

ONE

“Ready your blade.”

As one, the novitiates knelt in the snow, their weapons held high on upturned palms. For valkyrs like Wren, it was a blade fashioned from dead bone. For reapyrs, a scythe of gleaming steel.

The sun had set, the sky inky black and riddled with stars—the Gravedigger’s hour was upon them. Any moment now, the sickle moon would crest the would-be trees.

Any moment now, the trial would begin.

Wren’s heart thundered in anticipation.

The branches of the forest stood pale and stark before them, sharp with reaching hands and gaping mouths. With splintered spines and cracked ribs.

This was no ordinary forest, after all. This was the Bonewood.

Arms and legs soared up from the ground, twisted and warped. Bent and broken.

Dead, soulless bones.

Undead, haunted bones.

Human bones, yes, but other creatures too. Reindeer with spiky antlers and great woolly mammoths with arching tusks. Ancient bones from unknowable beasts. Bones from the dawn of time.

The Bonewood was at once a graveyard and a training ground. It was here that bonesmiths tested their skills, extended their magic . . . and showed their mastery over the undead.

Now, after years of training and a lifetime of living in its shadow, Wren would traverse the Bonewood and compete in the Bonewood Trial.

She lifted her head slightly, considering the novitiates kneeling on either side of her. There were ten of them total, each dressed in Bone House black and with black grease lining their eyes, making their sockets look sunken like skulls. Ghostlight was bright enough on its own but turned blinding when it flashed against the snow, so they used the wax-and-charcoal mixture to reduce glare. It also made the mark of their magic—their pale, bone-white irises—stand out all the more.

Sometimes Wren extended the eye black into her hairline or painted her lips for a more dramatic effect, though her teachers usually told her to wipe it off.

Sometimes she spread it on her teeth and smiled wide, just to give them a fright. There wasn't much to entertain in the House of Bone, frigid and isolated on the northernmost tip of the Dominions, so Wren had to make do.

Not tonight, though. Tonight Wren would play by the rules . . . for once.

If she passed the trial, she would serve for life as a valkyr of the House of Bone. In the Dominions, where magic welled up from deep in the earth, the dead lingered—violent and unpredictable—unless a

bonesmith severed the ghost from its earthly remains. That was the duty of the reapyr.

But not all ghosts went quietly. Some put up a fight, so it was the valkyr's task to defend the reapyr from the undead.

Without the House of Bone, ghosts would overrun their land, making it uninhabitable, as it had been for centuries. Their work was more than a job or a calling. It was a *necessity*.

But that didn't mean Wren couldn't enjoy it.

In contrast to their blacks, the valkyrs also wore bones. They wore them fastened to their forearms as gauntlets and their chests as breastplates, and bone weapons were strapped across shoulders and in belts or loaded as artillery into bandoliers.

They all had their favorites—Wren wore twin swords in sheaths on her back, while Leif had a broad ax made of sharpened pelvic bone and Inara carried a flail with a spiked skull on the end.

In short, they were dressed for war. The battlefield was the Bonewood, and the enemy was the undead.

Though they would one day be allies, tonight the other valkyr novitiates were Wren's rivals, her competition—sons and daughters of the House of Bone and its various branches, or upstart nobodies from across the Dominions who somehow found themselves with bonesmith blood. Cousins and distant relations, strangers and outsiders, but not friends. Not family.

Her father had explained it to her during one of their rare conversations: They were linked by *magic*, not love. *Duty*, not affection.

That was the way of the House of Bone.

Wren had worked hard, had scraped and clawed to get here. She was the best damn valkyr novice her house had seen in years, and tonight she would *prove* it in front of everyone: her teachers and

instructors, Lady-Smith Svetlana Graven—head of the House of Bone—and most of all, her father.

“Psst,” whispered a voice from her right.

Inara.

Of all Wren’s cousins, Inara Fell was the biggest threat to her superiority among the valkyrs—and her only worthy adversary. They were of an age and had comparable height and build, so they were often paired together for lessons and exercises, though the similarities ended there. Inara had coarse black hair, carefully arranged in rows of tight braids, while her ivory bonesmith eyes stood out starkly against her brown skin. Wren, meanwhile, had wild bone-white hair—always tangled and unkempt—and eyes to match, her skin equally pale and colorless. Inara was organized, by the book, and always on time. Wren was more *intuitive*, coming and going as she pleased, and considered rules as *suggestions* more than laws to follow to the letter.

The two of them had been at each other’s throats for as long as she could remember, but after tonight, they’d go their separate ways. Once they passed their trial, they’d each be paired with a reapyr and sent to travel the Dominions, performing death rites and battling dangerous ghosts, ensuring *all* the dead were reaped. Elsewise, they might be lost and forgotten for centuries until some hapless fool dug them back up and unleashed an undead horde.

Like what had happened at the Breach—the darkest challenge the bonesmiths had ever faced. But it was in such times that heroes were forged and legends were made, like Wren’s uncle Locke Graven.

She longed for such notoriety, and one day she would achieve it. But first she had to pass the Bonewood Trial.

“Shut up,” she said to Inara, not turning her head. She was generally in favor of whispered conversation—the more inopportune the

time, the better—but tonight was far too important for Wren to allow herself to get distracted.

The terms of the trial were simple: Each valkyr and reapyr pair must pass safely through the Bonewood, reaping three ghosts along the way. They had until dawn.

But the Bonewood did not suffer travelers lightly. There were ghosts there that did not sleep, undead that would never find peace.

And that was to say nothing of the living.

Wren had to protect her reapyr from violent ghosts *and* contend with the other valkyrs making their way through the trees. Valkyrs like Inara, who would love nothing more than to see her fail.

“Want to make things interesting?” Inara pressed. For someone who loved to toe the line, she was being surprisingly insistent tonight.

“I’m talking to *you*,” Wren drawled. “I’m not sure that’s possible.”

Yes, Inara was worthy competition . . . but she was also a constant thorn in Wren’s side and always nipping at her heels. Second place in everything, except rule breaking.

In that regard, Wren had no equal.

Inara was unfazed. “You might make things more interesting for *him*, then,” she said softly. She spoke to the ground, the pair of them still poised on their knees in the snow, but Wren heard the words clearly. There was only one “him” she could mean.

She glanced up at her father.

Lord-Smith Vance Graven stood next to his mother, Svetlana, atop the podium with the rest of the trial’s judges. As heir to the House of Bone, he was required to witness certain events—whether his only child participated in them or not.

He gave her the subtlest of nods. Acknowledgment, yes, but also a reminder.

“I’m counting on you today,” he had said to her mere hours before. They’d stood inside the training grounds of Marrow Hall, bone-white pillars arching over them and black sand underfoot. “Make me proud.”

To Wren, it sounded like a challenge. She hadn’t seen him for three months, and she was determined to make him *more* than proud. She wanted to make him *stay*, even just for a little while.

She lifted her chin. “Yes, Father.”

He’d surveyed her for several silent moments, then given her a reluctant, indulgent smile. “They tell me you spent half the night sweeping bonedust from the librarian’s bookshelves. Why?”

Wren couldn’t help but smirk back at him. She shrugged. “I was bored.”

Technically true. She’d climbed the bookshelves on a dare because she’d been bored during lessons, and when the librarian caught her three stories high with her dirty boots perched on a first edition of *The Gravedigger’s Watch*, the cleaning had been the eventual punishment.

Her father’s pale eyes danced, reading between the lines as he often did. Whenever he came home for a visit, however rarely, he asked Wren about her various studies—and accompanying punishments—with a serious air, like he was *looking* for something. For proof of her abilities? Or lack thereof? The topic was dull, even to her, so it seemed only proper, then, that her antics should entertain him. It was the least she could do.

He sighed, going for stern, but the amusement was still there in his gaze. Wren lived for that spark. Though he’d never own up to it, Wren had heard stories of Vance Graven as a young bonesmith, and he was at least as much of a troublemaker as she was. In fact, given Wren’s problematic origins, he was more so.

“I do hope the lack of sleep won’t affect your performance in the trial,” he said, the smallest amount of censure there.

Wren shook her head resolutely. “Never.”

He nodded, then turned to survey the rest of the novitiates who continued to practice in the training sands. Forgetting her already.

“In fact,” she added, reclaiming his attention. “I’d been planning on staying up anyway—acclimate to the night trial, you know—so the librarian did me a favor.”

His lips quirked. “I suppose that also explains why you slept until noon and missed morning lessons?”

Wren beamed. “Exactly.”

His focus shifted back to the other novitiates, Inara among them, and Wren had the sudden urge to tell him about the things she *hadn’t* screwed up lately. “I’m undefeated in our sparring class, and—”

He spoke over her as if he hadn’t heard. “Your grandmother is watching you, Wren. You must be careful. She will take any excuse to fail you.” His gaze returned to hers. “Do not give her one. You cannot simply pass tonight. . . . You must pass *spectacularly*. Do you understand?”

Now, with the Bonewood Trial mere moments away, Wren tilted her head toward Inara. “What did you have in mind?”

Inara smiled, and behind her, Ethen—her reapyr novitiate for the trial—exchanged a look with Wren’s novitiate, Sonya. This was not Wren’s and Inara’s first time going toe-to-toe, and their conflicts rarely ended without some form of collateral damage. Both reapyrs likely feared they might be it.

“A race,” Inara said, darting a glance up into the trees before looking down again. “First one through wins.”

That was already, more or less, the purpose of the trial. It was not

timed, but being last to finish would not look good. Everyone wanted to be first, Wren most of all.

“And the second one through?”

Inara turned her head enough to frown, as if the answer were obvious. “*Loses.*”

Wren smirked. It was sufficient motivation for both of them, but . . . “That hardly makes things interesting. I plan on winning whether you dare me to or not.”

Inara licked her lips, her gaze fixed on the ground. “If you win, I’ll give you Nightstalker.”

That caught Wren’s attention. Nightstalker was the Fell ancestral dagger, currently sitting in Inara’s open hands and gleaming in the moonlight.

Like Wren’s own blade, it had a long history within the House of Bone and had belonged to dozens of talented valkyrs over the years—most recently, Inara’s mother. She had been Wren’s father’s schoolhouse rival, just as Inara was hers.

How sweet would it be to lay claim to such a weapon? To show her father that she had not only outclassed her greatest competition—and in a lesser way, *his*—but now possessed *two* valkyr blades?

They were more than just practical weapons; they were symbols of the valkyr order itself, representative of their place within the House of Bone. They were not given lightly and could only be taken by a worthy opponent during a formal challenge. Or by the head of the house if a blade bearer was deemed unworthy.

Wren couldn’t imagine a more powerful way to prove herself. To be spectacular.

There was, however, a flip side to the arrangement.

“And if I win,” Inara continued, “you give me Ghostbane.”

Wren's dagger, and her father's dagger before her. It felt heavy suddenly, sitting in her palms, causing her arms to tremble with the weight.

Once this night was through, Wren would either have two ancestral blades . . . or none.

But with or without the bet, she had no intention of *losing*, as Inara put it, and not coming first. Then again . . .

You cannot simply pass tonight. . . . You must pass spectacularly.

"Oh, one more thing," Inara added, with the superiority of someone who has set the bait and is ready to release the trap. "We have to take the Spine."

The Spine. It was the hardest path between the trees, slicing right through the middle of the forest. It was the shortest way, but also the oldest and most severely haunted, traversing the very heart of the Bonewood.

It was the surest way to run into trouble, even if they weren't traveling together. But they were. They'd be directly in each other's path the whole way through, which presented its own opportunities and obstacles. Much as Wren flouted the rules on principle, she didn't intend to *sabotage* Inara. But if they traveled together, she *could*.

And, of course, Inara could sabotage her, too. Doubtful, since Inara was a teacher's pet who loved the rules, but this was the Bonewood Trial. The stakes had never been higher.

It would be risky, and reckless, and make what was already a challenging test twice as dangerous.

You cannot simply pass tonight. . . . You must pass spectacularly.

A horn call sounded, making Wren jump. She looked up at the moon, just now cresting the highest branches. She lurched to a standing position along with the others, her grip on her dagger aching tight.

She glanced at her father once more; then her gaze shifted to Inara. “You’re on.”

The moon cleared the bonetrees.

All eyes fell on Lady-Smith Svetlana. It was she who had called them to arms in the first place.

Ready your blade.

And it was she who spoke again now.

“Defeat the undead.”

The Bonewood Trial had begun.