

## CHAPTER ONE

There are stories written in our bones. What we eat, how we grow, where we were born, our sex, our traumas, how we lived, how we died. Our bones keep stories, and my mother keeps bones.

Kept bones, I suppose; I am the bonekeeper now.

People came from all across the realm to see my mother for her tinctures and salves, her potions and charms. Our home had a constant string of visitors come in through its carved oak door, propped open in summer by a sturdy stack of leather bound tomes. There was always tea brewing, always rolls or biscuits baking: my childhood smelled like tea leaves and melted butter. But the thing that drew them most often, these pilgrims, and from the farthest reaches, were her readings.

My mother knew two ways to read the bones, and she taught me them both. The first was to use smaller bones the way one might use a rune stone, throwing them across a mat to see what runes turned up, and where. The second was to carve those runes into a larger bone – a clavicle, typically – and to place it in the fire. Where the bones first cracked, that was the message, sent from a sister spirit to see it safely home.

“Why bones and not stones?” I asked her once when I was small, gathering up what remained of a dead man’s fingers into a small velvet pouch lined with satin. She eyed me levelly, a small smile playing on her lips, and said, “When has a rock ever pointed at anything?”

I screwed up my nose, trying to think of a time a rock might have pointed, wondering if it was a riddle. She laughed, scooped me into her arms and sat me on her lap by the hearth. Her hair was red, and it glowed like embers in the firelight.

“The stone has its secrets, to be sure,” she said, producing a small opalite crystal in the palm of one hand, and a stranger’s metatarsal in the other. “But stone represents earth, where bone represents something else. The spirit. Sometimes the earth should be consulted. But in the matters of women,” she arched one hearty shoulder in a shrug. “One must consult the souls.”

It was those words I recalled when I opened the velvet pouch I always kept in my sporrán, and poured the bone runes into my client’s outstretched hands. It was early in the evening, and it had been a slow day – this was only the fourth client I’d seen in twice as many hours. I was grateful for the quiet. I read my mother’s book of shadows, her cookbooks, her herbalism diaries, to see what else she could teach me, now that she’s gone. But I was grateful for this fourth seeker, this well-bred lady, who cupped my bone runes gingerly in her outstretched hands.

“Drop them on the mat,” I instructed her, spreading a beautiful piece of tanned leather on the tabletop between us. Notched into it were the cardinal directions and the elements, but it was mostly for effect: I could have just as easily read the runes if she’d cast them into the mud.

My client did as I bid her, relieved to have the bones out of her hands, and I watched them fall into their places.

“What do you see?” She asked, her eyes in shadow beneath a hood drawn close. I could tell by the quality of the garment that she was well-born, and in my home

at considerable risk to her reputation. That was probably why she waited until dusk to seek me out, to travel back under cover of night. It softened me, somewhat, but not enough to refuse the pouch of silver she'd dropped with a satisfying *thunk* onto my table.

"Nothing," I said. "Yet." A lie. The first of many. "First, you must imagine your query like words scrawled across a page."

"I want to know –"

"No," I interrupted. "Don't say it aloud." It wasn't half so impressive when I answered a question they spoke out loud. I watched her press her lips together even as the question sprang to life between us. I didn't need to dig for it, didn't need to root around the annals of her memories, it was big and bold as the Wanted signs plastered in the town square. The ones with my name on them.

In front of her was the rune Bandah, blazed in fire and ash on bone. But I didn't need it to tell me what I had already felt from the moment she walked in. I could smell it on her, and hear it, too: that second pulsing heart.

"The answer is yes," I said gently. "But I don't think you needed me to tell you that."

I saw her shoulders tremble but didn't hear her begin to cry. This was a woman used to hiding how she felt.

"How many will this be, then?" I asked, leaning forward with my elbows on the table. The incense curled a delicate tendril of smoke around my fingers and I toyed absently with it in the air.

"Seven," she said at length, her voice hovering just above a whisper. "I barely survived the sixth."

I lifted my chin, examining the shadows that masked her face. I didn't need to see her face to know that there were no lines around her eyes or mouth, to know that she was barely more than a child herself. I closed my eyes and let myself crash into her consciousness. Her memories felt like tiptoeing in bare feet over broken glass. Twenty years old, then, and barely. Bearing children since she was fifteen. Bearing them to the kind of man whose sudden and grisly passing no decent person would mourn.

"You might survive this one," I said, "but the future is unclear. Your husband strikes you?"

She nodded.

"He may do you enough harm to make the babe die inside you, which will in turn poison you. But it is not set in stone. None of this is. You have choices."

I heard her snuffle; I offered her a handkerchief which she took, and I watched it disappear beneath her hood. "Thank you," she murmured.

"For what? Giving you the worst news of your life?" I pointed to another rune near to her. "This rune here? This is Mandai. It means you are smart and capable. It means you are stronger than you have given yourself credit for. It means that you are not alone, and that there are people in your life to whom you could appeal for help."

"Like you?"

I smiled. "Just so."

She nodded again, and I could see the faces of her seven children flash across the plane of her mind. She was desperate not to leave them. But they were whole and unharmed. "This is Kazenai," I said, pointing to another rune, one that had fallen a bit

further away, one I was reading with less conviction. "He will not hurt the children." She didn't seem convinced.

"Perhaps not..." She twisted the handkerchief in her hand, and I could see her chewing at her lip. I remembered how my mother would comfort these women, and I tried to summon her ease, her mild strength, the way she would take them by the arm and let them fall into her and weep until their sorrow was dried up. I didn't have that kind of gentleness in me. But I did have more I could offer.

"You came here to ask me something else," I continued, and she nodded, lip trembling. They always came to ask me something else.

"They say you're a witch," she breathed. "They say you know how to... help."

"They're correct. But it will cost."

"I haven't got any more silver," she protested. But this was a business. I may have wanted to help her, and surely I wouldn't let her leave here without what she needed, but I had needs of my own. And a get-up like hers would allow me to travel in circles from which my current attire presently excluded me. I looked down at my dress: Green simple cloth and a brown leather bodice, a cream chemise, clean and in good condition, but nothing so fine as what this lady was wearing.

To say nothing of the *jewels*. Three thick strands of gemstones glittered at her throat. And who knew what else I couldn't see. The cloak alone could get me past the Kingsguard in the Crystal Keep's crossing. I practically salivated at the thought.

"Everything you are wearing," I said. "That is my price."

She gaped. "But how will I –"

"Oh, don't be stupid," I said, rising to my feet. "I won't let you traipse naked through the streets. You'll wear this." I flung my arms out to the side, showing her my dress. I couldn't see the face she made in response, which was all for the best. It was the cleanest gown I owned. "Have we got a deal?"

"Yes," she said, utterly without hesitation.

"Good. Undress here." I pulled back the velvet curtain and stepped behind it, into the tiny space I called my chambers. There was a bed with a feather mattress – another trade – and plush quilts. A small chest where I kept a few changes of clothes, my desk upon which sat my noctuary and an overly ornate candelabra, and my shelves full of what I fondly referred to as the detritus of witchery. I smiled, and looked through the myriad bottles, all neatly labeled and in alphabetical order, and found what I needed. Pennyroyal, Mugwort, Black Cohosh Root. I put the appropriate dosage of each into my mortar and crushed them down, an earthy and aromatic scent rising to fill the air around me. That done, I poured the mixture into an empty vial and sealed it with cork and wax.

Returning to the main room, I found my client clad only in her chemise – cream, like mine – and I handed over the mixture of herbs. "Brew this into a tea and drink the entire cup, leaves and all."

"And this will... help?" She asked, taking it in her hand and grasping it to her chest.

"Yes," I said. "You will bleed. It may hurt – but you will live. If you do not bleed, come back and I will make you more, but once is typically enough." I saw her part her lips to ask, and I held up a hand. "I will not charge you more. The price is for the deed, not the herbs."

She nodded, and I looked her in the eye for the first time, now that her cloak was abandoned: a striking pair of honey brown eyes like fine sherry in a crystal glass. She was so terribly young. I sighed, began to untie the laces of my bodice. "You don't have to stay in the life you have," I said as I watched her pluck the dainty garnet earrings from her lobes and place them on the table.

She scoffed. "Of course I do. What other choice do I have?"

I gestured to the space around me. This was my mother's cottage, the house where I grew up. Now, it was mine. And my sister's. But Rosceline didn't have the gift for bonereading, and found the entire enterprise needlessly macabre. She mostly kept to our apartments in the city, a luxury afforded us by a long-standing agreement my mother had made, the details of which she never shared. But this cottage, this was my home. "It isn't much, but it's mine."

"You're right, it isn't much. And it wouldn't be enough, not for my children and me." I pressed my lips into a thin line and handed her the bodice before shrugging out of the plainclothes. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean –"

"Don't apologize," I said, and rounded the table to take her clothes where she'd laid them over the stool. The dress was stunning, a royal blue silk that was absolutely buttery to the touch. Delicious. The cloak looked brand new. And the *jewels*...

"I'll get in trouble if I return home without this," she said, clutching something to her breast.

"That sounds like your problem," I said, and held out my hand, palm up. After a moment's hesitation, she deposited a ring into my outstretched hand, a sapphire as plump and blue as a summer blueberry. I slid it into my finger, admired it, considered what kind of price it might fetch.

"If I left," she went on as she dressed, her beauty dimmed somewhat by my drab attire, "what might I do to survive?"

"What you had to," I said plainly. I put on her gown, her corset in fine brocade, her jewels. Her shoes, I let her keep: they were too large for me and I couldn't afford to be slipping all over the cobblestone. "Have you got any skills?"

She considered this a moment. "I can sing. Sew. I'm a passable dancer."

I shook my head. "Then the only living you'd make is on your back."

"That is no way to live."

I shrugged. "My friends who do it seem happy enough." Though many of them spent their nights in the bottom of a bottle of Poppy's Milk. I helped her to lace up the leather bodice before tucking my finger beneath her chin and forcing her to look me in the eye. "You are young, and you are beautiful, and that can get you far if you learn to wield it the way the Kingsguard wields their swords."

"I –"

"Make friends," I suggested. "Make someone fall in love with you."

"Can I?" her eyes lit up; she stood a little taller. I could see her fortune clear as day: she would be dead by the hand of a man by winter's end, but I could not tell if it was her husband or someone else.

I nodded. "Find someone with a good heart, a genuinely good heart. Make him love you. And then make him kill your husband." I took her hand, more urgently than I'd intended. "Do it soon."

"What of my children?"

I dropped her hand and pocketed the pouch of silver. "Take the girls with you."  
She proffered a faint smile and gave a nod of her head. "Thank you," she said.  
"For your help."

What good was I when I could see a future but not a clear way to change it? I moved around the table and opened the door for her, inviting in the sweet scent of fresh autumn air. It was a bit of a walk back to the city; it would be full dark by the time she arrived. "Gods watch you," I said, and let her disappear into the waning light of evening.

I swept my bones up and tucked them safely in their velvet pouch before retreating into my private space. Sitting in front of the small silver mirror on my desk I examined my hair, determined to style it like that fine lady who had just come to see me. Her hair was a rich mahogany and mine was black as spilled ink. Hers had been tightly coiled and mine was more of a gentle wave. Still, I pinned it rather elegantly atop my crown which also served the dual purpose of keeping it off of my neck; it was getting warm in the small space.

I made a note of the client in my noctuary, just as my mother always did: Lady Eslpeth De Vinter, 40 – no, 45 silver pieces, a pair of garnet earrings, gemstone necklace, and sapphire ring, blue satin gown, and blue damask cloak with – ooh, look at *those* – silver buttons and a brocade corset, all for some bad news and a vial of herbs.

I tucked my noctuary into the pocket of my brand-new cloak and pulled the hood gently up over my head so it shielded my eyes, affecting a real air of mystery. I stepped back into the main room and found myself to no longer be alone.

A kingsguard, in full regalia, plated armor and the purple cloak of the Crystal Keep, sword at his side, helm tucked under one arm. I pressed into his mind, smooth and easy like a paved trail through a pleasant forest: he was here for me. To take me, as so many before him had tried.

"Merrowyn Trevandis?" He asked, and I pressed my hand to my chest, as though he'd startled me. He had, somewhat, calling me by my full and proper name.

"Me? Oh, no sir," I said, affecting a gentle lilt to my speech that mimicked my most recent client's. "I'm here to demand a refund from that witch."

"My apologies, my lady...?" There was a question in his tone, but I had no intention of answering it.

"Never you mind. I was just making sure she wasn't on the premissis, otherwise I would help you to secure your pound of flesh myself, I swear to the Gods."

"She... swindled you, then?"

I slipped the pouch of bones off the table and held them aloft. "Swindled!" I shouted, waving the pouch in the air so that they clanged together musically before pocketing them. "I should say so, sir. I should say so. Why, just last week she told me that my mother's cousin would be visiting from the Westerlands and bringing a veritable crate of gold from his mining expedition, but he'd gone completely broke, and I said to him, I absolutely cannot be compelled to marry him under these conditions." I sidled along the wall until I was just at the door. "Do keep me posted if you find her!"

I slipped out the door and into the night, stepping quickly off the main road and onto the side paths hidden in the underbrush that my sister and I had taken countless times to and from the city since childhood. I almost hoped that I would run into her on my way, to advise her to steer clear of the cottage for the next few weeks. She would

sigh at me and roll her eyes, saying for the hundredth time that she thought this would *stop* when our mother disappeared, but instead I'd taken up her mantle and her troubles. And I would just shrug as I always did and make some snide comment about how the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, and then *she* would say that she, *too*, was an apple and... it was an argument we had on a biweekly basis.

I was so lost in my imaginary argument with Rosceline that I neglected to mark the three other Kingsguards who had just turned off the main road and onto one of our side paths. I made the mistake of looking up, of making eye contact with one of them, and he immediately drew his sword.

So I did what any sensible high-born lady might do. I ran.