

THE
BONELESS
MERCIES

APRIL GENEVIEVE TUCHOLKE

FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX · NEW YORK

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To all those who seek glory

The story's been sung, the story's been told,
She burned the dead, and kept the gold,
Out goes the fire, in comes the cold,
She was the last of the brave, the last of the bold.

—"Song of the Lone Girl,"
from the *Blood Frost Saga*



This is a story of heroes,
of Mercies and witches, of marshes and Merrows,
of reeds and thorns, of women and giants,
of bravery and friendship, of an age that's ending,
and one that's about to begin.

—ESCA ROTH,
Jarl of Blue Vee, from the poem "The Boneless Mercies"



I shall gain glory or die.
—SEAMUS HEANEY,
trans., *Beowulf*

CHAPTER ONE



They say *dying makes you thirsty, so we always gave our marks one last drink.*

I reached for the flask of black currant *Vite* I carried in my pocket and put it to her mouth. “Here,” I said. “Drink this, *lamb.*”

She took a long sip. I pulled the flask away and wiped a drop from her lips. They felt plump and warm under my fingers, like a red plum in August just picked from the tree. I called all our marks *lamb*. Even the big ones with thick beards and hands the size of boulders. Even the mean ones with cold, shriveled hearts and dried blood under their fingernails. This *lamb* was neither.

She was covered in black silk, head to toe. The silk clung to her curves and moved lightly through the air as if woven from soft summer breezes. I wanted to touch it. I wanted to wear it. Our thick Vorse wool and furs and leather kept us warm, but they were utilitarian and plain next to her delicate dress.

“You’re from Iber.” Runa stared at the woman’s clothing as well.

The woman nodded. “I grew up with soft white sand instead of snow. The sun shone bright and brazen, and women had fire in their blood.”

She’d hired us herself. She wanted to die. Her husband, children—all dead from sickness. How she ended up in a dark, sod-roofed house on the other side of the Black Spruce Forest, I didn’t know.

The woman in silk was tall, taller than me, taller even than Runa. She had deep brown eyes and pointed ears like the Elvers in Vorse fairy tales. She took another sip of *Vite* when I offered it, and then slipped a gold coin into my hand.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Frey,” I said. I didn’t ask hers in return.

She sighed and leaned against me, her soft arm against my hard shoulder. I pulled her black hair away from her cheek, softly, softly, my knuckles across her skin. Her hair felt heavy on my palm, and it bore scents of the south. Myrrh and frankincense.

“We will do it quick, lamb,” I said. “As promised.” She looked up at me. Her smile was swift and kind and sad.

I motioned to Ovie in the shadows near the cold hearth, and she came forward, taut but quiet, like a snow cat on the hunt. Juniper, our Sea Witch, began to pray in the corner by a pile of hides and an old loom. Trigve stood by my side, and Runa simply watched us from the doorway.

Ovie handed me her knife—it was better made, sharper than mine. I took it and slit the woman’s neck. A flash of sharp silver,

and it was done. The woman kept her eyes on mine until the end, never looking at the knife. I caught her as she fell to the floor.

Juniper finished her prayers and came over to us. She put her hand on the mark's chest, and her curls fell over the dying woman's cheeks. Juniper's hair was blond, with a faint shimmer of pale, pearly sea green, the same as all the witches of the Merrows.

We waited for the mark's breath to slow. Slow, slow, and stop forever.

"I bet she was fierce when she was young." I closed each of her eyelids with a gentle push of my thumb. "Fierce as the Iber sun. I wonder if she was banished here, to the frigid north, for some fierce, heroic deed . . ."

Runa looked at me, sharp.

She said it was dangerous, this way I had of thinking about our marks after they died, imagining how they had lived, dreaming how their lives had played out, the twists and turns they had taken. She said all that dreaming was either going to get me into trouble or turn me soft.

Runa wasn't soft—she would have made a good Mercy leader. She could have gone off and started her own Mercy pack. Though when I admitted this once to Juniper, she'd just shrugged and said leadership took imagination as well as strength.

Runa stood then and began to explore the cold, empty house. I knew she was looking for food and clothing and weapons. I

caught her halfway down a shadowed hallway leading to more dark rooms, old bearskins hanging in the doorways.

“Leave it, Runa. The job is done. Let’s get out of here.”

She’d glared at me, mouth tight above her pointed chin. “There might be something hidden—treasures from the south, desert jewels we could sell for enough gold to book passage aboard a ship . . .”

“No.” Ovie’s deep voice echoed down the corridor. “We will not steal. Leave her things alone, Runa.”

Trigve and Juniper stood silent behind Ovie, though Juniper fidgeted, at war with herself. Her thieving urge was strong. Siggy had told us time and time again that the gods were watching and that they would punish a Mercy who took anything other than coin from a mark.

And yet . . .

I cut a lock of the Iber woman’s hair before we left. I slipped Ovie’s dagger under her head, metal scraping the cold stone floor, and sliced.

Runa had taken things in the past from our marks: simple, useful things. She kept a strong coil of hemp rope in her pack and all other sorts of stolen odds and ends: strips of leather and metal hooks and pieces of old wool and vials of potions and tonics. Runa usually did as she pleased, and I admired her for it.

Afterward, we waded into a nearby stream to wash the blood from our hands. We tried not to get blood on our clothing. Whenever we met people on the road, their eyes flashed to our black

cloaks . . . and then to the old red stains on our plain wool tunics. It reminded them that one day their blood might be staining our clothing as well. People didn't like to think about this.

The woman in silk hadn't wanted us to burn her. She'd asked us to leave her there in the forest, with the worn front doors of her home left wide open. The wolves would come and take care of everything after nightfall.

"That's how they do it in Iber," Trigve said. "I've read of it."

Walking away and leaving the woman's body to be torn apart by beasts in the night took all my discipline, all my steel. I ached to set her body on fire and let her soul drift up to Holhalla while her flesh turned to ash. Or even to put her safe in the earth, six feet deep, as the Elsh did with their dead.

How someone preferred to die said a lot about how they'd lived. The woman in black silk had wanted to die bloody.

And if she'd wanted a wild death, who was I to take it from her?

They called us the Mercies, or sometimes the Boneless Mercies. They said we were shadows, ghosts, and if you touched our skin, we dissolved into smoke.

We made people uneasy, for we were women with weapons. And yet the Mercies were needed. Men would not do our sad, dark work.

I'd asked my mentor, Siggy, about our kind one solstice night,

when the light lingered long in the sky. I asked when the death trade had begun, and why. She said she didn't know. The bards didn't sing of it, and the sagas didn't tell of it, and so the genesis of the Mercies was lost to time.

“Jarls rise and jarls fall,” she whispered, her dark eyes on the last orange streaks of light flickering across the horizon. “The Boneless Mercies remain. We have roamed Vorseland since the age of the *Witch War Chronicles*. Perhaps longer. We are ignored and forgotten . . . until we are needed. It has always been this way.” She paused. “It is not a grand profession, but it is a noble one.”

I didn't answer, but she read my thoughts.

“This isn't a bad life, Frey. Some have it much worse. Only fools want to be great. Only fools seek glory.”

CHAPTER TWO



Sleep eluded me, as usual. It lurked just out of reach like a gaunt North-Fairy from the sagas, shy and hollow-eyed.

Ovie's short, lithe body was nestled into mine, our feet toward the dying fire. I could feel her deep breaths matching my own. We were nine or ten miles outside a town called Hail. There would be death work for us there, if we wanted it. Based on the near-empty money pouch at my waist, we did. The Iber woman's coin would be enough to get us food and ale at the inn on the following day—a nice change from river water and snared rabbit.

I rested my cheek on top of Ovie's head. Her cords of thick white-blond braids smelled like snow. All of her smelled like snow. Snow and a hint of Arctic Woad. Every few months she dyed the ends of her hair with leaves from the fragrant northern woad plant until they turned as blue as the winter sky. It suited her.

We all believed Ovie was the oldest among us, maybe nineteen, maybe twenty, though she never told me her age. Something in her stillness made her seem wiser.

But for all her wisdom, at night Ovie nestled into my arms like a child.

Juniper once speculated that Ovie did this because she had nightmares, possibly about the time she lost her eye.

Behind me, the Sea Witch moved in her sleep. She was curled up with her back against mine, her thick curls making a pillow for the both of us. Unlike Ovie, Juniper smelled faintly of salt, specifically the Flower Salt that the Fremish harvested from the ocean and dried in the sun. I'd tasted some once in a Great Hall, the flakes sprinkled over a roast leg of venison. We'd been allowed to take part in a feast as payment for our services—the sick son of a servant, dying too slowly for the jarl's liking.

Runa was off by herself, as usual, her long legs stretching into the shadows. The rest of us always slept in a pile, our Mercy-cloaks wrapped around our bodies. The cloaks were well made and thick—they served as our blankets and our beds.

Sleeping all together in a pack like dogs, keeping one another warm at night . . . I'd grown to rely on it. I knew what it felt like to sleep alone. I remembered the long, solitary hours I'd spent on the open road after I'd run away from the Bliss House. Sleeping under trees, curled into myself, no one to run to, nowhere to go. It felt like a heartbeat ago.

I heard someone stirring. Trigve rose to his feet and set another log on the fire.

Trigve wore his hair long, like some Vorse men, dark strands tied back with leather straps or left streaming over his shoulders.

People often mistook Trigve and Runa for brother and sister, though their personalities were as different as snow and blood.

Trigve had been born three weeks before the festival of Ostar, in winter's last throes, and his mind ran strong and quick and cheerful, like a winter wind coming off the sea and stirring up the snow. He was even-tempered but deep, with a healer's compassionate heart. He was the most lighthearted of us, lighthearted as the Quicks, running free in the Seven Endless Forests.

Juniper had it in her, too, this lively spirit, but not Runa, and not Ovie.

Juniper had once said that Runa and Ovie understood darkness and carried it with them, but Trigve rejected darkness and turned to the light. The Sea Witch had looked at me then, hands on hips, eyebrows raised, as if to say, *And which are you, Frey, dark or light?*

We'd found Trigve last winter sitting beside an overturned caravan, the only person left alive in the village of Dorrit. He had no family, no home, like the rest of us Mercies. I'd lost my own parents at twelve from the snow sickness. My father had been a fisher and shipbuilder, and my mother a weaver. After they died, my father's brother sold me to a Bliss House, where I washed clothing and cleaned floors until I was old enough to provide another service. When the Bliss Mistress, a red-haired woman who looked kind but wasn't, told me I was ready to

move from the kitchen to the bedroom, I crawled out a window and ran. I ran until I found Siggy.

Autumn had already come again—the nights were growing cold and raw. Summer in Vorseland was bright, and short, lasting ten to twelve weeks, no more. I dreaded the coming of winter—the prior one had been especially hard. We saw no fewer than six blue bodies on our travels, frozen in the snow near the ash of long-dead fires. I often worried our flames would go out some night—one strong gust of wind, and then all of us freezing to death in our sleep. But Runa had a way with fire—she could get sparks sparking on wet wood on the coldest night and make the flames last until dawn.

“You have a glint,” Juniper said to Runa once, a few days after she’d joined us Mercies—the Sea Witch was the last girl Siggy recruited before she died.

Runa just shrugged and pulled out the little wooden box that contained her flint, steel, char cloth, and tinder.

“What you call a knack, the Sea Witches call a glint.” Juniper raised her arm and put a fist to her heart. “A glint is a spiritual gift from the goddess Jute. It shouldn’t be taken for granted.”

“What makes you think I take it for granted?” Runa leaned over and blew on a spark until the tinder nest caught fire. “Why don’t you just pray for a fire if you’re so devoted to Jute? It would save me the trouble.”

Juniper shrugged. “Prayers are tricky. And they are about giving, not receiving.”

Runa gave Juniper a long look. “Are they, now?” There was a snap to her voice, though her expression was mild.

Juniper simply smiled in return, and that’s when I knew Siggy was right, that this tiny girl with big ears and wide gray eyes would be a good addition to the Mercies. She was a sweet, earnest contrast to Runa’s deeply rooted skepticism.

Not that Ovie or I prayed much, either—the average Vorse citizen was not overly religious, as a rule. Supplication did not come easily to us as a people. Some exceptions existed—like the Gothi nuns, the Sea Witches, and a handful of pious jarls—but in general we did not turn to it unless in dire need.

When I did pray, it was to Valkree, the beautiful, silent, mysterious goddess of Boneless Mercies and all rover girls. It was said she had a special fondness for us. Siggy had taught me to pray when she’d first taken me on—it was part of my Mercy training. She’d taught me how to pray, just as she’d taught me how to slit a throat quick and clean by practicing on rabbits and squirrels, just as she’d taught me how to be patient and silent by tracking wolves and foxes back to their dens.

But the praying seemed to me more about fear and adoration than strength and function, and I’d never been one for passive worship.

Juniper whispered something in her sleep, and I felt her hair move across the back of my neck. She was the youngest of us, fifteen, and the smallest, too. But she held her own. She moved as light as air and was almost shameless when it came to theft.

She could steal the shirt right off your back, and you wouldn't know it until you felt the cold breeze shoot down your spine. When Ovie's traps failed, Juniper came through. She stole chickens at night, creeping past shaggy guard dogs without a sound. She once stole a sleepy red cow with gentle brown eyes when the farmer's back was turned. We had fresh milk for a week before we traded her to a cobbler for fleece-lined leather boots, a pair for each of us. Those boots kept our feet from freezing last winter and were the reason we still had all our toes.

I thought of my own theft—the Iber woman's hair tucked into my pack. A person was never truly dead as long as someone, somewhere, remembered them. Memories made you immortal. This was why men went to war. Why they had climbed in their longboats and raided Elshland, before the gold dried up. They risked their short, mortal lives for the everlasting glow of immortality. A chance to be a hero in a bard's song.

Runa said war was stupid. Juniper flinched at the wasted lives, at all the lost stories. Trigve said war was heartless. Ovie said nothing about it at all.

But I understood it.

I wanted to change my fate, to force it down another road. I wanted to stand in the river of time and make it flow a different direction, if just for a little while.

If I stayed on the Mercy path—this path of sad, inglorious, quick-and-quiet deaths—only the Mercies would hold Frey memories in their hearts after I died.

Siggy had said it was honorable to live an unknown and undistinguished life. She said it took courage. I disagreed with her on this, and other things.

I did not want to die like the woman in silk, alone in the woods, alone in the world, joy gone, love gone, spark gone, one last sip of *Vite*, chin up, neck slit, body down, a pool of blood, a midnight meal for hungry beasts.

I wanted to be known. To be sung about. I wanted men and women to hoist me onto their shoulders, to shout my name into the rafters.

I was a Mercy-girl with no family, no home, no fortune, and yet my blood sang a song of glory.

Juniper said the gods liked to humble people who dream big dreams. But the gods had never done much for me, and I wasn't afraid of them.

I stretched my arm over Ovie, searching in the dark for Trigve's warm fingers. I squeezed his hand. Sleep often shunned him, like me.

When I finally did drift off, my dreams were turbulent. Wolves howling into crisp winter air. White, sinuous moonlight on a black field. Oily red blood spilling across gray stone.

CHAPTER THREE



W*e* walked slowly through the village of Hail the next morning, to let them see us, the people with death on their minds. It was market day, and busy, but the villagers parted to let us through. None made eye contact—no one wanted to be seen trying to catch the attention of a Boneless Mercy. They gave us a wide berth, so the edges of our cloaks wouldn't graze them as we passed.

People knew us by our Mercy-cloaks—tightly knit wool, dyed black and embroidered with raven feathers. Ours glistened with the golden linseed oil we rubbed into the cloth to keep out the rain and snow.

A girl couldn't take on or carry out Mercy-work in Vorseland unless she wore a Mercy-cloak. Doing so could invoke the wrath of an overly zealous jarl—otherwise, anyone could buy a small, Mercy-size dagger from a village market and simply start trading in death. The cloaks were trickier. I'd had our four commissioned two years ago from a tailor's daughter who wanted us to kill her father—he drank too much, beat her, and who knew what else.

Runa said it was a vengeance kill, not a Mercy-kill, and hence not our business. Ovie said it would mean trouble if it was found out. But I didn't care. I saw the girl's bruises, deep purple across her cheek. I knifed her father as he pissed that night outside the tavern, a harsh slash to the gut. He writhed on the ground in the mud, blood pouring.

That daughter-beater screamed his way into a slow, painful death, and I was glad of it.

Siggy used to say that Mercies shouldn't enjoy killing. But the daughter-beaters, the wife-beaters, the ones who were cruel to animals, the ones who were brutal and selfish and hard . . . I liked killing them. I took pleasure in it.

Eventually we drifted into the Hail Inn—roaring hearth fire, sturdy wooden tables, cheery, bearded barkeep who didn't care a bit about our Mercy cloaks after he saw our coin. I ordered beef stew and bread and a pint of dark ale for each of us. We found a table in a dark corner away from the fire, Runa and Juniper on one side, me between Trigve and Ovie on the other. A skinny serving girl brought us steaming bowls and bubbling mugs, and I was in high spirits, grateful to be someplace warm and lively, grateful not to be eating on the cold ground again.

Runa did not share my good humor. She ate three bites of her stew, then set her spoon down with a thud. "I'm done with Mercy-killing."

This was an old argument. One we'd been having since the day Siggy died. There was no penalty for quitting the death

trade—we didn't pledge ourselves to a jarl like Vorse warriors. Mercies were more like the hedge-fighters of Elshland—wandering mercenaries who took work when they could find it and slept under a hedge when they couldn't. We lived without the comfort of a jarl's Great Hall and the food and shelter it provided . . . But we were free to come and go as we pleased, which had its advantages.

Ovie, for her part, didn't mind the death trade, though I knew she wanted to travel to distant lands and see the world. Runa didn't mind the endless wandering but hated bringing death. Juniper ached to stand still—she'd been raised by the Sea Witches in a cove by the Quell Sea and knew what it meant to have a home and a family.

None of us was content.

Occasionally I wished my parents had left me some small, isolated parcel of land at the far end of some quiet jarldom. As a farmer, I could have done as I pleased, more than most, at least. I'd be at the mercy of no one but nature and the gods.

I'd seen the occasional Vorse female farmer in our wanderings. She tilled the earth, cultivated it, harvested it, season after season, year after year. I imagined it was a hard life, filled with harsh sun in the summer and freezing wind in the winter. And farm-women often looked half-starved and weary beyond reason. But I would have taken that life in a heartbeat over being a Mercy.

No, that was a lie.

I would have stuck it out as a farmer for one season, possibly two, and then sold the steading. I was a wanderer through and through. Siggy saw it in me from the first, and she was right. I would never choose to sink my youth into the dirt, my back growing bent, my skin turning rough. I wanted more than this. A lot more.

“I’m done with Mercy-killing,” Runa said again, louder this time.

I looked at her. “*Once a Mercy, always a Mercy.*” It was something Siggy used to say whenever I asked her if she’d ever thought of leaving the death trade. “We’ve seen too much death not to carry it always in our hearts, whether or not we wear the raven cloaks.”

Runa slammed her fist on the table, and ale sloshed over the rims of our cups. “And if we joined the Quicks, they’d say, ‘*Once a Quick, always a Quick.*’ Wouldn’t you rather this be true?”

“Runa.” Ovie’s voice was soft but deep, her eyes narrow. “Don’t.”

Runa blinked and started in anyway. “I want to do something else. *Anything* else. Let’s join the Quicks.”

The Quicks moved through the Seven Endless Forests, living off the land. They were single-minded and focused when hunting but jovial and carefree at night beside the flames. We’d stumbled upon our fair share of Quick bands in our travels across the Vorseland Borders, following the death trade. They often let us share their fire.

Boneless Mercies were required by Vorse law to keep their hair long—it was the standard code for us death-bringers, as important as our cloaks. But the Quicks cut their hair short to keep it out of their way, to stay silent, to stay *quick*. It was said they were blessed by the gods, and jarls believed they brought luck to any forest they wandered.

Many jarls were also required by ancient Vorse law to pay the Quicks a sizable amount of gold to keep their forests free of thieves and brigands, an easy feat for the skilled archers. This gold allowed the Quicks to purchase sturdy boots and well-made cloaks. It allowed them to maintain a series of secret, well-stocked shelters across Vorseland, from caves to tree huts to camouflaged longhouses deep in the forest, invisible except for the thin plume of smoke rising from the roof.

I pushed my bowl away and rested my chin on my hand. “We’ve been over this, Runa. The Quicks will not take us in. I’ve asked each band we’ve come across, and they’ve all turned me down, every one. They want carefree wanderers, slow to anger, quick to laugh. They want skilled archers, silent on the hunt but loud and boisterous at night beside the fire. And we are death-traders.”

Runa shrugged. “We will learn. They can teach us.”

“And why would they bother?”

Juniper’s gray eyes shifted from me to Runa and back again. She kept a handful of small seashells in a pocket of her tunic, plucked from the shores of the Merrows, and she began to fiddle

with them. She did this whenever she was worried. I heard them softly clinking under the table.

Runa closed her eyes and sighed. “Then let’s just form our own woodland band. We can head into the nearest Endless Forest and never leave.”

I shook my head. “The Quicks have gold, and shelter—they can weather the worst of the winter storms in relative comfort. What would we do when a snowstorm hits, and we have no secret shelters and no coin?”

Runa took a sip of her ale, and then wiped her mouth on the back of her sleeve. “Fine. Then let’s join the Sea Witches.”

Juniper looked over her shoulder at Runa. “You can’t. I’ve told you this already. The Sea Witches won’t take in outsiders. Mother Hush wouldn’t even let me adopt a stray dog once because he wasn’t born on the Merrow shores. Though in the end, I kept him anyway. I fed him fresh fish and sang him the dog-prayers . . .”

“Is that why they exiled you?” Runa’s anger had switched in a heartbeat from me to Juniper.

“They didn’t exile me.”

“Then why are you here with us? The Sea Witches protect their own—you must have done something truly terrible for them to banish you.”

I set my mug down. “Back off, Runa.”

Next to me, Ovie finished her ale in one long swallow. Quickly, silently, she pulled her dagger, reached across the table,

and put it to Runa's throat. "Leave Juniper alone. She's a right to her secrets, just like all of us."

Trigve opened his mouth to protest, but I put my hand on his arm to keep him still. I wanted to let this play out.

"I don't have any secrets," Runa hissed, her eyes meeting Ovie's over the blade.

"We all have secrets," Juniper whispered.

"Yes." Ovie pulled her blade away again, leaving a thin line of blood on Runa's throat.

Most Vorse preferred not to speak about their past. They thought it unlucky. Often when a character in a saga spoke of their childhood, it meant they hadn't long to live.

Besides, Siggy used to say, the path to the death trade was paved with sorrow, and sad stories are best left alone. So we didn't pry, even Runa . . . until now.

Runa wiped the blood from her neck with a flick of her thumb. Ovie was the only thing in the world that seemed to scare her. Still, her fire had only been tamed, not put out. She leaned back and crossed her arms. "So we can't join the Sea Witches. Then how about we take up with the Gothi nuns?"

I shook my head. "The nuns can't enter the convent without a large donation to their god, Obin. Besides, they deal in the death trade even more than us. I can't see you washing dead bodies and preparing them for burning, Runa. And what if some jarl wants to make a vestal sacrifice to Forset, and the nuns send you? What then?"

Runa didn't answer. There was a long pause among us, our table cloaked in stillness, surrounded by the hum of the bustling inn. Juniper fidgeted. Trigve's foot brushed against mine. Ovie was silent, simply waiting to see what I'd do next.

Runa's gaze met mine. "Well, what would you suggest then, Frey? If you don't like any of my ideas, then why don't you come up with one of your own? I know you hate Mercy-killing as much as I do."

I leaned back and crossed my arms, just as she had, and said a silent prayer to Valkree to send me a new idea, an alternative path.

The front of the inn began to stir. A tall man with long red hair had risen from his table and now stood near the fire, telling a story. It was too loud to make out his words, but eventually the room began to hush. Spoons rested quietly in bowls, bodies went still, all eyes turned to the tale-teller.

He was telling a story about the Blue Vee Beast.

I'd heard of the beast. We all had. Rumors of blood, darkness, death. A creature that came in the night and slaughtered whole villages in Blue Vee. Men, women, children. A few weeks of quiet would pass, a month . . . And then the butchery began again. Some said the creature ate the corpses, and some said it dragged them away to its den, and some said it took only the girls, and some said it took only the boys, and some said it took only the heads and used them in dark snow-magic rituals.

". . . and in the morning they found the bodies, headless,

lifeless, strung up in the trees by their feet, the youngest still a babe. Roth's men had them taken down and burned, but the village is a haunted place now, and the ghosts of the dead roam after nightfall." The red-haired man's voice soared across the inn. "Jarl Roth is offering a hundred gold klines to anyone who can defeat this beast, but who here will swear him their blade?"

Roth was the jarl of Blue Vee, and half his warriors had been slain fighting this beast. He'd called in aid from neighboring jarldoms, but few answered. It was a difficult place to reach on foot—one had to cross the dangerous, fetid Red Willow Marsh or take the narrow Ribbon Pass over the Skal Mountains. The Jade Fells lived along the Ribbon Pass, and they were a wild people from the far north, brutal and fearless. It was said they ate the hearts of their dead.

A person could sail up the coast and avoid these dangers, but raiding longboats required two dozen strong men at the oars, and only jarls could afford their own single-mast, clinker-built vessels. Enough gold could book a person passage on the rare merchant ship that landed on the Blue Vee coast, but if any of us were that wealthy, we wouldn't risk our lives trying to slay a monster.

The people near us began to whisper. They called Blue Vee a cursed place and speculated on what would happen if no one was able to kill the beast. Would it go back to the far north and leave the rest of Vorseland alone? Or would it move farther south?

The red-haired man raised a fist in the air, and the firelight glinted off the bronze band on his wrist. “Who here has the heart to seek out this monster and bring it down?” He pointed at a broad-shouldered man near the door. “Do you, blacksmith? Will you add your strength to Roth’s and put an end to this horror?”

The blacksmith, a handsome, bearded man of around thirty, just shrugged.

No one here would answer Roth’s call. I’d seen a similar scene play out a dozen times in various inns throughout the last few months.

And yet . . .

I looked each of the Mercies in the eye. “I say we turn west and try for the Blue Vee Beast. We hunt it down, fight it, slay it, and claim the reward.”

Ovie said nothing. Juniper said nothing.

“Blue Vee?” Runa rubbed her palm along her jaw and eyed me warily. “That’s your plan to get us out of Mercy-killing? We slay the sick and old, Frey, not bloodthirsty beasts. What makes you think us Mercies can kill this thing? A creature that trained warriors haven’t been able to destroy?”

Even as she said it, I felt my heart beat faster, blood buzzing through my veins.

I wanted to fight something that fought back.

I wanted it more than I wanted a home and a family. I wanted it more than I wanted food and warmth and gold.

My eyes met Runa's. "Trained warriors kill loudly. We kill silently. And that is how you hunt a beast."

"*Quiet. Both of you.*" Ovie nodded toward a group of men in the opposite corner playing a dice game. "They're listening."

We left the inn and napped off the stew and ale under a large oak tree at the edge of town, stretched out on grass that smelled clean and floral. I woke before the others and lay still, staring up, arms crossed under my head. The sky was stark blue, and it was one of those perfect, early-autumn evenings.

But the oak's leaves were beginning to change color. A sign of things to come.

Winter.

Short days, long nights. Little food. And the cold. Always, always the cold.

Mercy-work was best done after the shadows set in. The people with death on their minds found us as the sun began to set.

An old woman, stooped and twisted as a bone-white juniper tree. "*Come to the house at the southern crossroads, the one with five windows. Bring poison. I can pay.*"

The blacksmith from the inn, dark eyes deep and melancholy. "*Come to the smithy, climb the outside stairs, and knock twice. My grandmother is eager to see Holhalla.*"

A father, thin and weary, with forlorn brown eyes. "*Come to the hut by the tall pine, straight north. Skin-eating disease.*"

And one last request, just as the fat orange sun sank below the sky. A girl, no older than twelve, with long black hair and green eyes.

"I need a vial of Blue Seed."

"Why?" Runa asked. "We aren't Potion Peddlers. We *use* poison, we don't sell it."

Blue Seed poison was squeezed from the seeds of the Black Pine—it was hard to make and hard to get, but it brought a fast and painless death. A smaller dose would also empty a woman's womb, if that was her wish—this was lawful in some jarldoms, but not all. Laws changed as often as jarls died and new rulers took their place. Young women sometimes approached us for "Small Seed," as they called it, clutching their bellies, eyes afraid. I told them to seek the Potion Peddlers . . . but I also suggested they use Wild Carrot Oil in the future to prevent a similar event.

The black-haired girl started shaking under Runa's hard gaze, thin shoulders twitching in her black wool dress. "My father went off into the Red Willow Marsh and never came back. My mother took a new husband and he's . . . He's not kind to her or to me. I want him dead."

"That's a vengeance kill, not a Mercy-kill." Runa's voice was a little softer now.

Juniper walked forward and put her arm around the girl's waist. She moved a strand of her hair and whispered a prayer in her ear.

My eyes met Ovie's. We'd done vengeance kills in the past. To get our Mercy-cloaks, yes, but it hadn't stopped there. Vengeance kills were forbidden, and things would go badly for us if it was discovered. Still, they were far more satisfying than Mercy-kills.

Ovie nodded. She agreed with me on this.

I slipped my hand into my leather satchel, pulled out a vial filled with oily blue liquid, and gave it to the girl. “Take it,” I said. “And remember, our Sea Witch sees all and knows all. If I find out you used this potion on anyone other than your stepfather, we will track you down and send you straight to Hel. You are putting us all at risk. Understood?”

She stared at me for a moment, nodded, then handed me two coins before running off into the night.

The Potion Peddlers followed strict laws and never sold to children. Sometimes they wouldn’t even sell to us. Siggy never would have given the girl the poison.

I wasn’t sure if this had made her a strong Boneless Mercy, or a weak one.

We went to the crossroads first, then the blacksmith’s. Old and sick. Simple tasks. We left the skin-eater job for last.

The house was nothing but a stone hut, built next to the tangled roots of a tall, ancient pine tree, upper branches reaching out vast and strong over a small black lake. The thin man from earlier answered the door, bloodshot eyes, shaking hands.

His wife had thick blond hair and small hands. Her skin was covered in weeping sores. She sighed when she saw us, whether with sadness or relief, I couldn’t tell. Her husband took her in his arms and held her. A few moments passed, and then he lifted

her chin with his palm, exposing the red blisters on her ashen neck.

“It will all be over soon, lamb. No more pain, just peace.” I gestured to Ovie, and she handed me her knife. Sharp blade, thin neck, one slash and it was done. The woman went still.

Next came the son. Trigve led the father outside as we climbed the ladder to the loft—he’d seen his wife through to her death, and that was enough for one man.

The boy was ten at most, with wavy yellow hair and a brave, intense look in his blue eyes, even as he lay dying on his bed. Juniper dropped to her knees and began her prayers.

Ovie took one look and shook her head. “No. I’ll not stay to watch this.” She spun around, went back down the ladder, and walked out the front door.

I turned to Runa.

“He’s just a boy.” Runa’s voice was deep and raw and sad.

I nodded.

Runa and I were the only ones fierce enough to take children. Yet we both held back every time.

“Just do it,” the boy shouted from the bed, fire in his voice. “I want to reach the Great Hall of the Slain while there’s some fight left in me.” He raised his fist into the air, and a sore burst and leaked blood down his arm.

The boy’s bravery about broke me. Even after all I’d seen, even after all the death.

Juniper’s prayer-whispers stopped.

“I’ll take him,” I said. “You did the last two children, Runa.”

Runa moved her dark braids behind her shoulders. Her hair was a true Skyye black, like many Vorse people whose ancestry could be traced to the Skyye Islands, and it shone a violet-blue in the firelight beaming from the nearby brazier. “No. I’ll do it. Blood is blood and bone is bone and death is death. It’s all the same.”

Juniper started her prayers again.

Runa’s Mercy-knife was smaller than Ovie’s but just as sharp. She went to the boy and, despite what she’d said about death being death, reached forward and gripped his small arm in hers, forearm to forearm, like warriors before battle.

People said the skin-eating disease was contagious, but that didn’t stop her.

The boy’s fingers tightened on her skin until the knuckles went white. He tilted his chin back . . .

And it was done.

His body went limp, blond head sagging against the pillow.

CHAPTER FOUR



I *don't think we should sleep here.*" Juniper narrowed her eyes as she stared up at the large rock.

I'd decided to build our fire that night next to a lonely, free-standing stone, fifteen feet around, twelve feet tall, jade-colored moss growing up its sides. We were a few miles outside Hail, in a dip of land near a group of spruce trees and an empty field.

Trigve helped me gather wood, and Runa got it lit, like always. I could taste autumn on the air. There was still a tang of life, of green and growing things, but a nip was sneaking in—the bite that would stiffen our muscles and freeze our blood come winter.

"I don't think we should sleep here," Juniper repeated. She'd been off in the spruce trees, praying for the Skin-eater boy and his mother. I hadn't heard her return—she moved as silent as the moon. She arched her back and put her hands on her hips, tunic wet from the ground, black wool leggings gleaming with damp.

"Why not?" Runa was quieter than usual, almost melancholy, and after what she'd done earlier, who could blame her. We all

had our roles as Mercies, and we were all needed, but Runa . . . Runa came through when the rest of us failed. She had our respect, even when her temper was as sharp as her steel.

“Troll,” Ovie said in response to Runa’s question. She lifted her black leather eye patch and rubbed her calloused palm over the hollow.

Trigve sat down near a bed of purple heather and undid his braid. He shook his head, and his dark hair rippled down his back. “Large rocks are not trolls turned to stone. That’s a myth. The warriors in the *Blood Frost Saga* named their weapons after legendary trolls, but even they knew the creatures weren’t real. Trolls aren’t mentioned in any of the Anglon Mystic books.”

Runa walked by and smacked Trigve on the shoulder. “So you know how to read. What good does it do you?”

Trigve shrugged. “It’s useful.”

Runa sat down, stretched out her long legs, and began to sharpen the blade of her knife with a small piece of unglazed ceramic from her pack. “Maybe. But it can’t help you hunt or kill or win a skin-fight.”

Skin-fight was a slang term for Vorse one-on-one combat, fought naked, no weapons. It was sometimes to the death, but mostly not. Jarls often used skin-fights to resolve disputes between two tenants. The opponents were usually of the same gender, though not always.

Siggy had taught us the basics of Mercy-killing—where to put the knife and the angles that made the blade go swift and deep. She taught us poison and the doses that would bring death. She

taught us how to pull the breath from someone with a rope and with our hands. She even taught us how to snap a mark's neck—though I believed Runa was the only one among us strong enough to do it.

But winning a skin-fight usually came down to either strength and stamina or wits and cunning. We'd seen a few in our travels—the times we'd been called to work in a Great Hall, and the fights always brought excitement to dark winter nights.

“Trolls *are* real, though.”

I looked over my shoulder. Juniper was staring up at the stone again.

“They were the mortal enemies of the Winter Elvers. One of my Sea Witch sisters saw an Elver battle a troll once, in the far north, past the Skal Mountains, in the Wild Ice Plains—it was a great fight of blood and ice, lightning and thunder. I believed her, too. Sea Witches never lie. Not to one another.”

I smiled. “I hope to meet your Sea Witches someday, Juniper.” Something about her tales of the witches made my imagination flicker, my blood move faster.

Trigve and I started on supper. We knelt on the cold ground and shared a plank of wood—I sliced carrots with my Mercy-dagger, and Trigve cut onions. We were making rabbit ale stew again. The Skin-eater deaths had given us enough coin to buy vegetables and mead.

I hated taking money from the sad-eyed man in the hut. A father, no longer, a husband, no longer. Alone.

Trigve tossed his pile of onion slices into the pot, shoulder grazing mine. “Forget what I said earlier. Juniper is right. There is something unnatural about this big rock. I feel as if it’s watching me.” He turned and pointed. “Look at those spots there, where the moss doesn’t grow. Don’t they look like eyes? And there . . . See where that part juts out, like a nose? It’s eerie. Why did you pick this place to camp, Frey?”

“I thought the stone would block the wind, which it does. I didn’t know everyone would worry about trolls.”

“*Enough.*” Runa was on her feet, blade in hand. “I will skin-fight the next person who says *troll.*”

She reached up, undid the simple pewter clasp at her throat, and let her Mercy-cloak fall to the ground.

“Today was the last day I will do this. I meant what I said at the inn. I’m done. Done killing children, done killing weak, ailing people. Done with sadness. Done with death.” She gathered up the cloak in her arm, raven feathers gleaming in the firelight. She lifted it out over the flames . . .

I jumped to my feet and pulled the cloak back from the fire, holding it bundled to my chest. “Don’t burn it, Runa. You need it to keep off the cold this winter, if nothing else.”

She looked at me for a long moment, then bent down, one knee forward, and seized the knife from the leather sheath around her hard, lean calf. She lifted her chin and put the edge of the blade to her neck. “I can’t go on doing this. I’d rather take my own life than the life of one more innocent person. I’ll slit my throat. Watch me do it.”

We faced each other, eyes locked.

It was that feisty, dying Skin-eater boy. He'd been the last straw.

I dropped to the ground and gently pulled the knife away from her throat. "I agree with you, Runa. I don't know how Siggy did this year after year. I don't know how she bore it."

Runa leaned forward, her face close to mine. "Did you mean it, at the inn, about going after the Blue Vee Beast?"

I opened my mouth, and then shut it again. *Had I meant it?*

I felt small fingers at my elbow, and then Juniper was there, her thin arms sliding around both of us. "People are in pain, and they need us. We help them. Isn't that enough?"

Juniper, always unselfish, always thinking of others.

I stood, and Runa followed. I put my hand on my heart, a gesture of apology. "I'm sorry about the taking the Skin-eater boy, Runa."

Runa let out a deep sigh, and her posture relaxed. "How could we have known the boy would be so young, so full of heart and life despite the sickness? Besides, we've done Mercy-kills for children before. We need the money. We always need the money."

It was true and would always be true as long as we stayed in the death trade.

Runa threw her blade onto the ground, tilted her head back, and let out a howl of frustration. "I still say we head into the nearest Endless Forest and to Hel with the consequences."

I smiled. "I love your spirit, Runa." I picked up her knife and

gave it back to her with a flip of the handle. “But I do not want to starve to death in the snow this winter.”

Runa gave me a long look and then nodded.

The three of us stared into the fire, not talking. Ovie slipped out of the shadows, back from checking her traps, and came to my side. Trigve stood apart and alone. I motioned for him to come over, but he shook his head. He wasn’t one of us, and he knew it.

It would become a problem down the road. Even if I wanted him to stay . . . even if *he* wanted to stay. It wouldn’t be enough. Not as long as we continued to roam and trade in death.

I felt something touch my cheek, and I looked up. It was snowing. The flakes were light and pretty, but it was snow all the same.

Winter.

I looked at Runa, then Ovie and Juniper. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. I smelled juniper and pine and snow.

Trigve had been teaching me the Two-Pronged Path. It was a discipline mastered by the mystics and took years of training, but he’d accomplished the basics. The goal was to send your mind down two paths and follow them both to the end in an attempt to understand the future.

I breathed in and out. Slowly.

The first path, the path of Mercies and the death trade . . . I knew where this road led. It was filled with cold and loneliness and tedium and sorrow.

The second path, however . . . The second path was filled with sharp turns and deep angles. Dark shadows and bursts of light. It was unknown.

It was beautiful.

I opened my eyes.

I put my hand on my dagger and faced the Mercies. “It has been less than a year since Siggy died, and here we all are, at a crossroads. Siggy Mercy-killed for forty years and led with courage and love and blood and fire. But things in Vorseland are changing. I’m sure I’m not the first to notice that the other Mercy groups we meet on the road are all older. The young aren’t taking up the trade anymore. It seems that orphaned Vorse girls have found a new path. And so must we. We make a decision. Tonight. Voice your suggestions now, and then we will vote.”

There was a long pause. The snow fell, white flakes on long Mercy hair.

“I won’t go to a Bliss House.” Ovie’s expression was calm and impassive. “I’d rather eat a black Snow Plum, ripe from the vine and leaking poison. I’d rather die shaking and screaming in pain, than end up there.”

“Yes,” I said. “So would I.”

Ovie reached out and let her palm fill with the falling snow. She closed her fist, and it dripped through her fingers as it melted. “I think we should go south. We’ll need to steal enough gold to book passage on a ship, and it will be a risk. But the woman in black silk said that Iber has sand instead of snow and that the sun

is hot and strong and the women are filled with fire. I want to see this place.”

I raised one finger. “Ovie votes for the south.” I raised another finger. “And I say we fight the Blue Vee Beast and try to win our gold, rather than steal it.”

I turned and met Juniper’s gaze. “What is your wish, Juniper? What path do you think we should take next?”

Juniper looked up at the night sky, and her pale sea-green curls slid down her back. She held up one hand, thumb bent, in a Sea Witch gesture that meant *hold, wait, give me time*. “Let me say a prayer for guidance.”

She moved a few feet away from us and knelt on the ground, eyes closed, lips moving silently.

I looked over at Trigve, sitting by himself near the fire. He would not voice his opinion.

Next to me, Runa reached up and gripped her blue-black braid in one fist. She pulled her dagger and put the edge of the blade to her scalp. “The Quicks will take us in. They will. I’ll cut my hair right now. We can all cut our hair, burn our cloaks, take to the woods, and join the first band we come across. They wouldn’t take us in as Mercies, but perhaps they will accept us as orphaned boys with no homes and no families and no worries. We’ll never tell who we are, what we’ve been. I’m ready, just say the word—”

I grabbed Runa’s wrist and stopped her blade for the second time that night. “They’ll see through the ruse. We can’t simply

dress as boys and fool everyone for years on end as we move through the Endless Forests. Juniper might be young enough still, but the rest of us would always struggle to hide what we are.”

“Some of us more than others,” Ovie said with a half-smile.

It was true enough. Runa was built straight and tall and solid, and Ovie was compact and lean, but I was rounder in every way.

Runa eyed my chest and frowned. “We could go to the Seeth Forest, where we met that friendly band last winter, and see if they will take us in this time—”

“No.” Ovie shook her head, and the firelight moved across her blond braids. “It won’t work. There’s a reason the Quicks hesitate to take in women.” She paused. “My mother joined a band of Quicks when she was young. She was quiet and fast, good with a bow. They let her in on the understanding that she would be female in form only, that she would dress as a man and *be* a man.”

Ovie paused again.

“What happened?” I asked when she didn’t continue.

Her eyes met mine, and I saw sorrow, deep and sharp. “My mother lasted three years. She fell in love with another archer, and all went well until she ran out of Wild Carrot Oil in one of the Endless Forests and became pregnant with me. Women with babes can’t roam through the woods with nothing but a dozen arrows in hand. Infants are unpredictable. They cry and startle prey. They remind wanderlusting men of homes and settled life. The Quicks kicked her out faster than they let her in.

Her time with them haunted her until her death—she ached to return to the forest.”

I stared at Ovie, a bit stunned. She rarely spoke, and never for so long.

Juniper rose from the ground, done praying. I pulled out my flask of *Vite* and passed it around as we waited for the Sea Witch’s decision.

She took a long drink of the fire liquor and then looked at me. “Jarl Roth is a man in need of heroes. We go west.”

Runa swore.

Ovie nodded.

I smiled.

Heroes in the Vorse sagas like to seal a promise with blood. I grabbed the blade from its strap across my right calf and slashed my palm, deep enough for the blood to ooze.

“The four of us will go to Blue Vee and fight this beast,” I said. “If we survive, we will take the gold and do whatever we please with the rest of our lives. We will be as free as any woman in Vorseland. I swear it on Siggy’s flaming pyre.”

I closed my fist and let the blood drip through my fingers as Ovie had done with the snow.