

Borne of Bone

A wildling's first hunt was not for food. It was for a name.

The elder's hands were heavy on Rava's face, fingers calloused by seasons of frost and blood. He dragged the ochre-clay across her brow, down her cheeks; pressed his thumbs into the hollows beneath her eyes as though they could mold her into something new.

The paint reeked of wet earth and bitter roots. It burned where it touched raw skin and stung her eyes like ash. But Rava did not let herself blink.

"The wilds give nothing freely," the elder murmured. "What you hunger for, you must take with your own hands." His thumb traced the final line down the bridge of her nose. "The beast you slay tonight will lose not only its life. Its name will be yours to bear."

Rava knew this already. She had seen dozens of brothers and sisters return with fangs strung around their necks. Bodies streaked with dirt and splattered with blood, shoulders squared under the weight of their new names. For all the others, this was a day they waited for since the moment they could grasp a blade.

Rough fingers tilted Rava's chin upward, firm but gentle, the same way he corrected her grip during spars and steadied her shoulders on treacherous ground. His hand lifted, reaching as if to ruffle her hair once more, but stopped short, then dropped back to his side. His eyes—clouded at the edges, framed by creases that fanned like cracks in dry earth—lingered on her a breath longer.

"Come back with the teeth," he said.

The rest of the words did not come. But Rava knew them anyway.

Or do not come back at all.

She understood. This silence was the last kindness he could give her.

Rava turned and began to walk. She carried nothing but the heat of the bonfire between her shoulders. The others had all left with gifts—knives of bone and charms of sinew, leather flasks filled with enough hot broth to smother the long frost. They'd had dried meat to last the night, furs thick enough to keep Night's claws from sinking too deep.

Nothing had been set aside for her hunt, for no one awaited her return. The runt of the litter was always the last to eat, the first to be forgotten. It was not meant to survive.

But she had.

She walked until the swollen trees swallowed the last of the firelight behind her.

Rava knew the Nameless Wastes. Knew them like she knew hunger, like she knew the cold.

The ground was never still here. It bulged in places; and in others, it split into deep fissures where something beneath the surface throbbed. The trees stood gnarled and knotted, bark cleft by weeping sores that bled thick scarlet sap. Some swayed when there was no wind. Their roots coiled and clenched beneath her feet.

She'd spent most of her days in the wastes. For all its terrors, at least it was not cruel.

Somewhere beyond the trees, a river wound through the crimson earth, carving through rock and soil. Along its banks, the ghost of a dead village lay scattered in rotted beams and toppled stone. She knew this place well, too. She had come here often when the taunts rang too loud in her ears. Even the bravest younglings dared not follow her here.

She knew every sunken hall, the places where the soft ones had built walls to keep the wilds at bay. Their bones were still inside, wrapped in blackened roots; faces open-eyed in the dark.

The tallfolk always thought themselves above the hunt.

That was why they died.

Rava moved like she had been taught. Low, light, breath even. She crouched along the river, pressing her fingers into the earth, feeling for some sign of quarry: a print in the muck, a snapped twig, the blood-stink of something wounded.

Nothing.

Her stomach had long since stopped growling. The hollow ache had settled into something deeper. It was the long frost, after all, and they had not wanted to waste a meal on a girl who would be dead by morning light.

She had learned how to endure it—how to curl her tongue against the roof of her mouth to keep the spit from drying up, how to press her belly tight until the feeling dulled. But today, this hunger was not only in her stomach.

For the first time in her life, she wanted more than just a meal.

She could not return with just the fangs of rats or foxes. She wanted something big enough that when she stepped back into the fire's warmth, the others would have to finally see her. She wanted a name that would make them stop laughing.

It was when the winds changed that she smelled it. Not fresh. But not dead, either.

Rava rose, her fingers tight around her spear. The haft was old, the worn wood bearing shallow grooves that her fingers fit into without thought.

The scent thickened. She followed it through twisting roots and half-buried stones, past the seeping trunks, until she realized the trees had begun to lean away from whatever lay ahead. Then, at last, she saw it.

It slouched in the ruin of what had been some great structure, now nearly devoured by the Wastes. Stone walls jutted in uneven ribs around a slab of dark stone that rested at the heart of the ruin.

Any roof that might have once existed had long since caved, leaving a broken arch flanked by shattered pillars. Inside, faded gold and white glinted among the debris. Some metal mark, curling in tarnished spirals, lay half buried in the creeping roots. A stone statue—or at least, what was left of it—stood over the obsidian heart. She was a faceless figure, crumbling hands open in an empty embrace.

Under it, slouched against the broken black stone, was the carcass. Its spine was bowed low in supplication, ribs splayed wide like the doors of the ruin.

Waiting.

Even through the gnawing in her gut, Rava knew something was wrong. Her breath came too shallow. Though she had scarcely moved, her chest ached like she had been running.

The teeth. She just needed the teeth.

She took a step. Her stomach twisted like she had swallowed something rotten. A shudder trickled down her spine. Another step. Her skin prickled. Her scalp burned. The air hung as heavy as clotted blood, and settled in her lungs.

But Rava knew she would find no other name to take tonight.

So she moved forward.

The carcass did not bear rot.

It should have. It should have returned to the land long before now, bloated as it was. The death-stench was thick enough to call carrion-beasts to it from sky and grass alike.

Yet no crows circled. No scavenger had dared lay claim to it; no flies gorged themselves on the glistening meat.

But it was coming apart in other ways.

The skin and muscle of its limbs had been unspooled in perfect spirals, peeling like the rind of ripe fruit. The skeleton beneath was half-bared, bones peeking through ribboned flesh.

Rava knew how eyes should look after death. They turned cloudy within hours. They bulged and burst within days. These ones were still clear, staring upwards at the stars. Its tongue lolled in the red earth, pink and wet.

But most wrong of all were the teeth.

She could not tell exactly what it had once been. Still, she knew that it had been a grazer. Its skull was blunt, eyes set wide across its head. This had once been something that eased grass from the ground and chewed its cud. Something that ran, and fled, and feared.

Its teeth should have been dull and broad. Instead, long, jagged fangs curled from its skull—teeth for holding and ripping.

Rava did not move.

Her gut twisted like it was trying to crawl away.

But the hunger curled tighter. She thought of the tribe around the fire, gorging on fat-marbled haunches, knowing there was one less mouth to feed. She thought of the empty space where she slept, already filled and forgotten.

She reached for the teeth.

The creature heaved.

It was a wet, thin sound, rattling about in the hollow of its chest.

Rava's hand froze mid air, inches from its maw.

The thing began to twitch. Its head jerked. Its mouth began to open and did not stop. The jaw cracked apart with a wet snap, distending impossibly wide. The pink tongue rolled loose and curled upwards, shaping something that almost resembled a word.

Rava listened, transfixed.

It was no language. Scarcely even sound. A hollow noise that made the roots tremble around her feet.

But she understood.

It had been prey once. It had been hunted. It had been weak.

Now it was something else.

Its body lurched forward, spine snapping upright with a sharp crack. Rava looked into its eyes, and something inside the blackness shifted, coiling in slow, rippling waves beneath the glassy surface. Its flesh clung in loose tatters, half-sloughed from the bone beneath.

Yet still, it moved. Though not in the wild throes of something dying, nor in the blind charge of something running.

No, it was hunting.

The creature moved like no beast Rava had ever seen. It dragged itself toward her, limbs snapping into place a heartbeat too late. Pale and splintered ribs jut through ragged strips of skin, but its belly—distended with bloated organs and writhing—remained intact.

If this thing could die, it would die there.

Rava's heels scraped against the overgrown stone. She took a step back, her own chest shuddering with each breath, but her eyes never left its mouth. The jagged, curling fangs glinted in the moonlight.

The hunger in her burned.

She *wanted* those teeth.

The beast charged. It moved too fast for something so broken, hooves like splintered stumps smashed against stone, shaking the frame of the ruin with every step.

Rava barely had time to throw herself aside before its lolling jaw slammed shut inches from her. Her shoulder cracked against the stones as she tumbled, rolling until she hit a pillar's base. She was back on her feet in a breath, scrambling towards her quarry on all fours.

She lunged like a starving hound, throwing all her weight behind the strike, and drove her spear towards that seething, bloated gut.

The thing folded away. Its spine popped and curled backward, and the spear caught only empty air.

Rava snarled, teeth bared. Hunger writhed in her like a bonfire. She struck again, and again, always low, always for the gut, but each time the thing twisted and snapped away. It moved like no beast, for there was nothing left of the beast it had once been—only something wearing its skin.

The splintered remnants of its antlers carved the air. Its ruined hooves cracked the stone. Fangs gnashed together, too long, too many, eager to close around something soft.

She could not get close. But she danced with it, darting in, striking, retreating.

Yet its movements never faltered. It did not blink, nor did it tire—not even when Rava's breath grew heavy and her legs began to ache.

Finally, the thing turned and though she saw it move, her body did not have enough strength to follow. She barely had time to throw up her arms before it struck. The impact lifted her off her feet. Stone and blood blurred together as she flew.

She slammed into the black altar at the far end of the structure. The breath fled from her lungs in a ragged wheeze. Her head lolled back over the cold stone, vision swimming.

Above, the faceless woman loomed, stone arms spread wide. The swollen moon crowned her in a silver light.

Rava blinked, dazed, eyes tracing the empty embrace and curve of her hollow face. Then the pain settled in. A deep ache seared her ribs and flared with each shallow breath. Her right arm hung limp at her side, and in it, she could feel exactly where something had twisted wrong.

Across the ruins, the creature began to move towards her.

Rava's good hand reached out, scraping the earth until it found the spear—or what remained of it. The haft lay in splinters beside her. Her fingers closed around the sharp stone tip.

Without its reach, it was nothing. She was nothing.

She tried to rise, but could not. Pain lanced through her chest.

The creature was closer now. Something coiled and unfurled within the void of its eyes. Its ruined lips stretched over yellowed fangs and peeled back into something that almost resembled a grin.

Rava knew that gaze. She knew well the weight of stronger hands, of hungrier mouths, of those she could not stop from taking and taking and taking. She had been prey all her life.

And she knew exactly how to play her part.

A strangled breath shuddered out of her lungs—a low keen that shattered into a sob. Her knees splayed loosely to the side, palms upturned in the red earth. She let her head tilt back against the blackstone, baring her throat and the soft curve of her belly.

The creature stopped just before her. The air grew thick with the scent of bloated bodies split in the sun. It leaned over her—slowly, now that the hunt was over.

Amidst the sunken ruin of its flesh, its ribs flared outward like fingers reaching for her. Its jaw began to open, inch by inch, peeling apart with the crack of bone. Strings of half-clotted black bile stretched between the fangs.

Rava's fingers closed, knuckles blood-slick around the broken spearhead. A cry wrenched free from her throat, sharp and frantic with pain and hunger. She threw herself forward, and thrust the jagged spear tip up into its stomach.

The beast screamed.

Its body convulsed and shuddered in great, wracking spasms. Its ribs flared wide as if trying to wrench itself together. But Rava did not stop. She drove the blade deeper, carving inward, and raked through the bloated skin from gut to sternum.

The body opened.

Steaming heat burst from the wound. Its insides spilled over her in ropes of viscera and bile and clotted masses.

The creature stood still for a moment, body writhing in place. Then it slumped forward. Rava barely managed to drag herself out of the way before it crashed into the earth beside her in a spray of black blood.

Rava lay there, drenched and gasping. She could taste the heat of the creature's last moments, could feel the final twitch of dying muscle and the shudder of its dying throes.

She closed her eyes and savored it.

When Rava returned, the tribe was huddled around the fire, faces red with heat. Fat dripped into the flames, hissing as it met the coals. Laughter rumbled low; voices rose and fell between bites. They had already forgotten her.

She stepped into the firelight.

The laughter stopped.

She lifted the fangs.

They were still attached to the bottom jaw, ragged remains of flesh hanging in scarlet tatters. The bone was half-shattered from where she had pried it free. The remnants of a tongue still clung to the hinge, now blackened and stiff.

She dumped it in the dirt before them. The wet slap of its landing was the only noise in the silence.

The elder rose slowly, his face pale, eyes fixed on the thing she had brought back. His mouth parted, as though to speak, but for several heartbeats, no words came.

When he spoke again, he did not ask what she had killed. He did not say the words he should have—the recognition, the naming, the claiming of a place among the grown.

“Ravakhaan.”

Not a hunter’s name. Not a warrior’s name. A name without meaning, without place.

Rava, of what cannot be named.

The fire crackled.

A slow smile curled at the corner of her lips.

It suit her just fine.