

MERCY WHITAKER

Mercy Whitaker was alone in the washroom. She quietly scrubbed and soaped and scrubbed and soaped. Her eyes lingered briefly on the two fingers on her right hand. Both were shorter than the others. Stunted. The fingers had died just after her tenth birthday. Over the years, they'd faded to a grim black color. She flexed that hand experimentally, but the two fingers never responded. She had learned to live without them.

After drying her hands off, Mercy reached for a pair of double-thick leather gloves. Most students favored wands or orbs or jewelry of some kind for their vessels. She'd started wearing the gloves after her incident and only realized a year later that she could use them to store magic. They were just as fine a conduit as anything else. Rich with magic, the gloves had grown with her as she aged. Always a perfect fit. It didn't hurt that they also hid her biggest insecurity.

Ready, Mercy turned and entered the operatory. Dr. Horn was waiting within. She took her position on his left, set her feet in the proper stance, and nodded. The lights of the operating room flickered out a few seconds later.

Mercy stood in that sudden dark. All the nothing. She held her breath. There were rumors of outside contaminants ruining severance procedures in the past. Apparently, Colin Near-chase had sneezed during his own practical. One failed exam had landed him down in the basement of Safe Harbor with all the other castaway doctors. Assigned the worst patients. Given the least resources. Mercy had not risen through the class ranks to fail now. And so even though she was wearing a mask with three layers of sealing enchantments, she continued to hold her breath.

Her eyes slowly adjusted. Their patient took shape. A dark mound on a flattened, steel table. Her mentor—Dr. Horn—hovered on her right. Between them, a square table with dozens of tools. Mercy was starting to grow light-headed when her mentor cleared his throat.

“Begin.”

Mercy exhaled. The first tool in her arsenal was the pair of gloves she was already wearing. She hadn’t chosen them with this career in mind, but once she’d decided to become a doctor, she’d found the gloves perfectly suited to anatomical magic. They gave her meticulous control over smaller spells. A certain finesse. With quiet concentration, she began the required spellwork. It was no secret that Dr. Horn had invented this particular procedure. She could not afford any missteps in front of him. Silver light crept from her fingertips like fog. An eerie circle that expanded in every direction until Mercy used

a second spell to ward herself and Dr. Horn from the magic. It cocooned the cloudlike substance into a sphere that now hovered directly over their patient.

“Very good,” she heard her mentor whisper. “Maintain that radius . . .”

Mercy had a steady hand. She was not the smartest resident. She certainly didn’t have the strongest family connections or the top grades in class—but she was steady. Always in complete control of her technique. An important skill when the slightest slip could slit an artery. She sealed the first layer of the spell before beginning the second, which led to the third, and then the fourth. The sphere around her patient grew thick. If she reached out to run a finger across its surface, she’d scrape away a substance that felt like translucent mud.

“Balance,” Dr. Horn commanded. “Do not forget balance.”

She had not forgotten it. She just wasn’t as skilled at this part as Horn. Even so, she began the process of equilibrium. There had to be the perfect amount of each magic for the layering to actually occur. Otherwise, they would not merge properly and she’d be forced to start over. That wouldn’t ruin the surgery, but wasted magic was wasted time was wasted energy. All the statistics showed that tired surgeons made more mistakes.

After a moment, her spells found their balance. All of the magic merged into a seamless unit. Mercy glanced once at Dr. Horn for confirmation. When her mentor nodded, she placed both hands—attempting to splay all her fingers—on the edges of the sphere. And then she *pushed*.

The movement was as mental as it was physical. There was a single flash of bright light. Mercy was forced to shield her eyes, and then the darkness stole the room back from them.

She waited in anticipatory silence. Long enough to start wondering if she'd failed. There was a flicker. Then another. A subtle glow began to illuminate the operatory. Mercy absolutely adored this part.

Threads appeared.

Every imaginable color. Some were colors she'd never seen in nature. The threads extended outward from the patient in complex patterns. Some were bone-thick, others no more substantial than silk. It was like looking at an entire person's life—a bright web of every connection they'd ever made in the world. Each thread represented a link their patient had with someone else in the world. Magical representations of naturally formed bonds. Smaller versions of true bond magic, which she'd never had the pleasure of witnessing in the operatory room. The hospital had only performed three procedures to sever such connections in the last two decades, and none since her fellowship began.

Mercy saw seven rust-red threads forking upward from the patient's abdomen. Those were kin threads. Blood relatives. She could even tell which ones were immediate family—or at least people their patient had spent every day with growing up versus more distant relatives. Near the patient's head, which was hooded for anonymity, Mercy spotted dozens of silver threads. A fickle color. These were connections to teachers, mentors, confidantes. Anyone who'd shaped the patient's thoughts. Mercy knew if she reached out and plucked them, they'd feel just like the strings of a violin—taut and resolute.

As she circled, she counted 131. The protocol for this procedure required her to document all of them. She circled back to the table and began taking notes. Her mentor did the same.

Both of them followed established patterns and categories. She finished a few minutes before him, and then they traded notebooks. Double- and triple-checking their work. This routine had been established after a doctor—who no longer worked at their hospital—accidentally severed a young boy’s relationship with his twin sister. It had caused quite a stir in Kathor. But medicine could not advance without failure. The two were bedfellows.

Mercy’s numbers matched Dr. Horn’s.

“Confirmed. Here’s your assignment.”

Dr. Horn handed Mercy a small card. The doctor’s handwriting was meticulous and cramped. Her task today was a fairly straightforward kin severance. When she’d first read about such procedures, she’d found the idea unfathomable. Why would anyone want to permanently sever their bond to a brother or a father? Even Mercy, who had a strained relationship with her mother, could not imagine severing herself completely from family. Horn had patiently explained that for some, those relationships were too painful to bear. Especially for those grieving the loss of someone they couldn’t move on from.

After reading the note a fourth time, Mercy selected her favorite chisel scalpel. She maneuvered forward, carefully skirting around threads that were unrelated to her task. She determined her best point of entry, angled her body to match, and then located the third largest of the kin threads.

Mercy wrapped her free hand around the floating thread. That first contact offered a predictable mental flash. She saw a tall man with gray-faded hair. He was handsome, but in a cold way. There were rotating emotions at the sight of him. Love, then fear, then pain. Mercy’s attention blinked back to

the operatory. These “visions” were common. After all, she was touching the magical representation of their relationship. Mercy steadied herself and began.

The sharp blade of her scalpel bit into that fleshy thread. She found a groove for the tool and began working it back and forth, back and forth. Deeper with each motion. Every few seconds, she saw another image of the man. Dressed in black, standing at a funeral. Holding out a glass of wine on a balcony, the stars behind him like a cloak. A raised voice. A pinched expression. A threatening gesture. A brief kiss. Dozens of small moments shared between the patient and the man.

All of them on the verge of being swept away.

It was as if the patient realized this reality at the same time Mercy thought of it. There was more resistance now. She'd reached the very center of the thread. Back to the very beginning of their connection. She saw a younger version of the man. A boy at university, bent over his books, blond hair swept away from his forehead. The same boy jogging across the quad, wildflowers in hand. This was always the most difficult part. The part of their connection that wanted to survive and hold on and live forever.

But Mercy kept cutting. The man on the other end of this thread was nothing to her. She'd never seen him before and was unlikely to ever see him in the future. The scalpel slid back and forth until she was through the core. Gliding through the final section. The last images rotated back to the older version of the man. Beckoning the patient from the depths of a cozy library, his eyes slightly unfocused. Seated at a family dinner, though Mercy could not make out all of the other faces around the table. An entire lifetime. Until her scalpel found open air again.

She held tight to the thread with her free hand. She'd read about one operation where the operating doctor had accidentally let go of the severed thread. It had fallen and wrapped itself around another. The patient had woken up with an obsessive devotion to their neighborhood tailor that nearly resulted in legal trouble for the hospital. That would not happen in her operatory. Mercy held the thread tight until it disintegrated, then she carefully made her way back to the table.

Dr. Horn nodded his approval. "Perfect work. You continue to prove Balmerick wrong, Dr. Whitaker. Go ahead and begin the dispelling process."

Mercy couldn't help flinching a bit at the backward compliment. Horn saw her as someone who'd overcome adversity. He knew that she had a disability that had required extra testing by Safe Harbor. They'd forced her into a special "tryout" before even allowing her in the medical school. She had to prove her fingers would not be an impediment in surgical procedures. Once she'd gotten past that test, though, the overseeing doctors had been biased against her. Never quite believing she could be as talented a doctor as her peers.

After completing her finals, Mercy had not been chosen for the program. Not at first. Her score had somehow fallen *just* short. Literally. She had missed the qualifying cut by a single percentage point. Fifty other students had beaten her. She was number fifty-one. The first one to be left out of the program. Also, the first alternate.

That had been the single worst week of her life. Practicing medicine, caring for patients. That was the only thing she'd ever felt called to do. And Balmerick was not a school that believed in backup options. You performed well and made a

name for yourself—or the school would quietly forget you'd ever graced its halls. Mercy had spent winter break chewing her nails down to stubs, unable to even break the news to her parents.

And then Cora Marrin had died.

That awful story about the six students who'd gotten lost in the wilderness. Four of them had died, and one of them just happened to be the best surgeon in their class. When Balmerick removed the girl's name from the list, Mercy slid up to number fifty. An invitation arrived a few days later. She was to be a doctor, because some poor girl had been killed. Horn had an unfortunate habit of reminding her of the fact that she hadn't been chosen.

She dispelled the magic she'd cast over their patient. One layer at a time. Then she followed the protocol for cleaning tools, carefully resetting the room for the next surgeon who would use it. The entire time, she thought about the man in those glimpses. How bright and bold he looked in the patient's memories—and now the patient would never think about him again. Such permanence.

Horn had finished in the washroom by the time Mercy stepped inside. She washed her hands again and then activated the cleansing spell in the room. She stood in that eerie white light and felt the magic washing over her body. As soon as the door gasped open, she marched out, determined to go home and sleep for as long as the world would let her.

"Whitaker." Horn was down at the other end of the hallway. "Need to see you in my office."

Mercy steeled herself as they walked. Had she made an error during the surgery? Maybe there had been someone observing

the operation and she would now be weighed and measured for each small detail. The real answer was waiting in Horn's office, and not at all what she expected.

A young man stood in the corner. He was absurdly handsome. Carved from stone. Broad shoulders. As fine a human being as she'd ever set eyes on. The only problem was that she'd set eyes on him before. Far too many times for her liking.

"Brightsword Legion? What's the saying? Leave them better than you found them?"

Her ex's cheeks flushed in response. Dr. Horn plunked into the seat behind his desk, clearly unaware of the pointed nature of her comment. After all, that was the legion's standard motto.

"Dr. Whitaker, this is Devlin Albright. A paladin that Brightsword sent over to us."

Devlin extended his hand. *Actually* extended his hand. As if the two of them had never met. As if they had not dated for three wasted years. As if she had not let him in on secrets that no one else knew about her. Mercy's eyes drilled into his.

"We've met."

Devlin blushed again. His hand fell back to his side. He lifted his chin—gods, that chin—before settling back into a perfect soldier's stance. It was only then that she noticed the emblem on his shirt. Not just the markings of Brightsword Legion. According to the crest, he'd already achieved light-bringer status. Rising through their ranks fast. No surprise. Devlin's main concern had always been his own achievements and reputation. Dr. Horn finally seemed to pick up on the tension between them. He was not the most socially adept person on staff, but this was hard to miss.

"Right," Dr. Horn said. "As you know, Doctor, we do not

typically use paladins within the walls of this hospital. But when the outlying provinces reach out for help—it is protocol for us to hire protection for our doctors. None of you are specifically trained in combat. Paladins are. This way, you can go about your duties without worrying about safety. Understood?”

Devlin was to serve as her protector. Gods knew he'd love that idea. It was enough to make Mercy grind her teeth. She tried to focus on the other half of what Dr. Horn was telling her. The more important detail. “The outlying provinces?”

Horn nodded. “We've had word from a town to the north: Running Hills. It's a farming community. A report just arrived of a disease that their local medic didn't recognize. Our services are required. It's my understanding you need one more practical to advance to fellow.”

Mercy nodded. “Yes, sir. That's correct.”

“Consider this your first chance,” Horn said. “I want you to travel north with Mr. Devlin here. Treat the illness. Assess the population. Perform your assigned duties to the high standard that we expect at Safe Harbor—and I'll sign off on your papers. You'll officially be named a practicing fellow at this hospital. One of the first in your year, I think?”

Another nod was all she could manage. She'd been waiting for this moment. It did not come as a surprise. Not to her. She'd tracked all of the other graduates in her year, noting their progress, and she knew she'd put in more hours than anyone. She was ready for this moment, but she also desperately wished that Devlin would not be there to witness her efforts. Briefly, she considered asking for Horn to send for another paladin. It was an obvious conflict. A request for someone else wouldn't be unreasonable, but Mercy also knew it would be a coin flip.

If the timing was urgent, Horn could just as easily assign the case to another understudy, rather than having to coordinate a brand-new paladin with an entirely separate organization. She wanted to move forward. This was her chance. All of the pride she felt was tangling with annoyance, however.

On cue, Devlin cleared his throat. "I'm completing my own practical. It would seem our ships are tied together."

Mercy threw up a little in her mouth. She could not unleash any of the snide comebacks she wanted to say. Not in front of Dr. Horn. It wasn't worth risking this opportunity. Better to take the high road. "Thank you for the opportunity, Dr. Horn. When do I need to be ready?"

Horn pushed a small file of notes across the desk. His smile was apologetic.

"You leave tonight."