

For the girls who have looked in the mirror and wondered...
No, you didn't deserve it.
Yes, you can heal.
You are worthy.
You are good.
You belong.

Prologue

I died alone in a frostbitten forest.

It was not heroic.

I did not die defending an innocent or hunting to feed my loved ones.

I died because I was reckless and cowardly. I died running away.

Alone, half-soaked in a frigid stream with icicles in my hair, I slowly froze to death. The cold stole my last breath, no more than a wisp of frost in the air as my organs stopped pumping and my eyes turned unseeing.

And that would have been the end of my story.

A selfish girl who died alone in the wood, having spurned those who would have missed her.

Until the witches found me.

I was dead. I did not hear their approach, could not wonder or worry. My soul—whatever fragment of self remains when the body dies—was not aware of itself. I saw no afterlife. Nor did I linger above my lifeless body, contemplating my existence, as the poets would have us believe.

One moment, I existed. The next, I did not.

But then I did again.

Sight returned first. Dark figures lurked on the edge of an even deeper darkness. The only light filtered down from a mostly obscured moon. Yet I could see the outline of each cloaked body clearly.

Next came sound. They chanted, deep and low. Words—words I should have recognized but could not force my mind to parse. I felt the thrumming of my blood in my veins, surging in time with their otherworldly chorus. But how could that be? I'd felt my blood slow and stop in time with my heart...

Blood.

The scent of it flooded my consciousness until the smell was the color and the sound. Red, hot, demanding. I'd never spilled enough of my own blood to learn the scent of it. But as I felt my knees bend beneath me, lifting me out of the frozen creek bed, I knew the tang in my nostrils belonged to me.

It dripped from my fingertips as I stood. There was a cut on my left forearm, just above the wrist. The blood flowed freely, thick and unclotted. Mesmerized, I lifted my fingers, entranced by the pattern of scarlet rivulets that decorated my palm and knuckles. My eyes followed the path—over my skin, down to the snow-covered ground. A thick layer of frost coated the rocks and mud at the edge of the stream. Droplets of fallen blood spread over the ice, their shapes distorting as their warmth melted the thin top layer of ice.

But the blood did not end there. It was all around me. I'd been freezing, not bleeding... so much blood... how was I alive?

The blood was not in a pool around me. It spread out in purposeful, intersecting lines. Five of them. And I stood at the center.

It wasn't possible. Unless...

Unless I wasn't alive at all.

Five lines. Five points. Five figures chanting.

Except they were no longer chanting.

A lone hooded figure approached, walking a straight line from the point where two lines of my blood joined until she stood directly before me.

She. I knew without seeing the face beneath the hood.

A hand emerged from the layers of heavy fabric, its graceful movements at odds with its ten long nails, each sharpened to a point. It took my larger one without hesitation. As if she was entitled to touch me.

I didn't catch her words. The silence around me was too loud. But I watched as her other hand produced a needle and thread and her graceful fingers stitched my skin back together. A few more words and a bandage appeared from the frigid air, winding itself around my wound.

She squeezed my hand, now suddenly clean of blood, before retreating to her point on the pentagram.

Five lines. Five points. Five witches.

And I stood at their center.

Though blood flowed in my veins, it was not my heart that pumped it, but an ancient power. That same power now surged through me, claiming every corner of my being. When I lifted my hand again, frost coated my fingertips where moments before had been blood.

I was not alive. Nor was I truly dead. Not reborn, but remade.

A fragment of memory curled around the icy stalagmites of my mind. An old adage, a line of a faerietale, a whisper of who I'd been before. Uttered by someone who'd loved me, who I'd loved in return.

But new words forestalled the old. The same witch who'd stitched my wound lowered her hood, revealing a riot of black curls and an eerie but alluring countenance that matched her hand. "Welcome, sister."

The words hung in the air. Then more joined them—the voices of the other witches echoing her greeting.

But different words filled my mind. Words that as a child I'd never fully understood. I was little more than a girl now, but I knew their truth in the same way that I knew my name. And knew what I now was.

A witch.

My mother's voice whispered a farewell as the girl I'd been slipped away. *Beware, sweet Koryn. Witches are not born. They are made.*

Part I: Mercy

*They bow beneath the weight of sin,
Still mercy's light glows clear—
To lift the low, restore the lost,
An act of faith and fear.*

Chapter 1

Three hundred and seventy-seven years later...

Desperation had a taste. Some people tried to season it to make the flavor more palatable. They spiced it with anger or sadness or bravado. But it was a futile effort. It always tasted the same in the end.

In the last four hundred years, desperation had become the national dish of Velora. Though calling what remained of the continent a nation would be overly generous. Four hundred years ago, the gods sentenced the continent of Velora to death. She'd taken her time about it, but there was no mistaking it now. The once prosperous, viable land was in her final death throes. Those who lingered here were either stupid or desperate. Most were some combination of both.

Not me.

I was perfectly aware of the gravity of my situation. Alone. Abandoned by my coven. Unlike the humans mulling around the dark hovel of a tavern where I'd taken refuge, I would not starve to death.

I forced myself to eat a bit of the gruel that I'd purchased from the gaunt proprietor. His bluster was apparent even from the dark corner where I sat. He wore it like armor, glaring at every person who blew through the door, bringing a gust of frigid air with them. The skin around his face was loose, his neck even worse. The thick woolen scarf he wore wrapped around it did little to disguise the slack skin. Once, he had been a bull of a man. Muscular, strong. Intimidating, even. But the gods had stolen that vitality from him, leaving a decaying husk. It was not even a metaphor; the comparison to the landscape and continent beyond was too direct for poetry.

The gruel stuck in my throat, but I forced it down. Witches needed no such mortal sustenance; we were already dead, after all. My body was sustained by ancient power, not by nutrients. But I could still feel hunger and cold, even if they would not be enough to kill me. The gruel was noxious enough I would have preferred the hunger, but it comforted the humans to see me eat.

It was one of dozens of small adjustments that I'd learned to make. My hair was braided instead of loose around my shoulders, the way I'd prefer it. No part of a witch was meant to be constrained. My nails were trimmed to points, but they did not curl around to kiss my palms, like the witches of the ancient covens. I'd even softened my coven mark—though too soon, it would begin to fade. My connection to my sisters was weakening.

I forced down another bite of gruel, studying the other occupants of the tavern. I could tell by looking what most of them would ask for, though who would summon the courage—or desperation—to approach first was not as clear to me. Would it be the young mother in the corner, squalling child at her empty breast? She would ask for a spell to increase the supply of her milk so that her child might live another week. There was a reason so few children were born in Velora. The land could not sustain them, nor their mothers. Perhaps it was a bit of mercy from Seraxa, that instead of allowing the children to be born only for their mothers to watch them die, the women of Velora hardly ripened with child at all.

Or perhaps it would be the farmer. Two hundred years ago, farmers were easy to spot. They were lean, like all the others as food became scarcer, but they still had muscle. Even as crops declined year after year, they fed themselves and their families. They *had* families. But over the last century, that had changed. The crops dwindled to nothing. With neither crops to tend nor food to sustain them, their muscles disappeared. Their wives were now gone, their children unborn. Stolen by the gods.

A hundred years ago, I'd had a coven around me. My existence had been fraught in many ways, but at least I'd had my sisters. I'd had *something*.

A hundred years could change everything.

The farmer in the corner ordered a watered ale instead of wine. He saw me waiting. He would spend his last coin on a spell in hopes of coaxing some bit of life from Velora's fallow, worthless ground. And I would take it from him.

My shoulder blades drew together, my body protesting the decision my mind had already made. Any kindness died when I did, I reminded myself. My heart was too dead to protest the lies that I told myself in order to keep moving forward.

The fae were the first to leave, retreating beyond the mountains to their walled refuge. No one had seen or heard from them in more than three centuries. Good riddance. All of this was their fault. Not just the curse—*all of it*.

The rich were next, booking passage on ships across the ocean in all directions. Anywhere was better than Velora. That left the middle and poorer classes, those who could not immediately afford to flee, along with those who were stupid enough to hope.

Many covens left, but not mine.

If we had fled to richer lands, where power still grew up from the ground with the crops, would it never have happened? Would I be with my sisters, still?

A useless thought.

I ought to have learned by then that the past did not matter. If I had not learned that lesson by now, maybe I was doomed to never learn it at all.

The mother or the farmer. One of them would be the first to approach me that night.

There were more that would come to me. It was my third night in this tavern on the outskirts of Canmar, what was once a thriving capital city at the heart of a prosperous continent. The old fae palace in the center of the city was deserted, as were most of the larger residences.

Three nights was the maximum, I'd learned. Enough time for the desperate to pass word from mouth to ear and muster the courage to come to me. Any longer and I would attract the wrong sort of attention.

I rolled my shoulders, trying to dispel the tension building in the center of my back. Remorse for what I was about to do, what I'd been doing for months, paired with the flood of sensations that accosted me from every direction.

Even the sparse tavern was almost too much to bear. Wood crackled in the hearth, the warmth spreading relaxation through the haggard patrons. Watered wine and ale were enough to intoxicate these days. Voices grew louder. The heat pressed in. The power thrumming in my veins grew to a rush. I flattened my palms against the table, fighting for control.

I might have been the only non-human in the tavern, but desperation makes humans do stupid things. If I was anything less than the hardened, ruthless witch they expected to see, there was no telling what the desperate patrons around me might convince themselves to do.

I forced myself to continue scanning the interior of the tavern, looking for prospective customers. It dulled the edge of tension, but only slightly.

A prostitute emerged from the shadows at the rear of the tavern. Her rouge was smudged, the kohl that lined her eyes expertly covering the heavy bags that should be beneath them. Comely women were harder and harder to find in Velora. Most of them had escaped with the more affluent, selling themselves as mistresses and broodmares. The ones left behind were those born too late. Unlucky to have been born at all.

She sauntered to the bar top, crooking her finger to call for wine. No man nor woman appeared from the shadows behind her. She must have sent her most recent customer off through the back door. The gaunt proprietor slid her a goblet. There was an arrangement between them. But I did not have any interest in her. She wouldn't seek me out. Prostitution was one of the few professions that continued to thrive in Velora.

A hacking cough filled the close space, reminding me that the patrons I'd marked were far from the only occupants of the desolate corner of the world I inhabited. The tavern was a beacon of warmth, and unlike many such establishments, the proprietor had managed to procure a stock of wine. The price was exorbitant, but desperation... well, desperation and stupidity. Even those without money for the next night's lodging will spend their coin on the escape alcohol can bring.

The door stuttered, protesting against the contrast of frigid cold outside and insulated heat within. It was the only redeeming trait of the dark, noisy establishment—warmth.

But even that might not be enough to keep it full.

As one, the occupants of the tavern held their breaths. I exhaled into the blessed silence, even knowing it would not last.

Sometimes, desperation outweighed stupidity. Instinct took over. The will to survive overpowered all else. Right then, every person in the tavern was calculating the threat posed by the new arrival.

It was not just the greatsword sheathed across his back or the full quiver of arrows, though the weapons said enough. Why carry a bow and arrows when there was so little game to hunt?

There was no doubt this man was a predator. Violence peeled off of him in curls as visible as the cloud of breath he huffed into the cold air he let in.

"Close the door!" the proprietor yelled without looking up to see who he accosted. Desperation and stupidity could look eerily similar.

I braced my hands flat on the scarred tabletop in front of me, a surge of power centering in my palms.

He was massive—tall enough that I found myself trying to pick out his ears in the dim light scattered from the lone stone hearth. I hadn't seen a fae in more than three hundred years; not since they realized that the curse the gods had warned about had truly taken hold. The fae took too much. They set themselves above the gods. Those same gods cursed Velora as punishment. Those same fae retreated to the safety of their walled fortress beyond the mountains while the rest of us were left to die.

Hate curled in my stomach, turning the meager gruel to ice in seconds. The fae had stolen everything from me—my past and my future. I'd never matched myself against one, though the hate for them ran deep among my kind. The witches and fae were natural enemies, both contenders for the power and magic rooted in the land itself. Except one of us had destroyed it and then fled to safety, while the others were left to scratch out an existence from the remains.

I would kill him.

He was handsome enough to be fae. The broad shoulders swathed in fur, the elegant but masculine lines of his face, the hair so blond that it might have been mistaken for silver, if not for the gold tones cast by the firelight.

But amid the tangle of pale hair, the man was just that—a man. Human. There were no points atop his ears, only rounded shells that proclaimed him as mortal as every other person seeking refuge in this particular hellhole.

The power that had overwhelmed me moments before ebbed to a light frost. He would scare away some of the patrons with that grizzled visage and all those weapons, but the most determined would remain. I would still get my coin and eventually get off of this cursed continent. Survive another day.

Though what I'm surviving for...

The thought slid from my mind, replaced by a sharp stab of awareness.

I may have dismissed him, but the newcomer had not returned the favor. Like everyone else who entered, he scanned the occupants of the tavern for predators or prey. He found me.

Even in the low light of the tavern, I marked the way his eyes widened. Recognition shone in the blue-green orbs. Recognition and intensity. The rest of the tavern melted away, the sounds of voices and scraping of metal and wood fading into a blur of indecipherable background noise. He held me in his gaze, his eyes boring into mine, as if he could see past the rings of exhaustion and into the dark power that pumped through my veins.

I dragged in a breath, the air scraping across my throat painfully enough I had to blink back a reaction. A blink was all it took to shatter the connection. He swung away from me, giving me no more heed than the prostitute who was already sidling in his direction. The cacophony of voices and sounds came crashing back in on me.

He pulled out a stool at the bar and put his back to every other occupant in the tavern. A distinct contrast to the approach I'd taken, tucking myself with my back to a wall at a table within an easy run of the tavern's rear door.

Wood scraped across the floor as someone pushed up to stand. More than one someone—the calculus of the tavern was rearranging itself around this new arrival. I exhaled slowly, trying to settle the tempest that raged through my stomach. He was just a man. A well-armed one, but nothing more.

From the stink of unwashed cloaks and the murmuring emerged a slim human figure, hair disheveled and cheeks pale despite the blazing heat of the tavern. And she was coming my way.

The mother. I should have known. Mothers were always the most desperate. And determined.

The child strapped across her chest was as slight as she. He would have been easy to lose in the layers if not for the squalls of hunger every few minutes. The words of a spell danced

along my tongue already, but I wouldn't give it to her without payment. I'd made that mistake early in my exile. Word of a benevolent witch had spread quickly, and I'd barely escaped with my life. Kindness was a weakness. Kindness allowed others to take advantage of my gifts. Kindness had gotten me cast out of my coven and set me on this desperate path.

I was not merciful. I did not have pity. Maybe if I said it to myself enough times, it would be true.

"My lady," the mother mumbled. She tried to dip a curtsy but lost her balance, not used to the weight strapped to her front or too weak to execute the movement. She grabbed for the table that separated us.

I didn't wait for her to steady herself. "I am not your lady," I bit back.

She blanched, one hand wrapping around the child protectively. My teeth ground together of their own accord.

Touching the child seemed to give her courage. "I beg your pardon, miss, but I—"

"Call me what I am."

Maybe it was cruel. Maybe *I* was cruel. It would be among the least of the charges leveled at my kind, and believing it about myself might give me the hardness I needed to survive. But in that moment, I needed to hear her say it. I needed to know that she understood exactly who—*what*—she was dealing with. And I needed to remember what I was, even if my sisters had cast me out.

"Witch." The whisper slipped between her lips. An admission and a curse. A plea.

My spine straightened.

"What do you want?"

"My babe." She swallowed, mustering her courage once more. "My milk is drying up. I do not have enough food." She opened her palm, dropping a single sparkling coin onto the table.

If she could not feed herself, then her body would not produce the milk to sustain her child. She was not the first mother to seek me out since I was cast out of my coven, driven to performing parlor tricks in dark, fetid holes of humanity to scrape out an existence. I could practically taste the power that she needed, the words that would give her what she so desperately wanted, at least for a time.

But those weren't the words that came out of my mouth. "Then use your coin to buy a meal."

Maybe I was as foolish as the humans loitering around that desolate place. The woman wanted to give me her coin. I might not technically need food or shelter to survive, but I'd rather sleep in a bed than on the ground. The sole of my left boot was nearly worn through. The leather and expertise to repair it would be dear; there were few animals left to hunt for hides, and most craftspeople had deserted the forsaken continent for kinder shores. The passage off of Velora was even more expensive, and my only real option. If I lingered too long on Velora, in a festering land without my coven to concentrate what power there was and sustain me, I would die.

The young woman's lower lip trembled, but she did not turn away. She used the broken fingernail at the end of a dirty finger to nudge the coin across the table in my direction. "A meal will not be enough. Nor will ten meals. Not when there is no shelter to keep him warm. I do not care for myself. Only for him."

She would let herself waste away for the sake of her child. She would suffer the pangs of hunger, using whatever resources remained to her to give her child warmth. She would die, but he might live. It was a choice I'd seen before, and one I was sure to see again.

This was the curse of Velora.

"It will not last forever," I warned.

The mother nodded. "Long enough."

I did not have the power to read minds. My active power was less useful, particularly in this frozen wasteland. So I could not know what her plan was once she had my spell—and nor did I care, I reminded myself. She had a coin, and for now, I had the power to cast.

I lifted a hand in her direction, although the action was meaningless. It was the words that mattered. But the motion comforted the humans and drew the attention of other potential patrons.

"By river's flow and rain's sweet song, let mother's milk again flow strong."

Once, the spell would have been enough to keep a mother's milk flowing until her child's second name day. But Velora's power was dying right along with everything else.

The mother closed her eyes, her focus turning inward. Her baby squalled again. But unlike before, a wet spot bloomed through the fabric over her breasts. She didn't bother with thanks, too transfixed with her child and the outcome of my power.

But others noticed. The farmer slid off his stool, leaving his empty tankard of weak ale behind. The pale-haired behemoth at the counter leaned on one elbow, his gaze more casual this time, a lingering perusal. Let him look. If he believed I could offer him some solution, he was welcome to part with his coin. But I doubted a man like that would pay for anything he could obtain through violence instead.

The prostitute from earlier was at his side, her laugh echoing off the low overhead beams of the roughshod, single-story structure.

Familiarity prickled my spine. I'd spent too many nights in desolate, desperate places like this. It was beginning to impede my judgment.

An elderly woman leaning on a cane sidled up behind the farmer, a makeshift line beginning to form. I flattened my hands on the tabletop once more and licked my lips.

Chapter 2

I left the tavern an hour later. There was a cadence to the evenings in such places. When the second prostitute arrived and the noise ratcheted up, it was time for me to leave. Once the humans began brawling over their company for the night, it was too easy to get injured and harder to control my power. Best to be gone before desperation took on its more dangerous shades. There was enough coin in my purse to buy a night of shelter—many nights, if I was not too particular about my accommodations. Getting my boot patched would be trickier. Or I could save it all. Not enough for passage out of Velora—not yet. But soon.

The door that stuck earlier gave way to me without a hitch. The walking death threat must have knocked the door into submission. He was still seated at the counter when I left. He did not glance my way, and I didn't glance his. Whether that eerie perusal allowed him to recognize me as the threat I was did not matter. I would never see him again.

The cold whipped in from every direction, pressing against the thick layers of my cloak and in through the leather and wool and linen beneath. There were never enough layers to truly keep out the cold. Not in Velora. Not in the last decade.

I died on a night like this. Back then, such extremes were rare. Now, we went months without seeing the sun.

But I could see just as well in the dark—a gift of the ancient power that moved my blood through my veins. Or more specifically, from the Dark God who created the witches.

I noted the pair of men huddled just within the dark alley that separated the tavern from the boarded-up remains of a general store. They were just that. Men. Too short to be fae, a possibility that had not even entered my mind in years until that huge hulking beast entered the tavern. And they were certainly not witches, for the simple fact that they were not female.

The tiny hairs at the nape of my neck prickled again.

Wearing it like this was driving me mad. I reached over my shoulder, dragging the thick braid forward and dislodging my other hand from inside my cloak to pull out the knot that held the plait in place—

My hands froze, every muscle in my body tightening.

It blended with the snow, white and so finely ground that it was nearly impossible to see. But I felt the impact immediately, as if I'd been punched in the gut, all of the air forced out of my lungs.

Salt.

The two men stepped out of the alley. A smile curved one of their faces—the bigger of the two, his cheeks still full and round. The rich and the evil were the only ones left in Velora with full cheeks. And the former were mostly gone.

"I told you she was real," the slighter man said, rubbing his bare hands together against the cold. He held his place behind the larger man, lingering just over his shoulder as they approached, leaving a trail of shuffling footprints in the fresh snow.

"The salt was worth the price," the bigger one agreed, his smile still in place.

Salt was expensive this far inland even before the gods cursed Velora. With so few people left on the continent, the once flowing trade routes from the sea had thinned to a trickle. A vial of salt could buy an entire month of shelter. Or capture one witch.