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Chapter 1

The pale carcass bloated under gray dawn as the last of the storm drummed rain on the roof. The other swine shied from the prize hog as if the magic behind its sneezing death lingered in the black mud.

Within the house, Coryss blew her nose and brushed dark locks from her face. She wiped her raw eyes grown puffy with tears and ringed with dark circles. Coryss stooped over the corpses, dead from the same curse as Bandor outside. Her hands trembled over her motionless mother and father.

The door rattled in its frame and muted laughter fluttered on the wind.

Coryss ground her teeth and measured cloth for the shrouds. No rest from those bothersome hags. She rolled her Ma and Pa in the cloth and began the arduous sewing. Coryss pricked her finger with the needle and clenched her fist with a hiss. She must be clumsy with her grief. She resumed her task and the needle trailed a thin streak of her blood on the cloth with the next stitch.

The seams lengthened on the shrouds with several more red streaks as decoration. Coryss' fingers ached but she persevered for her parents.

The door rattled once again.

Coryss jerked and pricked her finger. "Enough's enough!" Her bellow rang in her ears.

Cackles whispered from beyond the closed door.

Coryss shoved her fingers into her mouth and sucked the wound. "Emuff's emuff." They weren't out there but their mockery pricked like the needle. She'd see

to them as soon as... Just finish sewing.

She removed her finger from her mouth. Blood welled from the wound. She sniffed, wiped the blood on her skirt, and glared at the thin shaft of metal in her other hand.

"I'll give you more than a black-eye, Hanig the Hexer." Those witches cursed Pa's prize pig with sneezing death. If only he'd sold Bandor to the hag. She blamed herself. Coryss rubbed her damp cheek. My fist just made it worse. She caressed her mother's hair. "I'm sorry."

Tears flowed again but her cheeks heated. Those greedy hags didn't have to kill the pig for spite. She smacked the floor. A black-eye isn't worth Ma and Pa. Petty witches. She blew her nose and snatched the needle.

"Ouch." The needle lanced her finger. She winced and gritted her teeth. "Imagine a curse that makes you prick yourself to death if you sew long enough!" She chuckled and then shivered. They'd plan something special for her. But she'd take the fight to them. Coryss pricked herself again.

She eyed the needle with her brows pinched and set it aside. "I'm finished now."

"Let us in. We'll finish the shroud!" The muted voices accompanied the familiar rattle. Laughter echoed.

Coryss snatched the needle and it stuck her. She ignored the prick and flung the needle at the door. "I'll let you in and sew your mouths shut!" She shook her fist at the door.

The needle pinged against the door and again when it struck the floor. After a moment, it rolled with ominous purpose under the door.

Coryss shivered. She tasted bile and swallowed.

She wrapped a shawl over her shoulders. Time for the burials. Coryss didn't find the needle on the threshold, but found her father's shovel in the barn. She jammed the tool into the unyielding earth near the bubbling stream. She chose the view more for herself than them. She jumped on the shovel and forced it deeper.

Coryss scabbled at the ground for hours as the morning passed to noon while she planned her next actions. She'd take on the witches or leave. Ma'd taught her good. Coryss suppressed a sob. She wove better'n Ma. A man would have her. Folks in Ganders Fork said she'd get a good man with her skill and thick hair. Coryss tossed dirt on the pile. She could settle somewhere safe and away from them witches. Coryss brushed dangling tresses over her shoulder and heaved dirt.

She fetched the plow-horse and dragged the bodies to the graves. She gritted her teeth against sobs as she covered the bodies with soil while the day drifted past mid-afternoon. She couldn't leave them. Might as well fight since they'd find her anyway. Coryss choked on her farewells. She alone mourned the passing of Mabyss, the weaver and Gurly, the pig-herder. The house, her mother's sheep, the loom and the pigs remained for Coryss.

Later, Coryss knelt by the stream, wet her scarf and mopped her neck. Coryss winced as she soaked her pricked fingers in the cool water. She sighed. "That's better."

The sun hung low in the trees. "That took too long." Coryss dried her hands on her blue skirt. "Well, I'm too stubborn and mad to run away so I better get going. No man wants a woman hunted by witches and dark is no time to wander the forest." She stood and brushed leaves from her skirt.

Her jaw set, she strode past the new graves and set out for Gander's Fork. Pig snorts and sheep bleats soon faded as Coryss marched through the forest. Her face burned when she stomped into the midst of the twenty, small wood and stone crofts of the village.

Dogs barked as they chased playing children. Nob's hammer beat a rhythm in the waning afternoon. Scarny's water wheel squeaked in its turning at the creek. The aroma of cooking food wafted out of open windows.

The witches' shabby hovel squatted between the road's forks like a storm cloud. The closed shutters hung askew over the windows as sporadic smoke puffed out of

the chimney, first white, then black, then green, red, yellow.

Coryss' lips twitched and she squinted. That place is much worse since they arrived. Came in the night with their decay and demands. She ground her teeth and took a step toward the rotting pile.

A toy wheel struck her foot and Hoby Scarny scurried after it. Nobody even noticed her. Coryss kicked the toy away.

"Hey—," The boy's smile faded on his dust-covered face.

Coryss scowled and snarled when she spoke. "My Ma an' Pa's dead."

Hoby scampered toward his house with wide eyes.

Nob's hammering stopped and Scarny poked his head out the mill door. Confused women frowned out of windows. They noticed her now. Coryss' nostrils flared. "An' them witches what done it to 'em! How do you let 'em stay here?"

A few women shook their heads, others frowned and still others called children in and shuttered their windows.

"Hush, girl." Scarny's voice wavered as he strode toward her. "Go home before you make 'em mad!"

Coryss clenched her hands into fists at her side and leaned toward the miller. "No. I'm going do something about 'em! Who's with me?"

Those still watching gaped at her.

Coryss sniffed her disgust and started for the hovel.

Nob joined Scarny in the street. His blacksmith's muscles quivered. "Don't do it."

She marched away from both men. Cravens with muscles. Coryss walked faster lest her own resolve fade like morning fog.

"We're not part of this." She heard Scarny's mill door bang closed.

Any remaining children scattered like startled sparrows from a tree.

Her face flushed like forged iron. Go, don't stop. Her urging carried her to the door. She wrenched it open and burst in on the witches.

Hisses greeted her.

Coryss gagged at the rancid smell. She blinked. Am I falling? The weaver touched a side table and steadied her balance before she jerked her hand back as something dark skittered through the refuse. She stepped further into the room and ducked dried roots hanging from the rafters amid cured husks of lizards, snakes and nameless creatures.

Hanig, Vorxia and Nuthya hunched in the dim room like vultures eyeing a carcass from their perch. Their blood-shot eyes squinted at Coryss.

“Well?” Milk-eyed Vorxia waddled around the wax-encrusted table. A fat frog belched from its perch on her shoulder.

“Why are you here, child?” Hanig’s words tickled the air like a hopeful bell. This hag’s eye still bore a fading bruise. Good, that’s one blow well delivered. Coryss’ hand lingered near her pocket.

The weaver ignored the witches and grimaced. Horrible place. What are all these things? Coryss wobbled and forced her eyes open. Watch them closely. Hanig stood at her arm. The witch offered a gentle smile beneath eyes glittering malice as she fawned at the weaver’s arm.

“I’ve come to—.” Coryss frowned as she staggered. Her head spun and her eyelids drooped. Pickled eyeballs glared at her from bottles.

“Yes, girl?” Vorxia smiled and craned her neck.

Hanig pinched Coryss’ backside.

“Ouch!” Coryss jumped away from Hanig. “Don’t touch me again!”

“Nice child.” The witch edged closer with a feigned cackle of friendliness.

“Watcha wantin’ little weaver-girl.” Nuthya’s tone cut like a knife. The hag sidled away from the cauldron and brazier that sat atop a blue flame.

Those others shrank away. Coryss stepped forward and she swallowed. “I’ve come to challenge ya, a bet.”

“A challenge.” Vorxia’s loose jowls shook below her working jaw.