

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.

Runa 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 . . . Siggý 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. I put it in my pack.

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 didn't want us to burn her. She 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 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 blanket and our bed.

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 into the fire.

Trigve wore his hair long, like some Vorse men, dark strands tied back in 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 Ostara, 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 Siggie.

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 Siggie 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.