, you’re in no condition to travel on your own, and I won’t allow it. You’ll travel with us.”

“Us?” Connor asked with a glance toward the open door and the empty hallway beyond.

“If you won’t rest, at least get some clean clothes on,” she ordered, ignoring him.

He tried again to stand, but the pain in his torso sparked a surge of nausea that burned in the back of his mouth, and he didn’t have the strength to argue. Instead, he rubbed his temple and leaned one elbow on his knee while he watched her flit about the room.

Kiera looked over her shoulder at the drawers and rummaged through a few options before selecting something amidst the clutter. With a soft grunt of effort, she yanked out a few pieces of clothing and carefully laid a simple brown tunic and a pair of green pants on the edge of the mattress.

“You’re about my husband’s size, I think,” she added with another cursory glance over Connor’s muscles. “Though the fit won’t be completely right. You can wear these for now, and I’ll sew you something proper once we get to the new place.”

“New place?” Connor asked, pinching the bridge of his nose as the world spun around him. “What new—”

“Hush and change,” she chided. “I’m going to get you something to eat.”

With that, she left the room and shut the door behind her, the forgotten bags and scattered fabric still laying askew across the floor.

For a moment, Connor sat in the stunned silence the woman had left in her wake, barely following her train of thought. If she possessed the ability to listen, she didn't use it much.

He chuckled.

To her credit, she certainly had a fighter's spirit. The hovering, the insistence that a grown man do her bidding—honestly, she reminded him a little of his mother. The way she spoke. The way she carried herself like a matriarch.

His smile fell, and he rubbed his jaw to distract himself from the memories.

A second set of footsteps thudded toward the door, far heavier than Kiera's. Louder. The heavy thumps of a man's boots.

Connor tensed, anticipating conflict. Though Kiera had mentioned a son and a husband in her whirlwind of an introduction, he hadn't seen either yesterday.

The door opened again, and this time, a stocky man with broad shoulders filled the doorway, blocking the route to the hall with his bulk. He ducked as he entered, his dark hair and a thick black beard framing his weathered face. His eyes instantly landed on Connor, and he scowled.

Connor met the man's gaze, eyes narrowing at the potential threat.

"There we are," Kiera said with a broad smile as she stepped around the fuming man, her arms overflowing with food. A loaf of bread sat tucked beneath one arm. She held a balled-up cloth in one hand and a clay pitcher in the other.

Connor watched her through the corner of his eye as she sat on the edge of the mattress opposite him and placed it all on the rough linen. The corners of the balled-up fabric opened to reveal several strips of dried meat.

The salty aroma of venison snaked into the air, and his stomach gurgled at the idea of food. His throat ached at the promise of a drink, but he refused to indulge himself with a looming threat blocking the doorway.

Her eyes creased as she smiled warmly, and she watched him in the ensuing silence. With her hands on her lap, she waited patiently for him to begin.

But his gaze never strayed from the burly man standing by the door. Even in an ordinary fight, when Connor wasn't recovering from a brush with death, this guy would've been a challenge. His broad shoulders and thickset body implied incredible strength, and Connor had no inkling of the man's fighting ability.

It seemed he had found himself in a fresh pot of trouble.

Kiera peered over her shoulder, her gaze drifting between the two men, and she rolled her eyes. "Ethan, enough. After what he's done for—"

"I think it's time he and I had a chat about last night," the man interrupted, his gruff voice booming through the small room.

"Ethan, *really*," Kiera snapped. "You could show a *little* gratitude for the man who saved your wife and children's lives."

"Kiera, take the girls and leave with Wesley," Ethan ordered without taking his eyes off Connor.

His wife groaned, shaking her head in exasperation. "We don't have time for this, Ethan. There's no telling when an army might come through that damned portal again. And that young man," she added pointing at Connor. "He saved us. We would be dead without him, so I would like you to show a bit of kindness!"

Ethan didn't respond. His expression didn't change an ounce. He simply shifted his attention, turning the intensity of his gaze on her.

Kiera frowned and tilted her head toward Connor, a soft apology in her gaze as she smiled again. "When he's done being an ass, I expect you to come and live with us, at least until you get better."

Ethan groaned. "Kiera—"

"I won't have no for an answer." She quirked one eyebrow, her gaze fixed on Connor. "Now, you eat up. I expect you to eat all of this, you hear?"

A grin tugged at the corner of Connor's mouth, but with Ethan glowering at him, he resisted the impulse to indulge it.

Without another word, Kiera grabbed the packs she had been working on and stuffed them to the brim before slinging them over her shoulder. The sleeve of a yellow blouse hung from the opening in one bag, the hem trailing along the floorboards, but she didn't seem to notice. The woman charged through the door and shut it behind her. Her footsteps receded into the house.

In the silence that followed, Ethan crossed his arms as he stood between Connor and the exit. "Well?"

"You're welcome," Connor said with a nod in Kiera's direction.

Ethan frowned, chin lifting slightly at Connor's cheek. "Fine. We'll do this the hard way."

The burly man grabbed the chair from the corner of the room and dragged it slowly across the floor, letting the legs scrape against the wood. With a quiet groan, he slammed it down in the center of the room and sat on it backwards, leaning his forearms against the backrest as he stared Connor down.

A classic intimidation tactic, but Connor couldn't blame him. This was Ethan's house, his family had just been threatened. He no doubt needed to ensure Connor didn't have other intentions.

"Tell me your name," Ethan demanded, his steely gaze never once wavering.

For a moment, Connor debated not answering. He was hardly in the mood for this. He had done the man a favor and had no intention of spending another moment in the man's house.

Such was the life of a drifter, after all. He had to keep moving.

As Connor adjusted in his seat, his muscles screamed again. Momentarily disoriented from the brutal jolt of pain, he cursed under his breath and held the enchanted wound in his side.

Showing weakness at a time like this could cost him his life, depending on Ethan's morals and motivations—neither of which Connor could guess at quite yet. He had to swallow the pain and bury it deep down until he could find a quiet place to heal.

To mask the true depths of his misery, he leaned his back against the headboard and tried to stem the rising tide of fire through his blood.

It didn't work.

He could barely contain a pained grimace, and the room around him spun. Despite the risk, he briefly closed his eyes to re-center himself.

Hurt. Unarmed. Half-naked. He was clearly at the disadvantage here, with wounds that would take ages to heal. He needed to find his swords, and to do that, he needed a chance to rifle through the bloodstained grasses.

This man held the clear advantage, and Connor would have to play his cards carefully.

As he adjusted on the mattress, the water pitcher sitting on the sheet tipped over. In a lightning-fast movement that seemed impossible for such a massive man, Ethan snatched the handle to keep it from spilling. The motion appeared to be instinctive, like a father reaching for a child about to fall.

Ethan silently offered the pitcher to Connor. His expression didn't change despite the act of kindness, and Connor couldn't deny the ache in his throat any longer.

With a subtle nod of thanks, he grabbed it and drank straight from the jug. A thin stream of water snaked down his jaw, cold and delightful. The fresh water tasted like spring, crisp and light, and he closed his eyes in gratitude as it rushed down his throat.

The simple act ignited a deep hunger within him. His stomach growled, and a primal ache ripped through him, as if it had been waiting for the opportune moment to demand food.

Despite the deer he'd caught two days ago, it suddenly felt as though he hadn't eaten anything in weeks.

He eyed the bread and dried meat, his stomach rumbling, and it took every ounce of his willpower not to lunge across the bed.

"After a fight like that, I'd be parched, too," Ethan admitted.

The comment sparked dozens of questions in the back of Connor's mind, but he couldn't give them the time of day. Not with an insatiable hunger like this.

He set the empty jug on the floor and grabbed the bread, barely hesitating to smell it before he took a hefty bite. Kiera had offered it to him, after all, and he could justify eating their food by accepting it as payment for saving their lives. The warm crust cracked beneath his teeth, fresh from the oven, and he couldn't help but close his eyes to relish the rich and hearty flavor.

"My name's Connor," he said between bites.

"Connor," Ethan echoed, his shoulders relaxing as he finally got a name. "You did right by us, and even if Kiera doesn't think so, I'm grateful. My name's Ethan Finn, and as you've probably guessed, that was my wife. You've already met Isabella and Fiona, our daughters. Wesley is our son, and you'll meet him in a bit."

Connor doubted it.

He was a loner, used to wandering through the woods. As kind as these people were, he had no intention of staying.

"Do you want to tell me what happened out there?" Ethan asked, tilting his head slightly as he waited for an answer.

Connor shook his head as he swallowed the last of the bread. "Instead of that, maybe you can tell me where you were when your wife and daughters were left alone in a cabin in the middle of blightwolf territory?"

It was a fair question. A man's duty was to protect his family, first and foremost. As far as he could tell, Ethan had no right to sit here and interrogate him, least of all judge him.

Ethan's eyes narrowed briefly, as if daring Connor to say it again, but he ultimately sighed in resignation. "You heard the blightwolves, too?"

Connor nodded. "Every soul in the Ancient Woods can hear the blightwolves."

"They've been coming around the house more," Ethan admitted, rubbing the creases by his tired eyes. "I figured they could smell us and were trying to root us out. Trying to hunt us. Now, though, I wonder if they could feel something happening in those damn ruins. Wesley and I were leading them away, trying to throw them off our scent and get the beasts farther from the family."

Connor scoffed as he brushed crumbs of his hands. "How can a man lead blightwolves anywhere? They're bloodthirsty and brilliant."

"A bow, arrows, and a bit of nerve," Ethan countered, squaring his shoulders. "That's how."

Huh.

Impressive.

Ethan rubbed his jaw. Dark bags under his eyes suggested he hadn't slept, probably because there was a strange man in his house.

"I owe you a great debt," he said again, this time more sincerely.

"You don't owe me anything." With the bread devoured, Connor grabbed the strips of meat. "Consider yourself paid in full."

"A light lunch isn't remotely enough to—"

Connor ignored the man's protests as he tried once again to stand. Though pain ripped through him, he braced himself against it. This time, he was able to retain his balance by leaning against the wall.

"Cut the humble horseshit," Ethan demanded as he stood as well. "I give credit where credit is due, and my family's lives are worth more than a few strips of dried venison."

"Of course," Connor said. "That's why I ate the bread, too."

Ethan groaned. "Look—"

"I wasn't trying to be a hero, Ethan. I did what I had to." He grabbed the shirt Kiera had given him and tenderly tugged it over the bandages covering most of his body. Jolts of pain shot through him with every movement, but he did his best to ignore them.

"You could've run, but you fought off the people who would have killed my family." Ethan gestured toward him with a massive palm. "You risked your life and got your ass handed to you in the process. That's what heroes do, right?"

Connor frowned, glaring briefly at the burly man as he bit into another strip of dried meat.

"Kiera told me what happened in the field," the stocky man continued. "I know about the soldiers. The nobleman's order to kill all witnesses. The way the guards circled you. The way you took them out, one by one. Kiera had to cover the girls' eyes for that." Ethan stroked his beard, his brows tilting upward with remorse at the mention of what his daughters might have witnessed last night. "I know what happened, but I don't know *why*. I want to know why you were in these woods."

Ethan absently set the chair against the wall, his back to Connor, but there was weight to the question. Of everything Ethan had asked so far, it seemed this was the only lingering answer he truly needed.

Perhaps Kiera had seen the ghoul. Perhaps they rightly suspected something otherworldly had happened last night, beyond witnessing the Rift open.

Connor hesitated as the delightful tang of the dried meat sat on his tongue. Truth be told, he didn't owe this man anything, and what he said next might save his—or Ethan's—life. Omitting the truth could protect the man's family if any more guards came looking for him.

After all, according to the dead king, Connor was a dead man walking.

He could tell a partial truth by admitting what he was, and that would likely make it easier for him to leave. Usually, when he confessed he was a drifter, people chased him out of town. Merchants were welcome, as they brought goods into the local economies. Travelers and tourists brought coin.

But drifters brought new blood that wasn't guaranteed to stay. Vagrants weren't accountable to the townsfolk, and it made them nervous when a man could disappear into the night and not be tracked.

Transients didn't take the roads. Men like Connor knew better than to leave a trail because nothing good came from those who followed.

"I'm a drifter," he confessed. "On my way to Bradford to find work."

To his surprise, Ethan let out a calm breath. In a sudden rush, all of the man's tension dissipated. His shoulders relaxed, and his scowl disappeared. The deep lines in his forehead eased, and an almost jovial expression washed across his face, as though the scowl had been nothing more than a mask to intimidate a potential threat.

His reaction didn't make a lick of sense.

"What were you expecting?" Connor asked, eyes narrowing with suspicion.

"Nothing." The older man dismissed the question with a wave of his hand. "Can you walk?"

Connor nodded even though he wasn't entirely sure if he could. With a Rift that close, he needed to figure out how to move—and do it quickly.

"Good," Ethan said. "We need to leave. Kiera was right, but don't tell her I said that. The soldiers could be back any minute."

Without another word, Ethan left the room. The door remained open, a silent invitation for Connor to join him.

Once more, Connor was alone as the heavy silence weighed on his shoulders.

He didn't understand these people, but they had saved his life. He would find his blades, thank Ethan, and leave them be.

With a ghoul in the shadows and an army on the horizon, it was the only choice that made sense.