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# Broken Souls and Bones

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PENGUIN BOOKS

## Prologue

The feral bay of the king's hounds stirred her from the nothing. Mists tangled around knobby branches and the sting of lingering heat from the flames still burned in her eyes.

'Keep those closed.' Leather-wrapped fingers brushed over her lashes. 'Don't let anyone see the silver in those eyes, girl. Hear me?'

The voice was hoarse and rough, older than hers but not as deep as her pap's.

'We get snatched, then we're dead. Maybe we shouldn't have done it.' A new voice, a boy's that was young enough it cracked and squeaked, uncertain if it was yet a man's tone or still a child's.

'Quiet. We're here now, and we're seeing it through,' snapped the first. 'Get yourself into the damn shadows and stay down. Go. *Go.*'

A petulant protest from the second followed, but in the end the scrape of boots faded into the briars of the wood and was lost in the mists. The girl shifted and whimpered, muscles aching from running. Her mother told her to run – screamed at her to do it – and not look back.

Ropes held her tightly when she shifted, trying to break free, all at once desperate to find her family.

Through the haze in her mind she recalled the cruel sound of the door cracking against the wall, the iron and bronze blades cutting through the air, seeking flesh to split. She recalled the screams and blood.

So much blood.

'Stop fidgeting, godsdammit.'  
 She froze. Those ropes keeping her bound were arms. And her cheek was pressed to cold leather that reeked of ash and sweat and the bite of forest mist.

Buried beneath a dark cowl she could make out a stubbled chin. Not bearded in long double braids and bone beads like her pap's, but a ghost of a beard was there.

She wanted to cry out, to plead with the man to let her be. There were straps of leather for knives and weapons over his shoulders, much the same as the raiders who burned her village. Fear choked off her pleas into nothing but jagged whimpers.

'Not a word, girl,' he whispered, and she felt her weak body lower to the chilled forest floor. Brambles and little pebbles jabbed into her ribs. She tried to shift, but those leather-wrapped fingers curled around her chin, tilting her head back. 'This'll sting, but it won't last long. Don't make a sound.'

A hiss slid through the girl's teeth when a sharp bite of pain lanced across her throat. Through hooded lashes, she watched the faceless man pull back a knife. He mumbled strange words and brushed his fingers through something wet and hot on her neck.

She trembled, keeping still, terrified he might use the edge of his blade to finish her off.

In the next breath, her eyes fluttered, heavy with fatigue, and his sturdy arms scooped her up once again.

The fear burning in her veins faded to something gentler, something calm. Enough, the girl thought she might fall into a deep sleep.

Until her body shifted and she was handed over to new arms, thicker and smellier.

'She going to talk?' A smoke-burned rasp of a new voice broke the darkness.

'I've made certain she won't recall much of anything about this night. See that she's forgotten by the others' memories.'

'With what you be payin', I'll bury her in the realm of souls if you want. Won't be found, this one. You've my word.'

Her pulse raced, her mind grew frantic, but her body kept still when heavy steps thudded across wood, and somewhere beneath it all was the lap of the tides and the smell of brine and rotting scales.

With a grunt and a breath of smoking spices in her face, the girl was nestled beside rigging and damp linens.

'Blessed little barnon, you are.' The man spoke in common tongue, a dialect known throughout the three kingdoms and over the Night Ledges where feral folk claimed no king. Doubtless he was a tide wanderer, a soul without a land to call his own. 'They coulda torn out your skinny little throat.'

His thumping steps plodded away over wooden boards – a longship – she was on a boat.

No, she couldn't leave. There were people she was leaving behind. But . . . who?

As though the thick mists of the wood dug into her skull, the girl could not recall the fading faces in her mind. It was merely a feeling, a sense there was something – someone – she was forgetting.

Before the weight of exhaustion drew her into a murky sleep, the girl saw a darkly clad figure on the water's edge, a glow of flames at his back.

Across the breast of his leather jerkin was a double-headed raven. The emblem of Dravenmoor – the enemy kingdom. The land behind the raiders.

By the gods, they'd found her and the curse in her eyes had finally destroyed her entire world.

## I

*Roark*

The boy's death was my fault.

Uther was found facedown in the river near the stone walls of the royal fortress before dawn. A new Stav Guard in the unit assigned to my watch, a mere boy of eighteen. The body was rent down the middle, chest flayed, ribs torn apart like a cracked goose egg.

He was sent to the hall of the gods in Salur too soon.

The flat cart holding the young guard's corpse rolled past a line of stoic Stav. The palace healer attempted to cover his pulpy face, tinted blue from a night in the water, but when the wheel struck a stone in the path, the linen pulled back.

My fists curled, digging into the callused flesh of my palms.

Uther's pale eyes were left open, too stiff to close, staring lifelessly at the noon sun in a wash of fright. Splatters of blood coated his neck, his lips, his shredded black tunic of the Stav.

'Dravens,' a lanky Stav Guard murmured to another. 'Had to be. Uther was a bone crafter.'

I closed my eyes, despising the truth of it.

Tales of the different crafts of magic were written in the sagas of the first king, the Wanderer, who rescued a daughter of the gods. As a reward, the Wanderer was given pieces of the three mediums of the gods' power – bone, blood, and soul – to strengthen his fledgling kingdom.

Most within the realms of Stigandr believed the tales were mere fables, but magical craft was real enough.

Bone craft manipulated bone into blades that were nigh unbreakable. It crafted healing tonics from bone powders, and poisons from boiled marrow. Blood craft used blood for spell casts and rune work. Soul craft took power from the dead, and was the common gift of Dravenmoor, the kingdom across the ravines.

Dravens despised King Damir of House Oleg, the king of Jorvandal, insisting he used craft to strengthen his warriors and armories through corrupt and forbidden ways.

I would not say they were wrong, but it did not lessen the rage in my blood that a boy was slaughtered for merely doing his duty.

'If I could, I'd burn every damn Draven on a pike,' the guard went on.

His fellow Stav hissed at him to be silent, his gaze finding me – their superior and a Draven.

My blood belonged to the enemy kingdom, but fealty belonged to Jorvandal after being left for dead at the gates of the fortress a dozen winters ago.

But to some, even my own men, I would always be their enemy.

The heel of my boot cracked over the pebbles when I spun into the arched doorway of the Stav quarters, a long-house built to fit dozens of men.

In the great hall, flames in the inglenook were dying to embers, and drinking horns of thin honey mead were toppled from recent nights of debauchery. Stav trainees had spent the cold months at Stonegate, but after the revelry, they were all now returned to their families and villages across the kingdom to await orders from the king.

A few younger Stav staggered to their feet, readying to greet me. I could reprimand them for not standing by for their fallen brother, but at the sight of the green tinge to

their faces, the red in their eyes, perhaps they simply couldn't bear it.

I ignored their murmured salutes and strode into the larger chambers meant for Stav officers. My chamber was more a wing than anything. A library and study, a bedchamber, and a washroom. I bolted the door behind me and crossed the woven rug to the washroom in ten long strides.

Along the jagged scar that carved across my chest, throat, to the hinge of my jaw, was a roaring ache, like I'd swallowed the howling rage of the sea.

Bile rose in my chest, a harrowing sort of shadow coated my gaze.

I gripped the clay washbasin, breaths sharp and deep.

Violence was no stranger to me, but it grew harder to keep the lust for blood tamed. I was the Sentry of Stonegate, and the Sentry was meant to be the stoic measure of restraint.

In this moment, I wanted to be more of a monster than those who'd slaughtered Uther.

Heat slowly faded, the storm in my head lessened. I cupped the frigid water in the basin and splashed it over my face, then returned to the room.

'You, my friend, have the most pitiful stomach. The sight of death and blood has you spewing? Honestly, what sort of royal guardian have I shackled upon myself?'

Startled as I was that another voice was in my chamber, I did not show it.

Sprawled out on my bed, ankles crossed, Prince Thane the Bold smirked back at me, likely aware I'd been berating myself. In my haste to reach the washroom, I'd foolishly left my chamber unchecked.

I frowned and it only widened his grin.

*You are an ass and belong in one of the bells.* My fingers moved swiftly in response, but Thane could follow even my most

frenzied gestures since he'd found me outside the keep, bloodied and broken, my voice carved out the same as my place in my own clan.

'Really?' The prince chuckled. 'Which one, the molten or frosted?'

*Both. What if I'd had a knife in my hand?*

'Roark, my oldest, dearest, most frightening friend, the better question is, Why *didn't* you have your knife in your hand? Growing careless, Sentry.'

I shook my head and went to a personal cart topped with a wide ewer of aged wine and a horn. I filled only one horn when Thane waved a palm, refusing my offer.

'Jests aside,' Thane said, kicking his legs over the edge of the bed, 'You're taking this death too hard.'

*He was my charge.*

'Roark.' Thane sighed. 'Don't blame yourself for the actions of those bastards. It is not your fault.'

It was. In so many ways the death of the young Stav was entirely my fault.

*We don't know why he was killed,* I told him.

'We'll find out, and when we do, whoever is responsible will pay.'

I used one hand to respond. *Why are you here? Isn't your mother forcing you to plan your own wedding?*

'There likely won't be a wedding if Stav Guard are getting slaughtered.' Thane winced. 'Apologies, I'm careless with my words in your state of distress, allow me to try again. Yes, I've managed to slip my mother, flee the palace like a frightened child, and come to see you instead.'

I let out a breath of air, a soft laugh.

Thane was a warrior prince from the golden ridge of hair braided down the center of his head to the bones pierced in his ear. He stood just taller than me, and I was no small man.

But bony Queen Ingir and her endless revelry was enough to frighten away any man lest he be tossed into the madness of imported satins, silks, and different flavors of fillings for iced cakes.

‘I’ve come for a purpose.’ Thane reached into the pocket of his trousers and removed a tattered, folded parchment. ‘You have heard of Jarl Jakobson, yes?’

*The jarl obsessed with finding favor from the king?*

Thane jabbed the folded parchment in the air between us. ‘The very one. He’s made quite an interesting discovery.’

The prince handed me the missive. I read it through once, then once more. Thane was no longer smiling.

My fingers gestured swiftly. *Jakobson is certain of this?*

‘Seems my father’s blood casts have finally worked.’

King Damir couldn’t claim the blood-tracking spells as his since the queen was the blood crafter in the fortress. Not that it mattered.

Seasons ago, King Damir took spilled blood from the house of the lost crafter. If any soul from the same bloodline came near, blood crafters would know it. The king’s spells forced every village to have a royally decreed blood crafter within the borders.

All of it was done to find the child who’d disappeared. A child whose magical craft brought three kingdoms against a small village in the knolls.

There was nothing left of it now.

‘But there’s trouble.’ Thane interrupted my thoughts, pacing in front of my doorway. ‘Jarl Jakobson’s blood crafter has sold the woman out to Draven Dark Watch scouts.’

*So the missives speak of a woman?* The child who escaped was said to be a girl, more reason for greed and bloodlust from kings and queens to seek her out. *Any house sigil?*

It was common in the kingdoms to ink a brand below the

left ear of a child by their first summer, a mark of bloodlines and heraldry for houses and clans.

One of Thane’s brows arched. ‘Said to be manipulated. Some of the runes were added later to make a brand of the nameless. Curious, don’t you think?’

If one wanted to hide rare craft, adding ink to a house sigil until it looked like a waif-and-wanderer symbol – folk without clans or house bloodlines – would be the wisest action to take.

‘The jarl found the correspondence between the blood crafter and the scout,’ Thane explained. ‘Of course, Jakobson now wants some sort of reward for being the township to unearth the lost craft.’

The prince went to the tall arched window, looking out at the distant wood over the walls. ‘My father always suspected the reported death of the girl was a ruse. You know that’s why he forced each jarldom to have a blood crafter casting their spells. After all this time, he was right. A melder has been hidden from the king. A woman.’ Thane shook his head. ‘The first in five hundred winters, Roark. You know what this’ll bring.’

*War*, was all I gave in a one-handed reply.

If this report was even true, there would be new battles from the Red Ravines of Dravenmoor to the small seas of the kingdom of Myrda.

Damir would not allow anyone to take his prize again, and the queen of Dravenmoor would return for retribution for what she lost during those raids so long ago.

A melder’s craft was only found perhaps once a generation, and rarely in a woman’s blood. It was a collision of all three crafts – dangerous, coveted, and owned by Jorvan kings through treaties made long ago.

‘War is certainly a risk. Which is why you’re to go to this

Skalfirth village.' Thane chuckled when my mouth tightened. 'The king has already arranged for Baldur to go with you. What a fortunate bastard you are.'

A soft groan breathed from my throat. Baldur the Fox was as cunning as his name, brutal but a damn skilled Stav.

We'd trained together since boyhood, but when I surpassed him in skill with the blade, he built up resentment toward me. My rank in the Stav Guard as Thane's Sentry made me the prince's blade, his protection; it required me to do anything to keep the royal blood in his veins from spilling, even becoming a killer in the shadows.

The Sentry was not a true leader in the king's Stav, more assassin and brute when needed. Still, my position kept me under Thane's word and not the king's.

Baldur spent the night after my ranking by drunkenly mocking me, as though I ought to be disappointed.

As though I had not been placed exactly where I wanted to be.

'I wish I could be there,' Thane said. 'But with the attacks, I doubt I will ever be permitted to leave Stonegate again. Not unless my father sires another son, but alas, my mother would need to allow her husband into her bed if that were to happen.'

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, the prince paused and shuddered.

*What does the king wish us to do if it is confirmed the lost melder is alive?* I gestured the question slowly, already anticipating the reply.

'Deal with the traitor who sold her out first, then use your methods to bring the melder home. Roark.' Thane's voice lowered. 'I know you don't always care for the craft of melder, but you must admit it has its uses to keep our people safer.'

*Debatable.* My jaw pulsed.

Thane chuckled and rested a hand on my shoulder. 'The king plans to increase patrols and move his ceremonies to more private locations. In fact, that is the other piece of this. Only select Stav will join you, guards who are sworn to secrecy. They will not speak of what you find in this village.'

It wouldn't matter how the king tried to keep craft hidden behind the walls of the fortress. Blood and death always found melder.

The magic that ran in the veins of a melder crafted abominations that left souls and bodies corrupted, altered, and vicious.

Last harvest, the king's personal melder had been slaughtered. I felt nothing but relief with Melder Fadey's death. I thought, for once, there might be peace if melding craft were not here.

Gods, I'd almost allowed myself to forget the past wars, to forget lives had been lost trying to reach a small girl with silver in her eyes. Perhaps, I hoped, the Norns of fate had already cut her threads of life and sent her to Salur.

Maybe to one of the two hells to burn or freeze.

No mistake, now blood would spill again.

'We do this discreetly for as long as we can. We don't want another raid,' Thane said, soft and low.

I closed my eyes against memories of distant screams, of smoke and burning flesh.

No kingdom escaped without loss. Thane lost his uncles. The smaller kingdom of Myrda lost its loyal seneschal and the queen's nephews.

Me – I lost my homeland and voice.

'You're to leave at first light,' Thane said, clapping a hand on my shoulder. 'Be careful, my friend. This woman will not be Fadey. I'd hate for her to bespell that dark heart of yours.'

I scoffed. *I'd slit her throat if she tried. I have no love for melder, and that will never change.*