THE DEATHLESS ONE

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For all the women who descended from witches who were burned.

They weren't witches, they were women.

And that rage is something none of us have forgotten.

In the distance, he could see what had awakened him…

He strode toward it, dark boots splashing the water up against his shins. He shouldn't be so interested. And yet, his heart told him this was important. What he found stole the words from his tongue and the air from his lungs.

A woman lay in the water. Dark waves lapped against her cheeks and filled her hollow eyes with tiny pools of glistening ink. Her dark hair floated around her, nearly the same color as the water that surrounded her. A white gown hung from hollow shoulders, torn lace and bloodied fabric clinging to her otherwise pleasing form. A single lock of dark hair lay across her neck, like the delicious parting of flesh after all the blood had drained out, and he wondered what she was doing here. Why would she end up in his realm above all the others? She shouldn't be here.

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"The gods died on a spring morning. All of them; all at once. Everyone could feel it, from the priestesses in the north, to the witches in the south. Those who worshipped the Maiden cried out in anguish. The meager few who still worshipped the God King fell to their knees in horror…."

Her Majesty Jessamine Harmsworth blew out a long breath of frustration, taking the pencil from between her lips that she'd chewed into a ragged end. "I know all this. I know when the gods died, but what I don't know is how the witches caused the plague."

Her eyes ran over the book the vendor had slipped her in secret, his beady eyes looking left and right like he was committing a capital crime. In a way, he was. Books on black magic were forbidden throughout the kingdom. He didn't have to worry about her telling anyone, though. A princess wasn't supposed to have a black magic book at all.

"Really, did he think this would be helpful?" She cast a doleful look at the taxidermied skeleton of a cat on her shelf. Blank, soulless eyes stared back at her. "Well, you're not going to reply."

Poring over the words again, she searched for the origin of the sickness that continued to spread throughout her kingdom. The witches had long been rumored to have cast the spell. Jessamine had a hard time believing anyone would punish her kingdom like that after the gods died, so she searched for answers. What god had given them such power? Did witches still have any power after using all of it to create the plague? She

had so many questions about the most powerful creatures that had ever existed in her kingdom.

Perhaps she shouldn't believe there was hope for their goodness, but no one had ever *proven* that the witches had done anything. Even so, all the blame was cast upon their shoulders, and as such, no one had asked the witches to help solve the problem.

Not that there were many of them left. Her great-great-grandfather had destroyed nearly all of them in the days after the gods had died.

Unfortunately, no one else had provided a cure for the plague. Their scholars and healers had slowed the plague's spread, but they were no closer to curing it.

She had just kicked her feet up on her desk to read more when she was interrupted by the awful sound of bones crunching and a wet slosh that could mean only one thing. She winced as the head of her royal guard wiped the gore off the bottom of his boot, scraping the worn leather against her door. The gold buttons of his dark navy uniform gleamed in the light and clinked against the sword strapped to his hip. He'd stomped the poor thing out of existence, but at least it hadn't suffered.

Never mind that it ruined the otherwise peaceful solace she'd found in her laboratory. It was only here, among the quiet bubble and hiss of burner flames, that she felt like herself. All manner of strange findings covered her walls, mostly bugs and beetles in jars, but a few lovelier specimens as well. Like a man's right toe she kept over her workstation.

But today couldn't be saved even by a jaunt through the book of black magic currently resting on her lap, a purchase she'd have hidden from anyone other than the man standing in her doorway.

After all, a bride-to-be in a wedding dress shouldn't be researching witchcraft.

"Is it dead?" she asked.

"What do you think, princess?" The man at least grimaced at his tone. But he was the only person who could get away with talking to her like that.

Callum Quen, after all, had been with her since she was a child. He'd been the one to kiss her bruises after she fell from the horse he'd taught her to ride. He had tucked her in at night when her mother had late meetings with her advisors. And he was the only one who knew how to brush her hair when she was very little, because the long dark locks tangled so easily. She hadn't grown up with a father. She'd grown up with Callum. He'd always been a good substitute.

She could see the disgust on his features. Clearly he hadn't wanted to stomp a rat on this day of all days, but one could never be too careful. The plague didn't care that she was getting married, and no one knew how it spread. Perhaps rats were the cause. Perhaps it was in the very air people breathed. It infected as it went, killing her people by the thousands while mostly staying out of her capital city.

Well, it would not be her capital city much longer. She was getting married, and her mother would abdicate the throne as soon as the ink dried. That would leave only her husband-to-be as the rightful ruler of Inverholm. He'd be the king of both her kingdom and his own now.

"What are you reading, anyway?" Callum asked, still looking at the bottom of his boot.

"A history book I bought from a rather strange peddler who appeared out of the mist. He claimed the history of the plague rested inside these pages."

"And?"

She sighed, fingering the worn edges of the pages. "Just more about the death of the gods."

"May they linger in the halls of the just," Callum murmured. "It would be good to see them again."

"You worshipped when you were younger, didn't you?" Even if the gods were gone, there were still stragglers. Those

who believed that if they still paid their respects, perhaps the gods could feel it.

"The Warrior Son. I still do. On the days when things are hard, I like to think he can still hear us." Callum crossed his arms over his broad chest. "From what I've heard, your future husband also worships him—when his people are watching. His sacrifices should have been lavish enough to bring the god back. Perhaps his failure means that they are truly lost to us after all."

She wasn't sure why that made her stomach twist so. Leon Bishop of Orenda was said to be a suitable king, and he had sworn to take care of her kingdom. Even if her mother questioned why the man had propositioned her daughter after twenty-two years of growing up as counterparts in royal courts, he'd offered an answer to any doubts.

Turning to the full-length mirror hanging on the stone wall, she told herself to cast the thoughts out of her mind. No more magic. No more witchcraft. There was only the wedding.

Her reflection looked beautiful. She looked like the princess her people had come to expect.

The white gown fit reasonably well. It pinched in at her waist, creating a waterfall of lace that cascaded down to the floor. The bodice was modest, while still revealing the long, graceful line of her pale neck. Long bell sleeves covered her arms, a small blessing since she was hiding a few bruises, and a strand of diamonds that had been in her family for centuries sat at the base of her throat. The maid had successfully tamed her waist-length dark hair into a crown of braids at the top of her head, where a tiara was nestled among the dark locks.

But her haunted eyes ruined the entire vision. Too large. Too black. Surrounded by dark shadows because she hadn't slept a wink since this deal was signed six months ago. Her life, etched away on a piece of paper, and no one seemed to care that she'd been traded like livestock.

She straightened her shoulders and glared at her reflection. She was the princess of Inverholm. She would do whatever

it took to save her kingdom. Jessamine would pull herself together, even if that meant fiddling with the gown until it was just right.

"Princess!" Callum lunged forward, and she froze in fear.

But then he pointed at her hands, and she realized she'd gotten some of the ash from her burners on her fingers. One touch, and she'd leave dark smudges all over her wedding dress.

"Ah," she whispered. Her hands shook as she wiped them off on a cloth nearby. "Thank you."

He nodded before clasping his hands behind his back. "I'll watch the wedding from the balcony. Good luck."

The knock she dreaded soon came, and she followed the train of royal attendants waiting for her down the dark halls. Much of their castle had to be reopened for the visiting neighbors. This wing hadn't even been furnished with the whale-oil lamps that illuminated the rest of her home. The new lighting made her normal chambers much more welcoming than the guttering torches of this unfriendly wing. Black soot seeped down from the ceilings, dripping through the stories above her head to meld with the years of candle smoke that stained the walls.

Her mother waited for her at the end of the hall. Queen Rhiannon of Inverholm was stunning, no matter what day it was. But on the day of her daughter's wedding, her mother was exquisite.

Gray hair curled carefully around her face, braided in intricate knots all the way down her back. Her azure gown was the same color as the depths of the sea that surrounded their peninsula kingdom. Gemstones decorated every limb, from neck, to wrist, to fingers. Her ears glimmered with more diamonds, but the stony expression on her face did not match her sparkling attire.

Jessamine bowed low. "Mother."

"You do not have to do this." The queen's voice echoed through the hall, bouncing back a hundred times before it faded. "We could yet save this kingdom."