

Chapter 7

OTMUND

“Fates be *damned!*”

In the tunnels below Oakenglen, Otmund kicked the woman’s corpse that lay across the magical green stone of the Rift. As his boot railed against the servant girl’s side, her hand twitched, and he briefly thought there might’ve been a spark of life left. Her dead eyes tilted toward the wall as her head lolled to the side, the long slit across her throat coated with flecks of dried blood.

The gash in his leg stung as he stepped over her body, the girl nothing but another useless servant who had found her way into his bed and come to bore him.

Peasants didn’t matter, and yet he had been bested by one.

Agonizing pain shot up his arm, and he sucked in a quick breath through his teeth as he rode the wave of pain from his fractured hand. If he didn’t get a Rectivane potion soon, his wrist might not heal properly.

Despite the ache, he had more pressing issues to tend to. Namely, the commoner that had stolen a long-dead king’s soul.

The Wraith King.

The ghoul.

A pool of blood stained the stone floor beside him, the only remnant of the guard Henry had killed to slip through the Rift the first time. While Otmund had faced off with the madman in the woods, the soldiers had apparently carted the man’s body away.

A waste. There had been some blood left in him—enough to use for a potion, certainly.

Four dozen golden-clad king’s guard soldiers stood around him, borrowed and bought from under the king’s nose. Otmund had only swayed their loyalty temporarily, as they were as tired of the man’s cruelty as every other ally Otmund had acquired in recent years. The trained warriors studied him as he paced back and forth, their eyes narrowing with suspicion.

They were no doubt skeptical that he had come back alone when he had gone in with a small army of their brothers.

A Rift only opened for about sixty seconds for each body sacrificed on its stone, depending on how much blood spilled. To them, the great Lord Otmund had chased a dying king through a Rift with as many men as could slip through, and yet he had come back alone.

The peasant had become far more than a complication and far worse than a simple mistake.

As Otmund paced the small room, fuming at his failure, he scanned the soldiers who lined the wall and spilled into the corridor. Seven of the forty-odd men rested their hands on the pommel of their swords, a subtle movement he had seen them make often at court when a potential threat had visited their king.

Now, however, they watched only him.

“You fools had best take your hands off those swords,” he snapped, glaring at the nearest of them.

From the shadows of the soldier’s helmet, the hardened warrior narrowed his eyes and glared back in silent defiance.

Only the best made it to the king’s guard. These soldiers had proven themselves in battle and risen among the ranks of their brothers in arms. Augmented with inhuman strength and unparalleled senses, their innate skill only further complicated the puzzle of the peasant with two swords.

The commoner who had won against ten of the finest warriors in Saldia.

Otmund paused with his back to the soldiers, facing the Rift, staring into the air where the ancient magic had torn open the world to let him through. Without the skirmish at the edge of the gem-like stone altar, he might not have survived.

He had only spilled some of the soldier’s blood, just enough to open the portal for about twenty seconds. It had seemed like a lifetime with a madman on his heels.

With a steadying breath, he dismissed the guards with a lazy flick of his undamaged wrist. They didn’t deserve to be spoken to, not now.

For a brief and painful moment, however, no one moved.

No clink of retreating armor. No gentle sighs of relief from men who wouldn’t die today.

They remained.

Otmund wondered if he had overlooked something—or someone—in his planning. If this was the moment in which *he* was no longer useful. The moment in which someone more powerful had grown bored of *him*.

There were so many players in this sport, and he had coerced so many into dancing for him. Perhaps they had grown weary of his whispers in their ears. Perhaps they had finally seen his plot for what it was—and what he wanted.

Otmund had always been overlooked. The squat puppeteer no one saw. The silent mastermind no one expected.

He didn’t speak. He didn’t dare to. He held his ground, shoulders tense as he waited for the first fool to act. The cogs in his mind spun, piecing together his next move.

Because, like the stranger in the field, Otmund was a survivor.

After a few stressful moments, the rustle of armor and the soft thud of boots across the stone floor filled the small space as the men filed out. The few men he could see through the corner of his eye studied him through the slits in their golden helmets as they retreated.

He let out a sigh of relief, so quiet he could barely hear it himself.

These men were borrowed, after all. For now, he had to make do with what obedience he could wring from them, however temporary. When he finally sat on the Oakenglen throne, he would see to it they behaved properly by making examples of those who didn't.

Henry's method had been to place heads on spikes, but Otmund had more nuance. He could see further into the future and see the game for what it was. To the people, he would be the savior. The liberator of Saldia. He alone would sit on the throne Henry had so foolishly conquered for him.

The people would rally. Sing. Celebrate. They would say he was chosen by the Fates to free them, and if they started to suspect the truth, he would make his puppets dance again to remind them of his greatness. Wars would be won. Other lands conquered. Whatever it took to keep them fat and quiet, Otmund would pay the price. They would feast in his honor, never knowing the truth of the man for whom they cheered.

From the West to the East and as far south as the Barrens, Henry had conquered it all. Murdered kings in their own courts. Forced prideful men and their wives to bow before him. Married off other men's daughters to strangers in distant lands, just to remind them of his absolute authority.

The known world loathed Henry Montgomery, and Otmund would unite them all through their shared hatred as he took his rightful place in history.

When the last of the clanking metal receded into the dark corridor behind him, Otmund ran his good hand over his balding head.

Everything in him screamed to take the other soldiers through the Rift, to overwhelm the stranger who had so clearly been wounded, but these guards weren't dependable. They had tried to *kill* him, the idiots, instead of listening to orders. Their bloodlust had gotten the better of them, and if one of them had fused with the Wraith King instead—Otmund rubbed his eyes at the mere thought of an insider at the capital suddenly obtaining ultimate power.

No, his next move would require finesse and patience.

There were too many unknowns. This stranger could've been a mastermind, bent on stealing the Wraith King for himself from the beginning. There had been a house in the trees, which suggested a family had made their way outside of the southern towns. Perhaps he truly was a nameless peasant, useless and disposable, in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“But the way he fought...” As his broken wrist ached, Otmund rubbed his jaw with his other hand and paced back and forth across the Rift. The wound in his leg stung with every step, and he vented his rage by kicking aside the girl’s corpse.

He bit the inside of his cheek, eyes glossing over as he relived the horror of watching a lone man decimate his army, one by one.

It shouldn’t have been possible, not so soon after obtaining that much power. It took time for the soul to merge with the body and for the new Wraithblade to master his powers. More importantly, it took time to earn the loyalty of the Wraith King—or the ghost’s disdain.

If Otmund faced the stranger again, he would have to better prepare for the battle. He would have to cheat, or else he would lose.

Cowards cheat, his father used to say. Noblemen negotiate.

Otmund scoffed. His father would’ve been disappointed to see what had become of him, but then again he had never much cared for the old fart’s opinion.

His father, the last Lord of Mossvale, had been a damn fool. He’d been a man of the people, by all accounts a fair and just lord in their stunning land, and yet history would forget his name. All of his work and self-sacrifice had been for naught.

If Otmund had followed in his father’s footsteps, the Soulblud family name would’ve faded from memory. No one cared about the late Lord Soulblud, but Otmund had already begun to carve his own name into history.

He had spent too much money rebuilding roads and reforming tax codes, mere trivial nonsense that hadn’t added to the coffers. Too much time talking to the peasants. Too much time remembering their names.

It had been a waste of talent and a mistake Otmund wouldn’t make.

The rulers of Mossvale were forgotten, all of them, swept aside by the powerful and treated as butlers for the rich. Mossvale had nothing but roaring waterfalls, breathtaking architecture, and exotic women.

Wealth, sure, but Otmund’s riches were dwarfed by that of the courtesans in the capital. No resources to barter for political gain save rivers and natural beauty. The land served tourists and nothing more.

Otmund deserved *better*.

The Wraith King was his one chance to be powerful. To have the world bow before him and for him to be served as was his right. He wasn't going to let some peasant take it from him.

A peasant who fought with dual blades.

A peasant who could kill an army.

A peasant who had been in the right place at the right time.

Lost in his thoughts, Otmund paced the edges of the circular room. As he absently rubbed the back of his neck, his sleeve slid up his arm and revealed the forbidden augmentation that enhanced his thinking. The nondescript circle, so simple and plain in its design, hid the power of the stolen spell that gave him a clear and steady mind.

This stranger in the field was nothing more than another puzzle. One he could solve.

It had taken an army to kill King Henry, and he wouldn't have access to those resources again. It had taken years of twisting minds and corrupting souls to get the resources required to catch Henry momentarily off guard, and one of the most important people in that betrayal had disappeared into the night.

He groaned and pressed his good palm flat against the wall as he tried to compose himself. Anger never got him anywhere.

If some stray peasant wielded the power of the Wraith King now, Otmund would have to be clever and lure the man to him. More importantly, he would have to ensure no one killed this stranger before he had a chance to do it.

He couldn't let anyone discover what this man was truly capable of with the Wraith King at his side—especially not the peasant himself.

With a deep and settling breath, Otmund finally cleared his head. He had killed a king, after all. Even if this stranger in the field were more than a peasant, he wouldn't pose much of a threat. The man didn't stand a chance, and he, too, would die.

Painfully.

Otmund would have his day, and when the time came, he would not make the same error again. Henry's death had been five years in the making, but with the peasant, he wouldn't wait. He wouldn't give this stranger in the woods the chance to slip through his fingers, nor would he give the man time to regain his strength.

By his count, he had roughly two seasons before the stranger posed a true threat. Henry had taken two seasons to master his powers, and even then, he had needed another three years to build an army.

Otmund had time, but not much.

He rolled his shoulders as the ache in his broken wrist worsened. After orchestrating Henry's death, he had only a few favors left to cash in, which meant he needed to be cautious with how he spent them.

For now, it was time to use the Lightseers. There were still a few minds he could twist to his favor.

When he caught this commoner, Otmund would personally skin him alive, just as he had promised. And when the time finally came, he would enjoy every moment of the man's pain.