

Chapter One

BRITTANY 1485

I BEAR A DEEP RED stain that runs from my left shoulder down to my right hip, a trail left by the herbwitch's poison that my mother used to try to expel me from her womb. That I survived, according to the herbwitch, is no miracle but a sign I have been sired by the god of death himself.

I am told my father flew into a rage and raised his hand to my mother even as she lay weak and bleeding on the birthing bed. Until the herbwitch pointed out to him that if my mother had lain with the god of death, surely He would not stand idly by while my father beat her.

I risk a glance up at my husband-to-be, Guillo, and wonder if my father has told him of my lineage. I am guessing not, for who would pay three silver coins for what I am? Besides, Guillo looks far too placid to know of my true nature. If my father has tricked him, it will not bode well for our union. That we are being married in Guillo's cottage rather than a church further adds to my unease.

I feel my father's heavy gaze upon me and look up. The triumph in his eyes frightens me, for if he has triumphed, then I have surely lost in some way I do not yet understand. Even so, I smile, wanting to convince him I am happy—for there is nothing that upsets him more than my happiness.

But while I can easily lie to my father, it is harder to lie to myself. I am afraid, sorely afraid of this man to whom I will now belong. I look down at his big, wide hands. Just like my father, he has dirt caked under his fingernails and stains in the creases of his skin. Will the semblance end there? Or will he, too, wield those hands like a cudgel?

It is a new beginning, I remind myself, and in spite of all my trepidations, I cannot extinguish a tiny spark of hope. Guillo wants me enough to pay three silver coins. Surely where there is want, there is room for kindness? It is the one thing that keeps my knees from knocking and my hands from trembling. That and the priest who has come to officiate, for while he is naught but a hedge priest, the furtive glance he sends me over his prayer book causes me to believe he knows who and what I am.

As he mutters the ceremony's final words, I stare at the rough hempen prayer cord with the nine wooden beads that proclaim him a follower of the old ways. Even when he ties the cord around our hands and lays the blessings of God and the nine old saints upon our union, I keep my gaze downcast, afraid to

see the smugness in my father's eyes or what my husband's face might reveal.

When the priest is done, he pads away on dirty feet, his rough leather sandals flapping noisily. He does not even pause long enough to raise a tankard to our union. Nor does my father. Before the dust from my father's departing cart has settled, my new husband swats my rump and grunts toward the upstairs loft.

I clench my fists to hide their trembling and cross to the rickety stairs. While Guillo fortifies himself with one last tankard of ale, I climb up to the loft and the bed I will now share with him. I sorely miss my mother, for even though she was afraid of me, surely she would have given me a woman's counsel on my wedding night. But both she and my sister fled long ago, one back into the arms of death, and the other into the arms of a passing tinker.

I know, of course, what goes on between a man and a woman. Our cottage is small and my father loud. There was many a night when urgent movement accompanied by groans filled our dark cottage. The next day my father always looked slightly less bad tempered, and my mother more so. I try to convince myself that no matter how distasteful the marriage bed is, surely it cannot be any worse than my father's raw temper and meaty fists.

The loft is a close, musty place that smells as if the rough shutters on the far wall have never been opened. A timber and

rope bed frame holds a mattress of straw. Other than that, there are only a few pegs to hang clothes on and a plain chest at the foot of the bed.

I sit on the edge of the chest and wait. It does not take long. A heavy creak from the stairs warns me that Guillo is on his way. My mouth turns dry and my stomach sour. Not wanting to give him the advantage of height, I stand.

When he reaches the room, I finally force myself to look at his face. His piggish eyes gorge themselves on my body, going from the top of my head down to my ankles, then back up to my breasts. My father's insistence on lacing my gown so tight has worked, as Guillo can look at little else. He gestures with his tankard toward my bodice, slopping ale over the sides so that it dribbles to the floor. "Remove it." Desire thickens his voice.

I stare at the wall behind him, my fingers trembling as I raise them to my laces. But not fast enough. Never fast enough. He takes three giant strides toward me and strikes me hard across the cheek. "Now!" he roars as my head snaps back.

Bile rises in my throat and I fear I will be sick. So this is how it will be between us. This is why he was willing to pay three silver coins.

My laces are finally undone, and I remove my bodice so that I stand before him in my skirt and shift. The stale air, which only

moments before was too warm, is now cold as it presses against my skin.

“Your skirt,” he barks, breathing heavily.

I untie the strings and step out of my skirt. As I turn to lay it on the nearby bench, Guillo reaches for me. He is surprisingly quick for one so large and stupid, but I am quicker. I have had long years of practice escaping my father’s rages.

I jerk away, spinning out of his reach, infuriating him. In truth, I give no thought to where I will run, wishing only to hold off the inevitable a little longer.

There is a loud crash as his half-empty tankard hits the wall behind me, sending a shower of ale into the room. He snarls and lunges, but something inside me will not — cannot — make this easy for him. I leap out of his reach.

But not far enough. I feel a tug, then hear a rip of cloth as he tears my thin, worn chemise.

Silence fills the loft—a silence so thick with shock that even his coarse breathing has stopped. I feel his eyes rake down my back, take in the ugly red welts and scars the poison left behind. I look over my shoulder to see his face has gone white as new cheese, his eyes wide. When our glances meet, he knows—*knows*—that he has been duped. He bellows then, a long, deep note of rage that holds equal parts fury and fear.

Then his rough hand cracks against my skull and sends me to my knees. The pain of hope dying is worse than his fists and boots.

When Guillo's rage is spent, he reaches down and grabs me by the hair. "I will go for a real priest this time. He will burn you or drown you. Maybe both." He drags me down the steps, my knees bumping painfully against each one. He continues dragging me through the kitchen, then shoves me into a small root cellar, slams the door, and locks it.

Bruised and possibly broken, I lie on the floor with my battered cheek pressed into the cool dirt. Unable to stop myself, I smile.

I have avoided the fate my father had planned for me. Surely it is I who has won, not he.

The sound of the bolt lifting jerks me awake. I shove myself to a sitting position and clutch the tattered remains of my chemise around me. When the door opens, I am stunned to see the hedge priest, the same small rabbit of a man who'd blessed our marriage only hours before. Guillo is not with him, and any moment that does not contain my father or Guillo is a happy one by my reckoning.

The priest looks over his shoulder, then motions for me to follow.

I rise to my feet, and the root cellar spins dizzily. I put a hand to the wall and wait for the feeling to pass. The priest motions again, more urgently. "We've not much time before he returns."

His words clear my head as nothing else can. If he is acting without Guillo's knowledge, then he is most assuredly helping me. "I'm coming." I push away from the wall, step carefully over a sack of onions, and follow the hedge priest into the kitchen. It is dark; the only light comes from the banked embers in the hearth. I should wonder how the priest found me, why he is helping me, but I do not care. All I can think is that he is not Guillo and not my father. The rest does not matter.

He leads me to the back door, and in a day full of surprises, I find one more as I recognize the old herbwitch from our village hovering nearby. If I did not need to concentrate so hard on putting one foot in front of the other, I would ask her what she is doing here, but it is all I can do to stay upright and keep from falling on my face in the dirt.

As I step into the night, a sigh of relief escapes me. It is dark out, and darkness has always been my friend. A cart waits nearby. Touching me as little as possible, the hedge priest helps me into the back of it before hurrying around to the driver's bench

and climbing in. The priest glances over his shoulder at me, then averts his eyes as if he's been burned. "There's a blanket back there," he mutters as he steers the nag out onto the cobbled lane. "Cover yourself."

The unyielding wood of the cart presses painfully into my bruised bones, and the thin blanket scratches and reeks of donkey. Even so, I wish they'd brought a second one for padding. "Where are you taking me?"

"To the boat."

A boat means water, and crossing water means I will be far from the reach of my father and Guillo and the Church. "Where is this boat taking me?" I ask, but the priest says nothing. Exhaustion overwhelms me. I do not have the strength to pluck answers from him like meager berries from a thorny bush. I lie down in the cart and give myself over to the horse's jolting gait.

And so my journey across Brittany begins. I am smuggled like some forbidden cargo, hidden among turnips or in hay in the back of carts, awakened by furtive voices and fumbling hands as I am passed from hedge priest to herbwife, a hidden chain of those who live in accordance with the old saints and are determined to keep me from the Church. The hedge priests,

with their awkward movements and musty, stale robes, are kind enough, but their fingers are unschooled in tenderness or compassion. It is the herbwitches I like most. Their chapped, raw hands are gentle as lamb's wool, and the sharp, pungent smell of a hundred different herbs clings to them like a fragrant shadow. Often as not, they give me a tincture of poppy for my injuries, while the priests merely give me their sympathy, and some begrudgingly at that.

When I awake on what I reckon to be the fifth night of my journey, I smell the salty tang of the sea and remember the promise of a boat. I struggle to sit up, pleased to find my bruises pain me less and my ribs do not burn. We are passing through a small fishing village. I pull the blanket close against the chill and wonder what will happen next.

At the very edge of the village sits a stone church. It is to this that the latest hedge priest steers our cart and I am relieved to see the door bears the sacred anchor of Saint Mer, one of the old saints. The priest reins his horse to a stop. "Get out."

I cannot tell if it is fatigue or disdain I hear in his voice, but either way, my journey is almost done, so I ignore it and clamber out of the cart, sure to keep the blanket clutched tight around me lest I offend his modesty.

Once he secures the horse, he leads me toward the beach,

where a lone boat waits. The inky black ocean spreads out as far and wide as my eye can see, making the vessel seem very small.

An old sailor sits hunched in the prow. A shell bleached white as bone hangs from a cord at his neck, marking him as a worshiper of Saint Mer. I wonder what he thinks of being woken in the middle of the night and made to row strangers out into the dark sea.

The sailor's faded blue eyes skim over me. He nods. "Climb in. We en't got all night." He thrusts an oar at me, and I grasp it to steady myself as I get into the boat.

The small vessel dips and rocks and for a moment I am afraid it will tip me into the icy water. But it rights itself and then the priest steps in, causing the hull to sink even lower.

The old sailor grunts, then returns the oar to its pin and begins rowing.

We reach the small island just as dawn pinkens the eastern horizon. It looks barren in the early, spare light. As we draw closer, I see a standing stone next to a church and realize we've come to one of the old places of worship.

Gravel crunches under the hull of the boat as the old sailor rows right up onto the beach. He jerks his head toward the stone fortress. "Get out then. The abbes of St. Mortain be expectin' ye."

G R A V E M E R C Y

Saint Mortain? The patron saint of death. A tremor of unease washes through me. I look at the priest, who averts his eyes, as if looking at me is too great a mortal temptation.

Clutching the blanket close around me, I climb awkwardly from the boat and step into the shallows. Torn between gratitude and annoyance, I curtsy slightly, careful to let the blanket slip from my shoulder for the merest of seconds.

It is enough. Satisfied at the priest's gasp and the old sailor's cluck of his tongue, I turn and slog through the cold water to the beach. In truth, I have never flashed so much as an ankle before, but I am sorely vexed at being treated like a temptress when all I feel is bruised and broken.

When I reach the patchy grass that grows between the rocks, I look back toward the boat, but it has already put out to sea. I turn and begin making my way to the convent, eager to see what those who worship Death want of me.

Chapter Two

TWO ANCIENT STANDING STONES MARK the entrance to the convent. The chickens in the courtyard are just now beginning to stir, scratching in the dirt for their breakfast. At my approach, they cluck and flutter away.

I pause at the door, wishing I could find a corner and sleep until my head clears, but the sailor said the abbess is expecting me, and while I do not know much about abbesses, I suspect they are not fond of waiting.

My heart beats wildly as I raise my hand and knock. The heavy door opens at once, revealing a short, plain woman covered in black from head to toe. Without saying a word, she motions me inside.

I follow her through a sparsely furnished room, then down an equally austere corridor that leads into the heart of the convent. My guide knocks once on a closed door.

“Enter,” a voice commands.

My guide opens the door and motions me inside. The furnishings are simple but sturdy, and early-morning light pours in through the east-facing window. My eyes are immediately drawn to the woman who sits at the large desk in the middle of the room. She wears a black gown and wimple, and her pale face is striking in its beauty.

Without looking up, she motions me toward one of the chairs. My footsteps echo lightly among all that space as I approach her desk. I clutch the blanket tight around me, then sit.

The abbess lifts her gaze from her work, and I find myself staring into a pair of eyes as cool and blue as the sea. “Ismae Rienne.”

I flinch, startled she knows my name.

“Do you know why you’re here, child?”

I do not know what answer she is looking for, I only know that I am overcome with a sudden desire to earn her approval. “Because I displeased my new husband?”

“Displeased him?” The abbess gives a delicate snort that makes me like her even more. “From what I hear he practically wet his braies in fear of you.”

I feel the familiar shame rise up in my cheeks and I look down at my lap.

“The fault lies not with you, daughter.” She says this so gently

it makes me want to cry. I have never shed a tear, not throughout all my father's beatings or Guillo's mauling, but a few kind words from this woman and it is all I can do not to bawl like a babe.

"So tell me," she says, drawing a quill and ink pot close. "Do you know the circumstances of your birth?"

I risk a glance at her face, but she is focused on what she is writing on her parchment. "Only that my mother did not wish to bear me. She went to an herbwitch for poison, hoping to purge me from her womb."

"And yet you lived." She looks up. The words are quiet but hold the power of a shout in the stillness of this room.

I meet the abbess's steady gaze. "And yet I lived."

"Do you have any idea what that means?"

"You mean other than having to spend my life in the shadows, dodging blows and staying out of sight so as not to cause others undue fear?"

"Yes, other than that." Her voice is dry as bone. She leans forward, her eyes alight with some purpose. "Did they not claim, Ismae, that you were sired by Death Himself?"

I nod cautiously.

"Well and so. After many trials, you are now here."

"Trials?" I ask. "Is that what my life has been? A series of trials to be passed?"

"You come to us well tempered, my child, and it is not in my

nature to be sorry for it. It is the well-tempered blade that is the strongest.”

“And who exactly is *us*?” My whole body stills, waiting for her answer.

“You have found refuge at the convent of St. Mortain. Although in truth, Mortain is older than any saint, older even than Christ.”

“One of the old gods we now call saints,” I murmur.

“Yes, one of the old gods. One not easily cast aside by the Church. And so we call Him saint, but as long as we serve Him, He cares not what He is called.”

“How does one serve Death?” Am I to spend my life collecting bodies in the bone cart?

The reverend mother does not flinch. “We carry out Mortain’s will when He wishes to alter the warp and weft of life’s weave for some purpose of His own.”

I look at her blankly, not understanding what weaving has to do with Mortain. She sighs and pushes away from her desk. “Perhaps some refreshment is in order.”

I want to beg her to tell me more of what being Death’s daughter might hold, but I suspect this woman does not suffer fools gladly, so I hold my tongue.

She takes a flagon of wine and two crystal goblets from the cupboard behind her desk. She pours the wine into the goblets

and hands one to me. The cut crystal is finer than anything I have ever seen, and I hold it gingerly, afraid it will shatter in my hands.

“Here at the convent, it is our job to train those who are sired by the god of death. We teach them to perform their duties quickly and efficiently. Usually, we find that He has given His daughters some special skill or art. Abilities that will aid you as you carry out His work.”

His work. The words are ripe with possibility. I take a sip of wine to steady myself. It is sweet and crisp on my tongue.

“If I may guess a little about you?” the reverend mother asks. I nod, and she continues. “You never get sick with the ague or the chills or the flux. Even the plague leaves you untouched, is that correct?”

I feel my eyes widen at her uncanny knowledge. “How do you know such things?”

She smiles. “And I know you can survive harsh beatings and heal within days. Do you also have dreams that foretell death?”

“No.” I shake my head, sorry to disappoint her. “But sometimes I can tell when people are going to die.”

She tilts her head to the side. “Go on.”

I look down and study the wine in the goblet. “I can see them fading sometimes. It’s like watching a flame grow dim in a lantern. And once, I saw a mark. On the blacksmith. He had a faint

black smudge on his forehead in the shape of a horseshoe. Three days later he was dead.”

She leans forward in her chair, eager now. “How did he die?”

“He was kicked in the head by one of the horses as he worked.”

“Ah.” A pleased smile hovers at the corners of her mouth. “Mortain has given you powerful gifts.” She takes up the quill and makes a notation on the parchment in front of her. Small beads of perspiration begin to form on my forehead and I take another sip of wine to steady myself. It is hard to air old secrets.

“So,” she says, looking back up at me. “You are well equipped for our service.”

“Which is?”

“We kill people.” The reverend mother’s words fall like stones into the quiet of the room, so shocking that my body goes numb. I hear the splintering of crystal as my goblet hits the floor.

The abess ignores the shattered goblet. “Of course, many die without our help. However, there are those who deserve to die but who have not yet encountered the means to do so. At Mortain’s bidding, we help them on their way.”

“Surely He does not need our help?”

Anger flares in the abess and for the first time I feel the iron will I have only vaguely sensed before. “Who are you to say what the god of death needs or doesn’t need? Mortain is an old god and has no desire to be forgotten and fade from this world,

which is why He chooses to bestir Himself in the affairs of man.” She stares at me for a moment longer, then the tension leaves her, like a wave going out to sea. “What do you know of the old gods?” she asks.

“Only that they were once the nine old gods of Brittany but now we call them saints. And we must leave them an occasional offering or prayer if we do not wish to offend them or incur their wrath.”

“You are close,” the abbess says, leaning back in her chair, “but that is not the whole of it. The old gods are neither man nor God, but something in between. They were the first inhabitants of our land, sent to do God’s bidding in this new world He had created.

“At first, the relationship between gods and man was a difficult one, the gods treating us much as we treat cattle or sheep. But soon we learned to honor them with prayer and offerings, which led to harmony between us. Even the early Church, when it arrived, was content to let us honor the old gods, although we learned to call them saints then. But lately, that has been changing. Just as France has gobbled up most of the smaller kingdoms and duchies so it may claim all their power for its own, so too does this latest pope work to extinguish any trace of the old ways, wanting all the prayers and offerings for his own church.

“So now more and more put aside the old ways and traditions

that honor the gods of Brittany. But not all. Some still raise their voices in prayer and make their offerings. If not for that worship and supplication, the old gods would fade from this world. Surely you can understand why Mortain would not wish that. He feeds off our belief and worship much as we feed off bread and meat and would starve without it.

“So, it is our job to believe and to serve. If you choose to stay here and take the vows, you will be sworn to serve Mortain in any way He asks of you. In all things. In all ways. We carry out His will. Do you understand?”

“Is that not murder?”

“No. You would not expect a queen to wash her own clothes or lace her own gown; she has her handmaidens for that. And so it is with us; we serve as handmaidens to Death. When we are guided by His will, killing is a sacrament.”

She leans forward then, as if eager to tempt me with what Mortain offers. “If you choose to stay, you will be trained in His arts. You will learn more ways to kill a man than you imagined possible. We will train you in stealth and cunning and all manner of skills that will ensure no man is ever again a threat to you.”

I think of my father and of Guillo. I think of all those in the village who worked so hard to make my life a misery. The young boys who threw stones at me, the old men who spat and stared at me with terror in their eyes, as if they expected me to snatch

the souls from their old, wrinkled bodies. The younger men who fumbled clumsily at my skirts in dark corners, guessing correctly that my father cared not for my safety or reputation. It would be no hardship at all to kill the likes of them. I feel like a cat who has been dropped from a great height only to land on her feet.

As if plucking my thoughts from my head, the abbess speaks again. "They won't all be like them, you know."

I look up in surprise and she continues. "Those Mortain sends you to kill. They won't all be like the pig farmer."

My ears are deaf to her warning. I am certain all men are like that, and I would kill them all gladly.

But she presses further, to be sure I fully understand. "He will ask for sacrifices, but it is not your role to question. Only to serve with love and obedience." A whisper of emotion crosses her face, a memory of some pain I can only guess at. "That is the nature of our service," she says. "Unquestioning faith. Can you do that?"

"What if I say no?"

"Then you will be taken far from here and given to a kind, gentle man in need of a wife."

I weigh the choice that is no choice at all. To be removed from the world of men and trained to kill them, or to be handed to one like a sheep. "If you think I am fit to serve, Reverend Mother, I will do so gladly."

She smiles and leans back in her chair. “Oh, you are fit to serve. You have already passed the first test.”

Something about her smile makes me uneasy. “I have?”

The abbess nods to the shattered goblet on the floor. “Your wine was laced with poison. Enough that a sip would kill a man twice your size. You experienced slight discomfort, nothing more.”

I am shocked into silence as she so easily confesses to poisoning me, and I remember the warm, dizzy feeling I had earlier.

“Now come.” The abbess stands, walks over to the door, and opens it. “Annith will get you settled. Welcome to the convent.”