



BILE

THE FOREST WAS DARK AND FULL OF ANIMALS. THE NIGHT between the trees clicked and growled and fluttered.

In the small light of a lantern, a man and a boy stood and stared at a tiny flask. Although the flask itself was unimpressive, the solution inside was remarkable: a powerful substance that could force a bond between a human and a spirit animal.

“Will it hurt?” the boy, Devin Trunswick, asked. He was handsomely dressed, and there was an arrogant, cruel tilt to his chin that fear couldn’t erase. A lord’s son, he would never admit he was afraid of the dark. Even if there was plenty to be afraid of.

The man, Zerif, pulled back the embroidered blue hood of his cape so the boy could see his eyes more clearly. Holding up the flask, he said, “Does it matter? *This* is a privilege, little lordling. You’ll be a legend.”

Devin liked the sound of that. Right now, he was the opposite of a legend. He came from a long line of Marked individuals—people who had bonded with spirit animals.

But when his turn had come, he had failed, breaking a chain that was generations long. At his Nectar Ceremony, the event where children who came of age drank from the Greencloaks' Nectar of Ninani and hoped for the appearance of a spirit animal, he had summoned nothing.

As if that wasn't bad enough, his own servant, a lowly shepherd boy, had called up a wolf. A *wolf*. And not just any wolf. The boy had summoned Briggan the Wolf, one of the Great Beasts.

Devin was stung by humiliation.

But that humiliation was going to end. Now an even more powerful animal would be delivered to him. He had prepared his whole life for this—it ran in his *blood*. This destiny had only been delayed, not destroyed.

“Why is it called Bile?” Devin asked, his eyes on the flask. “That doesn't sound great.”

“It's a joke,” Zerif replied tersely.

“I don't see what's funny about it.”

“You've tasted the Nectar, right?”

Devin nodded, his face sour despite memories of its exquisite taste.

“Well,” Zerif said, nose scrunching, “you're about to taste the Bile. Then you'll get the joke. I promise.”

The boy looked hurriedly over his shoulder as a growl muttered from the trees. Beside him, a spider with a hard, shiny back lowered itself down on a thread. He tried to stay out of its path.

“Whatever animal I call will have to listen to me, right?” he asked. “It will do whatever I say?”

“Bonds with the Bile are different from bonds with the Nectar,” Zerif informed him. “The Nectar might taste

sweeter, but the Bile is more useful. *We* can control much more of the process. For instance, you don't have to worry about bonding with that spider you've been so desperate to avoid."

Devin bristled, annoyed that Zerif had noticed his terror. Loftily, he said, "I'm not worried."

But his eyes darted to the covered cage that waited for them. Beneath that cloth was the animal he would bond with. He tried to guess what it could be from the size of the enclosure. The cage was large, up to his chest. Occasionally he could hear scratching noises from underneath it.

This was the animal he'd spend the rest of his life with. The animal that would make him triumph.

Zerif handed the flask to the boy. His smile was as wide and encouraging as a jackal's. "Just one sip will do it."

The boy wiped his sweaty palms on his shirt. This was it.

Nobody would ever question him again.

Nobody would ever doubt his strength.

He was not the Trunswick family's first failure. He was its first legend.

Through the open top of the flask, the Bile smelled dreadful. Like hair burning.

He remembered the glorious taste of the Nectar, like butter over honey. It had been so remarkable, until it had gone wrong.

Now he raised the flask to his lips, and without another thought, gulped down the Bile. He had to fight hard not to gag – it was like drinking death itself, and the ground that death was buried in. But within that blackness, he felt

something coming alive within him – something vast and strong and dark. His body could barely contain the thing that grew inside him. In that instant, he felt no terror. He only felt that he could create terror.

Still smiling, Zerif whisked the cover off the cage.