



## CHAPTER NINE



**A**lthough years had passed since their last encounter, he was unmistakable. It was him. It was Hal. He was supposed to be missing.

But here he was, laid low in a canopied bed. Wren stood abruptly, and the scrape of the chair on the floorboards stirred him awake. With a groan, his eyes peeled open. Wren's mind blackened in terror, the same color as his eyes. She fixed her gaze on his chest to avoid meeting his. Even one second, one glance, would be enough to stop her heart.

No, no, no. This couldn't be happening. Why, of all places, was he *here*?

He was the Reaper of Vesria. He was a monster, above mortal things like sickness. Yet he languished here the same as any flesh and blood being with a fever. It was almost pathetic, the way he shivered.

As fear solidified into rage, a thought slid effortlessly into her head: *Kill him.*

The ink was already drying on a contract that required her to heal him, at risk of everything she'd taken such pains to secure. But this was a man with too much blood on his hands to wash away. It would be so easy, so right. She could sever his carotid artery right now and not spare a thought to the trifling consequences of breaking her contract.

Wren had never killed anyone before. Her oath as a healer forbade it. But she had watched her friends do it time and time again with the grace and remorselessness of a wolf snapping a rabbit's neck. Killing him now was as good as an act of mercy, as holy as healing. It was a far more honorable death than succumbing to fever like a feral dog.

Silver magic glowed in her palm. His every undeserved breath rasped.

If Una wanted her to be ruthless, she would be ruthless.

On the opposite wall, Wren caught a glimpse of herself in an old mirror, oxidized with dark spots like mold. With her tousled hair and hollow eyes, she looked haggard and desperate and afraid. She looked nothing like herself.

What was she *doing*? She was a healer, and besides . . .

A faint memory from her and Una's meeting with Isabel returned: *His life is mine to dispose of*. Wren's anger slowly cooled into realization. She couldn't kill him because Isabel wanted him alive.

She hated the sudden flood of relief. She hated that she wasn't strong enough to do this. But the opportunity Hal presented her with was almost too perfect. The queen had never wanted anything more than to make an example of the man who had turned the tide of war and tarnished her reign.

What if Wren was the one to deliver him to her? She could picture it now. The delicious, enraged shock on her aunt's face when she made her dramatic return. The shift into grudging respect. Everything she'd come here to gain—redemption, proof of her skill, the reauthorization of the investigation—she'd have it and more. She didn't have to waste her time here, sucking up to some dithering nobleman until the storm cleared. All she had to do was

call a carriage to take her home and cure this disease so he didn't die before then. With an eerie, resolved calm, Wren settled back into the bedside chair. Her wavering shadow fell over him.

His eyes searched for hers, and she sucked in a startled breath and looked away. From the edge of her vision, she could see Hal staring at her so imploringly, it unnerved her. He said something in Vesrian that she couldn't understand, so quiet and raw, it sounded like he hadn't spoken in weeks. It frustrated her, the limits of her own knowledge.

"What did you say?" She shaped each word carefully, deliberately.

The corner of his mouth pulled into the barest smile. As if he hadn't registered the shift in language, he slurred in accented but perfect Danubian, "I know you."

Surely he didn't recognize her from the one time she'd seen him on the front line. Perhaps he'd seen her portrait before, but given she'd been excluded from the line of succession, she doubted he had reason to remember her name or face. Wren knew better than to humor people in the throes of delusion, but her curiosity won out. "Do you now?"

"You're here to end this." Wren was almost disappointed. Of course he didn't recognize her. He was delirious—he looked at her and saw the Crone.

"No." Carefully, she brushed his hair off his forehead, surprising herself with the tenderness of the gesture. It was strangely beautiful, even plastered to his face with sweat. Black and glossy as a raven's feather. Beneath her fingertips, his skin burned dangerously hot. "You won't get off so easy."

His expression was a snuffed candle, utterly defeated. Was he really so eager to die?

His eyes grew unfocused, heavier, as she watched him struggle for lucidity. Wren waited until his breathing evened out into shallow slumber. What a relief, not to have to speak to him anymore. And deep down, she didn't want to see the gleam of his eyes in the dark again.

Some said his power was unholy, unnatural—that he was no mortal but Vesria's god made flesh. Wren believed none of it. No

matter how terrifying he was, it was only magic. Complex but explainable magic. Rationalization, however, did little to calm her churning stomach. He looked human enough, but if she cut him open, what would she find nestled in his rib cage? A beating heart or something burning black as coal?

“Are you awake?”

Mercifully, he remained still and silent.

This would be fine. Routine, even. He was like any other patient. First, she would record his vitals. Then, she would proceed to diagnostic tests. Drawing in a steadying breath, Wren unfastened his nightshirt from clavicle to sternum, efficiently as opening a surgical incision. As soon as she drank in the sight of him half bared, she felt disembodied and almost hysterical.

*Goddess above, I'm undressing Hal Cavendish.* Her eyes watered at the absurdity her life had taken on in the past twenty-four hours. She laid her hands on his chest, warmed by the feverish heat. As she poured magic into his system, she closed her eyes and read the faint images of her energy mapping out his body. *Highly activated sodium channels, ventricular arrhythmias, hypotension.* Her mouth formed the shape of the words as she lost herself in the whispering of her magic.

Then fingers as cold and brutal as steel bands dug into her wrists. She couldn't choke back her gasp—equal parts startled and pained. What could have possibly set him off?

Then she realized. Her magic in his system, of course. Although “healers” existed in Vestria, they were more often assassins, trained to destroy their targets from within.

Wren jerked against his grasp. “Easy!”

Even like this, frail and faded, Hal was strong. *Strong enough to kill me.* But with skin-to-skin contact, her magic was a weapon as lethal as his eyes. The Healing Touch's silver light flickered wildly between them, blanching him white as bone.

“If you don't let go, I will sever every tendon in your hand before you even blink. Think careful—”

Before she finished her threat, he wrenched her forward.

He moved so fast, she couldn't track him, couldn't react. For one breathless moment, she was suspended and off-balance. The next, her face was shoved roughly against the mattress. Her teeth clacked together, the impact reverberating through her skull.

As he bore his weight into her, he twisted her arms behind her back and wedged his knee into the space between her scapulae. Over the sound of her short, panicked gasps, she could hear nothing. How could she be so stupid? She'd had the advantage, but Hal had been trained in combat since he was a child.

If he pulled, he'd dislocate both her shoulders.

"Wren Southerland." The sound of her name, so flat and disinterested, settled like a winter chill beneath her skin. Gooseflesh spread along her ensnared arms. Although roughened by disuse and illness, his voice was dark and rich as a woodwind. "It seems I do know you."

"Let go of me!"

She struggled, only for him to dig his knee harder into her spine. Her rotator cuff crackled in protest, desperately struggling to hold bone to socket. If she couldn't touch him, her magic was useless. *She* was useless. Death at his hands was said to come fast and silent, like an injection of barbiturate. But incapacitating her like this meant he intended to savor this. How much pain could she stand before she begged to look into his eyes?

The sound of wheezing cut through the haze of her fear. His breathing grew thicker, more faltering, until a hacking cough bent him double. All at once, his hold went slack.

This time, she did not hesitate. She grabbed his leg—the first thing she found—and sheared through muscle like fabric. Her traitorous heart lurched as he choked back a sound of pain. He rolled off her, and Wren scabbled off the bed, hands raised and blazing with magic.

"Don't move." The sound of her own voice startled her. Such a sound, so wild and raw, couldn't have come from her. "Or I'll—"

"Wait." His chest heaved with every miserable breath. With her eyes locked onto his chin, she could see the blood dribbling from

the corners of his mouth. Slowly, he drew his sleeve across his face. It was too intimate to see him so abject, so . . . ashamed. "Please."

"*Please?*" she snarled. "Are we using our manners now?"

"I acted too rashly. I'm more use to you alive."

Alive? No wonder he'd been so jumpy. He assumed she'd come to assassinate him. It was so ludicrous, she almost burst into laughter. Wren had devoted her life to her work. No matter how much she hated Hal, she was honor bound as a soldier and a healer to cure him. How she would relish the look on his face when she told him she'd been in the process of *saving* him. Then again, if he was so eager to bargain with her, he must be desperate. Hal wanted to live, and there were few things people wouldn't trade for their lives. If it meant forcing the Reaper of Vesria into her debt, she would bluff.

She would make him beg for her help.

"You think I'm here to kill you?" she asked incredulously. "I'm a doctor, not an assassin. Don't you know healers take an oath of nonviolence in Danu?"

Confusion pulled at the corners of his lips. "Then you were . . . ?"

"Examining you." The silver tracery of her activated *folia* faded as she crossed her arms.

"Why are you here?"

"I might ask you the same thing."

He did not respond. They glared at each other across the room, but Wren's resolve slipped as she watched him tremble with fever. Heat flushed his skin and clouded his eyes, and blood spattered his sheets. Yet he still carried himself like he might strike at any moment, watchful and intense.

Sighing, Wren broke first. "Lowry hired me to heal a patient. Imagine my surprise to find you. I considered leaving, but I couldn't resist seeing how far you've fallen." When he didn't respond, she pressed on. "It's a shame, really. A war hero dying like this. That disease should finish you off in a few days."

If it frightened him, he gave no discernible reaction.

Wren matched his blank expression. As long as he believed she

could and would walk away from him, she'd won. She lifted one shoulder and turned toward the door. "Goodbye, Cavendish."

"Wait."

Wren allowed herself a self-satisfied smirk before composing herself and glancing back at him. "What?"

"I have information on your missing soldiers."

That, she did not expect.

All the air in her lungs left in a rush. "How would you know anything about that?"

He hesitated. "I've been involved with the case."

"Then Vesria *is* responsible."

"No, we aren't. But I have a lead."

Una's words flooded back to her. *Despite the fact it makes no sense, the queen believes Vesria is responsible. It can't be this simple.*

The air thickened like nitrogen, too heavy to breathe. If he was telling the truth, then their nations were indeed careening toward a pointless war. One Danu would not survive. Yet here he was, wasting away and hoarding information that could save them all.

"We had a lead, too," she snapped. "A boy with magic, watching patrols. If he wasn't your agent, then whose?"

His only response was blank-faced silence. Wren bristled.

"Fine," she said through gritted teeth. "Why did your government report you missing? Does Lowry know who you are?"

With unmoved serenity, he said, "If you offer me something in return, I'll answer your questions."

Wren wanted to scream in frustration, had to clench her fists to keep from shaking him. *Do you not want to find them? Does another war really mean nothing to you? Do you not still jolt awake from the nightmares? Have you ever cared about anyone at all?*

As satisfying as it would be, an outburst wouldn't help her. Wren willed herself to be calm. If she got his information, then hope wasn't lost. With a new lead, she could pursue the investigation again. She could still prevent a war. She could still have justice for Byers—and maybe even find him alive.

She raked her hands through her hair. It had come loose in their

scuffle and hung in tangled waves down her back. As she knotted it back, she imagined speaking with all of Una's authority and condescension. "Alright, Cavendish. You have my attention. What's your price?"

"I want you to cure this disease."

Exactly as she predicted. Hoping she sounded suitably affronted, she said, "You realize you're asking me to commit treason."

"I know." He looked exhausted, defeat written into the slump of his shoulders. Blood still stained his lips, a red dark and vivid against his sickly pallor.

"How do I know you're not lying to me?"

"On my honor—"

"Your honor? What honor?"

Frustration edged into his voice. "I swear it on your Goddess. Please consider it."

His oath startled her. He'd said it before: *please*. But this time was different. It was so genuine, so vulnerable, something predatory shook loose within her and coiled tight in her gut like a viper. Wren wet her lips. "You'll truly answer *all* of my questions?"

"Yes. Anything."

*Anything*. Someone like him might never crack under interrogation, but here he was, offering himself up to her. Treason or not, only a fool would pass up the opportunity. "Don't get your hopes up. Until I know what the disease is, I can't promise you anything."

"Your effort's enough." He sounded so relieved. After a pause, Hal added, "Although if you'd allow me one more request, would you also fix what you did to me?"

"Why should I?" He deserved it, anyway. She couldn't be certain how much internal damage she'd done, but even a strained hamstring would take weeks to heal on its own. "It's my only guarantee you won't attack me again."

"I won't." Somehow, the weariness in his voice convinced her.

"Fine. I promise you a diagnosis for your illness and a functioning quadriceps femoris, for now. We renegotiate after that. Anything *else*?"

“That’s all.”

“Then it’s a deal.” Treason, sealed with four words.

While she’d always intended to cure him, saying it aloud made it all seem too real. Wren expected some rush of shame. An ominous parting of the storm clouds. But nothing happened. She supposed she should be more concerned with how easy betrayal was becoming.

“Just keep your hands to yourself this time,” she added.

Wren approached him as if he were a caged animal: one creeping, measured step at a time. As she slid into the bedside chair and the last of her adrenaline faded, it set in how much everything *hurt*.

She guessed that her pectoral muscles were strained, if not torn. Mottled bruises, a deep goddessblood purple, were already beginning to bloom on her swollen wrists and creep toward her elbows.

*That brute.* He’d have torn her limb from limb had his own body not shut down. Hatred burned steady as a flame in her chest. Right now, she wanted nothing more than to sink into a hot bath and soothe away the ache, but a deal was a deal. One way or another, she would have answers about her missing comrades. First, she had to—

“I’m sorry,” he said.

Wren froze. “What?”

From the corner of her eye, she watched his gaze wander over her mangled arms. “I’m sorry for hurting you.”

Laughter bubbled within her stomach, and her eyes nearly watered at the effort to contain it. He was *sorry*? After all he’d done to her people, *this* was what he chose to apologize for? He had to be mocking her. “Why?”

“I see no point to senseless violence, or in making enemies of those who’re helping me.”

“You see no point in senseless violence,” she repeated slowly. With every word, her hatred sparked hotter. “Is that what you believed when you slaughtered my people in the Battle of the River Muri?”

Hal looked almost surprised.

“I saw you that day.” She clenched her fists into her skirt so tight they trembled. “I stood ten feet away as you struck down my comrades without even lifting a finger. Or have you already forgotten?”

“No.” He frowned, his eyes falling shut. If not for the eerie, distant tone of his voice, she might have mistaken him for remorseful. “I remember.”

“Oh, do you? Then what a change of heart you’ve had over the past four years. And they say people never change.”

“Perhaps they don’t.” He spoke quietly, but each word was as cold and hard as steel. It raised the hairs on the back of her neck. “Regardless, my apology stands.”

“I don’t forgive you. Words fix nothing.”

Something flickered over his face, like a ripple in still water. She braced herself for a rebuttal—craved it. But he remained infuriatingly silent.

He was right, of course. People didn’t change. Once a monster, always a monster.

She forced herself to ignore him as she rolled his pant leg above the knee. At least they matched. Bruises spread like decay along his thigh, with hideous black tendrils. It must have hurt terribly, which gave her a twinge of satisfaction. When she laid her hand on his skin, he flinched. Soldiers and their dramatics.

“Relax,” she muttered.

He did not relax. But he remained, at least, as still as stone.

Repairing the muscle fibers and readhering them to the bone took only minutes, and Wren swore he did not breathe for the entirety of it. Few people *enjoyed* the sensation of healing; magic traveled through the body like the cold creep of an injection.

Once, after a sparring match with Una, Byers came away with a sprained ankle. As Wren healed him, he puffed away on his cigarette like a godsdamned chimney. Despite her admonitions, he insisted it helped with stress.

*I hate it, I hate it, I hate it*, he’d said as she repaired his tendon. *I feel like you should’ve bought me dinner first.*

She pushed that memory far away, locked it deep behind the

mental wall that kept her grief at bay. As the last of Hal's contusions melted beneath her fingers, she sighed. "I'm going to examine you now. Prolonged healing can be uncomfortable, especially in the vital organs, but I can offer you a painkiller if you'd like."

"No." It was firm, the kind of tone that left no room for argument.

She couldn't help thinking of the boy with the broken arm and how proudly he'd refused the opiate. Hal's stubbornness suited her fine, as much as it exasperated her. She'd asked as a professional courtesy, but she had no qualms about making his experience a miserable one. "Very well then."

Wren slipped her hands underneath his shirt and pressed them against his chest. Sweat dampened his skin, and tension stiffened his entire body. Trying to keep himself from trembling as his body temperature climbed, most likely. So pathetic. So proud.

As her magic traversed his body, discomfort twitched his lips, but he did not squirm. It fanned out, tugging her gently toward the areas in need of her attention: his lungs, his heart, his eyes.

*His eyes?*

Curiosity won out. She pooled her magic in his skull and into the insertion of the optic nerve. The *folia* in his eyes were almost completely degenerated. So little of her energy could squeeze through the hyaloid canal, it was a wonder he could use his magic at all. Or maybe he couldn't.

She stifled her bitter laughter. No wonder he hadn't tried to force her to look at him. No wonder he wanted to bargain. He was powerless. Overuse injuries like this didn't happen overnight. The repetitive use of magic caused microtraumas to the *folia*, which, over time, swelled and tore like overstrained tendons. Hal's magic was effectively gone—and likely had been for some time. How long had Danu needlessly lived in dread of him? How long had he been lying to his own people? Without his magic, kidnapping him was going to be far easier than she anticipated. Assuming, of course, her hypothesis was correct.

Little by little, Wren probed deeper into his system, her magic catching on diseased tissue like debris in a river's sure course. Images

came to her: damaged and weeping tissue, angry inflammation that ravaged capillaries, blood collecting in his lungs. The disease was an infection unlike any she had seen before. It had none of the typical signs of a transmissible disease. No bacteria or viruses that she could detect. Even his own cells seemed to be functioning normally—no autoimmune response, no cancer, no histamines. Nothing that could explain a sudden acute illness.

All her life, healing had been like breathing. Effortless. Natural. Necessary. Her magic opened the human body to her. It spoke to her, guided her. But this . . . This was like reaching into a void. As if her magic had turned away from her, left her blind and alone. It terrified her.

How could the etiology elude her so completely? If she couldn't diagnose him, she couldn't treat him systematically. She prided herself on her research, her ability to treat any disease, any injury. She couldn't be stumped by something as trifling as a servants' quarters illness.

"I need more time to come up with a diagnosis. In the meantime, I'll treat your symptoms so you don't drop dead before you're of any use to me." It was true enough. With his respiratory and immune systems as weakened as they were, he would die long before she could call a carriage to take them both to Danu.

"Thank you."

Wren tried not to visibly recoil. She did not want the burden of his gratitude. "Sure."

Bending over him, she began to heal him, sealing off leaking capillaries and soothing the inflammation in his bronchi. It was long, arduous work. The disease was aggressive and the damage profound. She feared she wouldn't have him stable before the journey home, but she would have to manage it.

Everything depended on his survival.

After an hour, Wren broke the connection between them, and Hal sighed heavily. There was no rattle in his lungs, no congestion damming his airways. Her hands tingled with exertion, the *folá* run raw.

“That’s all for tonight,” she said.

He eased himself into a seated position. His shirt still hung open, revealing a pale triangle of skin. In his prime, he must have been impressive. There was hardly a scar on him—a terrifying testament to how untouchable he was. Sickness had eroded some of his physique, but he was still in lean military shape.

*Enough of that*, she decided. Disgusted with herself for cataloging anything outside medical significance, she turned away and began to pack up her things.

His searching gaze singed her face like a brand. She tried to ignore it, but two impulses, *don’t look* and *look*, warred for dominance. Fear drove the first, curiosity—and indignation—the second. He was staring at her so openly, so intently, she was certain he could see the exact center of her. Did he just go about gaping at everyone so brazenly? He was probably accustomed to getting away with such rudeness when no one dared to challenge him.

If only they knew how he’d deceived them.

*I’ll show him*, she thought bitterly. *I’m not afraid.*

She dared to raise her eyes to his, and it felt like jumping from a cliff. Everyone said his eyes were black, but beneath the surface, there was indigo and cobalt, as clear and dark as glacial water. Wren waited for her heart to stop.

It didn’t.

Her satisfaction melted when she took in his expression, lips parted, eyes wide. He looked like a man seeing sunlight for the first time. Starving. Almost . . . awed?

Before she could let the uneasiness of that settle, Hal spared her and glanced away. Just like that, whatever flicker of emotion Wren had seen was gone.

“What?” he said.

Such accusation condensed into one word. As if she held some power over him. “It’s eye contact. Is no one permitted to look His Highness in the eye?”

“Permission is beside the point.”

It was beside the point. Anyone else wouldn’t dare take the risk.

“Your magic is gone,” she said, quicker than she could think. “Isn’t it?”

He was silent, but the air around him crackled with tension.

“I thought so.” Wren leaned in closer. She wanted to see his fear. She wanted to see his shame. He gave her nothing, but his now bored, heavy-lidded gaze was a challenge. “Now I see why you’re missing, Reaper. You don’t stand a chance of winning your election like this. You ran away because you didn’t want them to realize you’re worthless. Didn’t you?”

At the title, Hal flinched. His voice, however, was as flat and cold as ever. “And what of you? It’s no secret what happened to you after your mother’s death. Although you managed to escape your exile, you were born into shame and can’t outrun that, no matter how desperately you try.”

“You don’t know anything about me,” she spat.

She trembled at the inadequacy of her retort, but fury had left her near speechless. No one besides Isabel had ever so plainly twisted the knife in her greatest insecurity. No one besides Isabel had ever been so intentionally cruel. Without another word, she got up and left.

Across the hall, in the safety of her room, every feeling she’d avoided waited for her in the shadows. Her silent accusers: fear, stress, shame. They crowded in on her until she could see nothing beyond the haze of her own failure. As much as she wanted to be better, to be stronger, Hal had gotten to her.

She slid to the floor in a heap and wept.