

Chapter 10

CONNOR

As Connor trudged through the thick woods with Ethan at his side, neither man spoke.

With every gust through the trees, the forest breathed fresh life into its canopy. The wind swirled around them, carrying leaves and twittering birds through the dancing gale. Leaves clapped together in the rush of spring, and timeless oaks swayed in rhythm as nature took hold of them.

For the last eight years, this expansive wood had been the only home Connor had known.

Each step through the rotting leaves stretched his body a bit more, and he rolled out his shoulders as he tried to loosen his aching muscles. Apart from the sharp pangs from the injury in his side, most of the pain had faded. The spins had lessened. Each time his boots crunched the sparse forest grass, he felt a little more like himself.

He'd fought professional soldiers before, but he'd never been in a battle like that.

In Yarrin, three soldiers had nearly killed him when they mistook him for a wanted criminal. After taking four stab wounds to his legs, he'd hidden in a mountain cave for almost a full season before he could fully walk again. Even that miraculous recovery had been after spending most of his money on a Rectivane potion. Though weak, the brew had helped.

He'd gambled and won. Not all men were so lucky.

Yet now, after nearly a dozen injuries to his back, legs, and sides, he meandered easily through the trees. For some of the wounds, the rough bandages scraping at his skin with every step served as the only reminder they had existed at all.

The pain was almost completely gone.

Several of his joints popped as he stretched his arms above him. The wound in his side stabbed into his soul yet again, but he grimaced and tried to ignore the surge of pain. "What potions did you give me?"

Ethan shook his head. "Once we got you onto that bed, you were out cold. We couldn't force-feed you anything, much to Kiera's horror. We assumed you would die, but we couldn't leave you to the wolves. Not the man who saved my wife and babies." Ethan sighed, his massive shoulders drooping as he looked away. "We vowed to be with you to the end, if that's what it took to give our thanks."

For a moment, Connor didn't respond. Instead, he let the chirping birds fill the silence as he processed what Ethan had said.

He wasn't used to kindness like that. Not out here, where it was eat or be eaten.

“Wait.” He grinned as something occurred to him. “All that intimidation in the house was fake, wasn’t it? Deep down, you’re soft.”

Ethan laughed, the sound carrying through the quiet trees as his eyes creased with surprise. “Watch what you say, my friend, or I’ll leave you lost in these woods.”

As they strode through the forest, Connor sidestepped a patch of dirt to avoid leaving a footprint behind.

A good drifter left no tracks and no trace.

“No potions,” he absently muttered, pausing to glance over his shoulder in the vague direction of the meadow. “That can’t be right.”

“It doesn’t make sense to me, either,” Ethan confessed. “But you’re alive, and that’s what matters.”

Connor didn’t agree.

His enhanced strength, his improved hearing, his sharpened sense of smell, his superior vision, and now the rapid healing—none of it had an explanation, save for one.

The ghoul.

It had promised him immense power if he obtained Otmund’s little green dagger. Perhaps the demon had gifted him skills in order to get it, even though they had failed.

Of course, all magic came with a price, and he wasn’t sure he wanted to owe a favor to a demon.

“Tell me something, Ethan.” He sidestepped a fallen branch, careful not to break any of its limbs as he passed. “Why do you and your family live out here? You’ve clearly been here for some time, given the ornate detail and woodworking in the house. You’re a day’s walk from the nearest town, hidden in the canopy. Why?”

The burly man went quiet again, his shoulders tense as he scanned the branches above them. As they stalked through the trees, he didn’t answer except to groan when he walked around fallen logs or ducked under branches.

The minutes passed in silence, and Connor allowed the lull to settle into the air. One way or another, he’d get his answer.

“Kiera liked the old ruin,” Ethan eventually said. “Thought it was just a decaying church. We had no idea it held magic in it. Sure, we had seen the little green circle and tried to lift it. I thought we might be able to sell it and get some good coin for our trouble. But even before it shocked me, it weighed as much as a damn castle. There’s no moving that thing.” He shook his head, absently scratching at his elbow as they trudged through the woods. “I don’t understand magic. I’ve only dabbled in it when making a Rectivane potion or two, but I was

never any good. Kiera's potions speed up healing by several days. Mine can barely give you an extra minute."

"You didn't answer my question." Connor studied the woods around them as he spoke, the trunks in the distance sharp and clear thanks to his newly improved vision.

He wondered if it would last—or if, like all magic, it would eventually fade.

In a sudden, violent rush, the injury in his side burned. He groaned as the trees around him spun, his feet shifting beneath him. His shoulder hit a trunk, the wood cracking beneath his strength, and he growled with pain as he held the injury from the glowing dagger.

The only one to still hurt.

As waves of agony pummeled him, the rush of the ocean crashed through his brain. Of home. Of the rock that split open his back. Of the shouts of soldiers overhead.

That was all he had left of home, anymore—bad memories.

The pain weakened his resolve, and it took everything in him to shove the visions back where they belonged. He shut his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose with his free hand, and he took several steady breaths.

"Ride it out," Ethan said. A strong hand gently patted Connor on the back.

"I'm fine."

"Sure you are."

"Where are we going?" he asked to change the subject. "We've been walking for hours."

Once again, Ethan went quiet. Connor squinted at the man as the pain subsided, and the world solidified around him. The stocky carpenter stared at the ground, eyes glossed over in thought as he absently held Connor's shoulder, like he'd forgotten where he was and what they were doing.

There was something Ethan wasn't sharing.

"We're headed for a second house we built a while ago." The burly man rolled up the sleeve of his shirt in the warming spring day as they continued their hike. "We won't stay there long, but it'll do for now."

Ethan cleared his throat a few times and led the way through the underbrush as the canopy swayed overhead. The leaves trembled in the wind, crashing together as the gust had its way with them.

In the distance, the soft grunts of a large animal echoed through the trunks, its heavy footsteps thudding as it meandered away from them. Wood splintered somewhere nearby, and the trill of furious bees hummed through the air.

As Ethan led the way, Connor frowned. The man was clearly holding something back. Drooping shoulders. Cracking voice. Somber shift in mood.

It all signaled grief.

Whatever had happened at this other home, it hadn't ended well for the Finns—and Ethan didn't seem to like the idea of going back.

“Oh, would you look at that.” Ethan ducked behind an oak and peeked around the trunk at something out of sight.

Connor stopped midstride and followed the man's gaze to find a brown bear twice the size of a normal man sitting against a weeping willow in the distance. Through a gap in the dangling leaves, the massive beast growled as it dug its snout into a beehive. Its matted fur perfectly matched the shade of the decaying leaves on the ground around it.

Bits of the hive clattered to the forest floor, fracturing against the hard dirt, while bees frantically buzzed around the creature's head. Several dove, no doubt trying to sting it, but they couldn't seem to pierce its hide. It munched happily, snorting as it smacked its sugar-stained mouth. Honey stretched between its teeth as it chewed. Two long fangs protruded from its jaw, curving upward toward its nose with every bite. Only the occasional flick of its ear to bat away a bee gave any indication it knew they were there.

Ethan grinned, lowering his voice as he leaned toward Connor. “These bears are cowards, but they're entertaining to watch. This far south, they don't hibernate like northern bears, but they still eat like they have to.”

The fanged bear paused, its head tilting toward them at the sound of Ethan's voice. Its eyes landed on Connor, and the creature stiffened as it registered a possible threat. When he didn't move, however, it grunted and returned to its honey.

Two rabbits raced over the flattened leaves, darting like ghosts through the underbrush. The first reached the bear and hopped effortlessly onto its leg. The second misjudged the hop and fell to the ground, its chubby little legs kicking in the air as it rolled on its back. Without moving, the bear continued to munch—and the first rabbit happily nibbled on whatever fell into the thick fur on the beast's massive stomach.

Ethan laughed. “I could probably join them and steal some honey. I think it's too fat to care.”

Connor leaned against a tree, his attention shifting from the bear to the burly man hiding behind a tree trunk only half as wide as he was. He stuck out like a sore thumb as he watched some of the only creatures that could survive in the Ancient Woods.

Nothing out here feared death, not really. Each day could've been the last, and life was lived to the fullest.

To live out here, one had to be a little insane—man and beast alike.

Ethan grinned, his shoulder against the oak as he studied the scene, completely ensnared by the micro-war raging between beast and bug barely twenty yards away. Connor couldn't help but watch the man's face—the way it lit up, the joy he found at nature and discovery—and it stirred something deep within.

Nostalgia.

His father had done this back in Kirkwall. He'd used to take Connor on nature walks when he was little, pointing out all that the island's Firebreath Forest had to offer and warning him of what nature did to protect herself and her creatures. He had always spoken of the woods as if they lived, as if they breathed, as if they watched over all who entered.

As if the trees themselves bled magic.

Ethan chuckled and gestured for Connor to follow him once again, and something deep within Connor shifted. It was painful, this nostalgia, but he couldn't lie.

He had missed it.

Kiera's mothering demands. Ethan's blunt honesty. The undercurrent of compassion. Connor didn't know what to think about this family that didn't want him to leave, since most turned him away.

Even Beck Arbor.

"So, tell me about your family." The stocky man clapped his hands together as they trudged through the woods. "Do you have a wife? You're about old enough for one, I'd wager."

Connor grimaced at the very idea. No woman would've wanted this life, and children deserved better.

For several moments, only the delicate chirp of birds in the canopy filled the silence.

"That's fine." Ethan patted Connor roughly on the back, and it sent small ripples of pain down his spine from the force. "There's no need to share what you don't want to revisit."

"Thank you."

"It's a long walk, though," the carpenter warned. "I hope you don't mind me filling the silence."

Connor shrugged. He preferred the stillness, but he didn't care enough to voice his opinion.

"Poor Fiona," Ethan said with a shake of his head. "That's my youngest. She's the one who, well, in the meadow—"

"I remember."

“The flash of green light woke her. She said she saw a man crawling through the dark and wanted to go help him.” Ethan rubbed the back of his head. “She's got a good heart, that one, but she's too trusting.”

“Most children are.”

“And that man.” Ethan's nose wrinkled in disgust. “Grabbing her like that. Getting his blood on her face, in her hair.”

That man.

These people hadn't realized who it was.

The Finns didn't know a king had died in their meadow.

Connor let out a slow breath, unsure of what to say. The trembling girl had fought to break free from the dying king without understanding any of what had happened to make him so cruel. Even if he hadn't hurt her physically, a girl that young would be scarred for life.

“And then you,” Ethan added calmly. Quietly. “You come out of nowhere, swinging two swords like you were born with them in your hands, and you took on ten men like it was nothing.”

“I'm covered in scars, can barely walk without my world spinning, and I still don't know what the hell that nobleman stabbed me with,” Connor corrected. “That wasn't ‘nothing’ to me.”

“How did you learn to fight like that?” Ethan tilted his head as he cast a wary glance toward Connor. “The way Kiera described it made you sound like a specter striking fear into the hearts of his enemies.”

Connor's blood ran cold at the mere mention of the word.

Specter.

Perhaps Kiera had seen the ghoul, too. Perhaps she knew what it had done to him, but he doubted it. If they suspected the demon had tied itself to him in any way, they likely wouldn't have been so generous.

As much as Ethan's probing dug into the past Connor didn't want to share, he had to admit these were fair questions. If he were inviting a stranger into his home who could kill him in his sleep, he would've wanted to know a thing or two, as well.

So be it. He would indulge this.

“After I left home, it took a while to figure out how to survive,” he admitted. “I worked when I could. Stole what I had to. An old farmer caught me hustling darts in a tavern one night, and he cornered me afterward. I found out he was a retired king's guard, come to live out his last years on the old family homestead. I thought he was going to turn me in.”

“Shit,” Ethan muttered.

“That’s what I said, too,” Connor admitted. “I thought I was a dead man, I really did, but the old man struck a bargain with me. Instead of sending me to the gallows, I would work the farm. In exchange, he would feed me, clothe me, and give me two hours a day to train. Sir Beck, I called him, just to annoy the daylight out of him. The farmer didn't have any money, but I didn't need pay. Not with all he did for me.”

For a while, they strode through the calm forest, leaves crunching beneath their feet. Birds twittered overhead, and Connor lost himself for a moment in the memory of Sir Beck sitting on stump as Connor swung the old man’s sword. He’d given lecture after lecture on that stump, his speeches filled with everything Connor had done wrong and the few things he’d done well.

“It sounds like he did right by you,” Ethan said.

Connor rubbed the back of his neck. “He was a decent man, but it was a business transaction. There wasn't much in the way of affection. Just a teacher and his student.”

“That's still a gift in a world like ours.”

“I suppose.”

Running on instinct and intuition, Connor took a careful step around a bush to avoid snapping any of the twigs. As he stepped around the scrub, however, a tiny imprint in the mud caught his eye, roughly the size of a little girl’s boot.

“They need to be more careful,” he warned with a nod to the footprint.

Ethan sighed. “Good eye.”

He kicked up a nearby rock and slid it across the boot print, obscuring it with a thick streak. “Wesley is getting better with hiding his and the family's tracks, but he still needs a bit of practice.” Ethan hesitated. “Maybe you could give him a few pointers?”

Connor nodded as another surge of homesickness hit him. “If that’s what it takes to earn my keep.”

Ethan clicked his tongue in disappointment. “That's not what I meant. Sure, we could use a hand around the house to help fix it up while you recover, but we don't abide by fair trades. Good men do right by each other. It's how I live.”

The words hit Connor sharply in the chest, the motto eerily familiar to something his father used to say.

A man is never taller than when he bends to help someone in need.

The words stung him. His home had been ripped from him once, and there was no point in looking for another one.

He went silent. They walked for several minutes without a word said between them, save for the occasional muttered cursing as Ethan climbed over a fallen log. To distract himself, Connor scanned the world around them. Ever vigilant. Always wondering when the ghoul would appear again.

Yet nothing moved but the birds overhead and the branches in the wind.

As he pressed his palm against a trunk to climb a boulder, a small brown lizard with a green lightning bolt down its spine scampered up the tree. It slithered over his fingers, pausing briefly to watch him before carrying on with its day.

In the somber stillness of the forest, a silhouette darted between the trees. He paused mid-climb, tensing as he studied its movement.

A deer, perhaps—just another fanged buck wandering the forests of Saldia, but he wanted to be sure.

As Connor glared into the trees, the frayed ends of a tattered cloak billowed from behind an aspen roughly fifty yards away. The silhouette slunk past another tree and disappeared behind the towering fir.

And then, nothing. The forest chirped around him, still and serene, as if the ghoul had never been there at all.

The specter was still here, watching and waiting just beyond reach. He simply wasn't sure what—or who—it was waiting for.

When it made itself known, he needed to be ready to face it again. Not just for his sake, either, but for the Finns as well.