

# ONE

The rumble of horses' hooves echoed in the night, an unseen foe riding hard on their heels.

Unseen, but not unknown.

"There they are again," came Leo's strained voice from Wren's right.

"Another Breachfort patrol," said Julian from her left.

They'd been chased from virtually the moment they'd set foot beyond the Border Wall, the gate creaking open behind them as they'd neared the palisade. Apparently, Wren's father had chosen to ignore her when she told him not to follow.

It wasn't entirely unexpected. She *had* just blown up his plans, exposed his betrayals, and robbed him of two high-value prisoners—a prince of the realm and the heir to the House of Iron—not to mention *herself*, a tool he was all too eager to use.

Anger flared in her stomach.

She would have to make him regret it.

As they crouched behind a tangle of scrub brush, Wren fingered the ghostsmith ring, the amplifier that gave her magic beyond her wildest imaginings. Magic that controlled ghosts and shattered bones.

Her ears filled with the remembered sound of a living bone being broken with a sickening crack. She squeezed her eyes shut, but the image of the guard's face inside the dungeons, the look of horror and confusion on his features as he clutched his arm, remained before her darkened eyelids.

She could do it again. Mow down her pursuers. Show her father what happened when he refused to heed her.

But knowing him, such a show of power would only make him want her and her connection to the well even more.

No, they would do what they had been doing all night.

Hide.

“Perhaps we should have taken the time to warn the commander,” Leo said softly, catching his breath. “Told him that Lord-Smith Vance Graven, heir to the House of Bone, is a liar, a murderer, and a traitor. He might not have offered up his soldiers so willingly.”

Wren had had the same thought herself. They could have saved themselves from pursuit, or even secured aid and allies, not to mention justice.

But trust in those in positions of power was thin between the three of them, and while they *might* have gained help in their quest to destroy the well and stop a second Iron Uprising—or an *invasion*, as Julian had called it—they might also have wound up questioned, imprisoned . . . or worse.

The complex plot Wren had discovered between Vance, the regent of the Iron Citadel, and the Corpse Queen ran deeper than

she'd known, and she didn't relish the thought of finding out it ran deeper still.

"It wouldn't have mattered," she said grimly. "My father would have just ridden roughshod over him anyway, lying and manipulating until he had what he wanted."

"Sounds familiar," Julian said, whisper-soft, but they were inches apart, and Wren heard him.

She gritted her teeth. He'd not spoken a word all night; she'd thought the silent treatment was bad, but snide remarks under his breath were definitely an unhappy development.

She glanced his way but got nothing except his cold profile, as pale and distant as the moon. He cut an intimidating figure, helmet atop his head, gleaming black armor covering him from head to toe, making him untouchable—except she *had* touched him, had kissed his lips and raked her hands through his hair, though it felt like a lifetime ago.

The far-off thunder of the patrol, echoing in the night like an oncoming storm, changed direction and grew louder.

Next to her, Julian tensed, noticing it too.

"We need to move," Wren said. They'd long since passed the palisade, and though she'd secretly hoped the barrier would prove a line the patrol wouldn't cross, they had, which meant this chase could go on for hours still.

Even days.

"Where?" Leo asked, surveying the bleak landscape.

The copse of trees they'd hidden among when Julian and the other kidnapers attacked the Wall was too far away, and the fissures and caves that dotted the countryside were difficult to spot in the dark.

“There,” Wren said, darting from behind the brush and forcing the other two to follow.

They skidded onto the ground behind a cluster of rocks that forced them to lie flat on their stomachs, and as Wren chanced a look back at the distant patrol, she saw something that made her heart sink.

There was a *bonesmith* with them.

Who they were was impossible to tell, but the bone armor was unmistakable.

Apparently, her father intended to follow them into the Breachlands. All the way in.

He intended to follow them for as long and as far as it took.

*Stubborn fuck*, she thought viciously. *Stubborn, ruthless . . . reckless fuck.*

She sighed. Of all the times to recognize herself in her father, now was *not* it.

The three of them remained like that, lying still and breathless on the cold, hard ground, for at least an hour before anything changed.

“Hey,” Leo said hoarsely. “I think they’re—yes, they’re turning back.”

The relief was plain in his voice, and even the tense line of Julian’s shoulders descended from where they’d been hitched up near his ears. After watching the patrol slowly disappear into the darkness back toward the fort, he bowed his head and blew out a breath.

Wren, however, was not comforted. “They had a bonesmith,” she said, getting stiffly to her feet and dusting herself off. “Probably more than one.”

“Which means . . . ?” Leo said with a frown, moving gingerly as well.

“They’ll be back,” Julian said gruffly, standing upright faster than them both. As if it were a competition. “And they’ll risk riding deeper into the Breachlands.”

“They’ll risk getting themselves killed,” Wren said crossly. “They have no idea what they’re up against.”

Julian’s eyebrows rose so high and fast, they disappeared under his helmet.

Wren scowled.

Yes, she had done the same thing mere days ago. And yes, it had been equally, if not *more* dangerous than what they were doing now, as she’d been traveling with *him*, a known enemy. But she had done that of her own stupid volition. These people were being ordered here by her father. For all Wren’s flaws and shortcomings, she’d never have asked someone else to do something dangerous that she wouldn’t do herself.

Here he was using people again, just like he’d used Wren. Like he would continue to use her if he had his way.

He wouldn’t.

“If they intend to follow, then may I suggest we keep moving?” Leo asked, squinting after the patrol. “Perhaps we can gain some ground before they circle back—even lose them.”

“Unlikely,” Julian said, but he marched in the opposite direction all the same. “Not without horses.”

“A horse or two would indeed expedite things,” Leo said, speaking to Julian’s back.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to walk, Your Highness,” Julian said without a backward glance.

Leo leveled a look at Wren. “Still angry with you, I see,” he said grimly.

“With *me?*” Wren spluttered. “I’m not the only person who left him behind.”

“True, but you *are* the only one to have stuck your tongue down his throat *first.*”

Wren opened her mouth. Closed it.

“Hurry up, you two,” Julian snapped.

Wren was *pretty* sure he hadn’t heard them, but she hastened to keep up all the same.