

The Shadow Courtesan

Willow Woods

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Cover design by authorpackages.com

Proofread by Becca Allen

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ISBN-13: 978-1-9993097-2-5

Aiséirí Publishing
www.aiseiripublishing.co.uk

DEDICATION

To my friends and family for their encouragement and advice. A special thank you to Tom, Andy & Rachael for keeping me on track, reminding me that too much procrastination is bad and making sure I don't repeat mistakes!

And of course my awesome husband, Nick, for supporting me in following my dream.

Also by Willow Woods

Where I Belong

The Gods' Wrath (short story)

PART ONE

Chapter One

1910

The sun rose lazily, spreading scorching golden rays of light across the cracked and parched ground. The blistering heat was greeted by the futile groans of those who had no choice but to work in the fields, with no protection of shade or even the comfort of a drop of water.

A young girl, no older than twelve, with long midnight black hair pulled back into a loose plait ran through the village. She tried to take longer steps than her short legs would allow, the soles of her feet protesting with each violent contact they made with the ground. Her hands were slick with sweat and threatened to drop the bucket of water she was carrying, desperate to not spill any. She could ill afford to make a second journey. Nor could the well spare a second bucket for that matter.

Pausing in the shade of a cottage, Reina set the bucket down, fighting back the urge to plunge her face into the blissfully cool water. Instead she settled for swiping the back of her arm across her sweaty forehead. She had to slow down; turning to look back she could see there were several splash marks of water. She pulled a face at her clumsiness. The well was dangerously low. How long until it was emptied completely? *Please Lord, we need rain.* She prayed as she tilted her head up to look at the azure blue sky. How long had it been since it last rained?

Unable to go any further, Reina leant against the cottage. The

air was suffocating, and she found herself almost longing for the bitter cold winter nights. Beads of sweat prickled between her shoulder blades and, with a heavy sigh, she leant down to pick the bucket up once more. As she picked it up a shadow passed across the sun; it lasted for barely a second, but a sense of foreboding lingered in the air. *Get back to Cassandra*, she told herself, walking more carefully. Her skin prickled but it had less to do with the heat than before.

'Reina, close the shutters,' Cassandra rasped before Reina had a chance to set the bucket down. The sisters were similar in appearance; both had inherited their mother's black hair and father's violet eyes. But where Reina was skinny and clumsy, Cassandra mirrored her mother in grace. At sixteen Cassandra should have been ready to marry, yet she was an outcast in the village and had no offers. Carefully Reina stepped over her sister, who lay on the straw-filled mattress they both shared and pulled the shutters closed. 'Thank you.'

'Are Mama and Papa back from the fields?' Reina asked as she dipped a cup into the bucket and brought it slowly to Cassandra's lips. It was a pointless question; the cottage had only two rooms and their parents were in neither. But she had hoped they had at least been back recently.

'No,' Cassandra rasped. 'It's too hot for them to go back and forth. Not that it matters...' Reina's eyes warily searched her sister's face for signs of her sickness. Every so often she was plagued with migraines, but with those came visions. She had foreseen the fire which had spread through the outskirts of the village the previous summer. She had warned her parents of the accident that would later claim the life of their brother.

'What have you seen, Cassandra?' Reina fought to keep her voice and hands steady as she refilled the cup. What would her parents say? Should Reina even warn them? They refused to believe that Cassandra's visions were anything other than demons which would soon be expelled from their eldest. Sitting beside Cassandra on the hard floor, Reina held out the cup of water but her sister had fallen into a deep sleep. *Wake up!* Reina wanted to scream at her, but she swallowed a mouthful of water instead. Surely it would be cruel to wake her sister when she slept so rarely? *It is probably nothing; it may just be the heat. She has been wrong before.* She tried to ignore the nagging voice that pointed out Cassandra had rarely been wrong.

'A storm is coming...a storm of death,' Cassandra mumbled but she didn't stir from her slumber. 'No mortal will tell of our tragedy.' Reina turned her head sharply to question Cassandra but still her sister did not move. Assured that Cassandra was deeply asleep, Reina stepped up to the shutter and pushed it open. A storm was certainly what they needed, but there were no signs of the weather cooling. *Maybe she is just having a dream, a normal one.*

Settling back beside Cassandra, Reina picked up her teddy bear and pressed her face into its coarse fur. Rocks of fear dropped into her stomach and she tucked her legs tightly to her chest. Beside her on the straw mattress Cassandra began to snore lightly. Carefully Reina moved off the floor and squeezed herself close to Cassandra and curled into a tight ball.

Had this ever happened before? Reina had never known her sister to confuse her visions for dreams, but surely it must have happened. She yearned to lean over and wake Cassandra, to question her about what she had seen. But what if it was just a dream? Why cause worry unnecessarily? Trying to comfort herself with this thought, Reina moved closer to her sister and closed her eyes. She would rest for just a few minutes.

The sound of rain falling tugged Reina from her slumber. Groggily she blinked several times to try and clear her eyes of sleep and was surprised to find the room was dark. She could barely see Cassandra sitting up with her back against the wall. Fumbling against the darkness, Reina stood up and looked for something to light a candle. How late was it?

'Where are Mama and Papa?' Reina asked in a hushed tone; something about the air cried for caution and she felt a stab of fear. Outside the shuttered window she could hear shouting.

'They won't be coming back.' Cassandra's voice was hauntingly calm and Reina moved to open the shutter a crack. 'No, little sister.' Cassandra pulled Reina so she was sitting beside her on the floor. 'Don't be scared, it will be over quickly.'

'Cassandra, please, you're scaring me!' Reina cried. 'Where are Mama and Papa? What is happening?' The shouts outside the cottage were growing closer: a mixture of cruel laughter and panicked cries for mercy.

'They seek offerings for their Master.' Cassandra's tone was soothing but this only frightened Reina further.

'Who?' But her question was drowned out by the sound of the

door to their cottage crashing open. Pouncing to her feet, Reina yanked open the door to the bedroom, relieved to see her mother standing in the main room soaked to the bone. 'Mama!'

'Hush, child!' But her mother's tone was not scolding as she swept her daughters into her arms. 'We must pray, I am sure God will protect us—'

'He cannot save us, Mother. Nor would he care for three peasant women.' Cassandra's voice had turned scornful as it always did when religion was mentioned in front of her. Reina looked at Cassandra in horror; how could she speak such blasphemy? She turned to look at her mother, but she could only make out a pair of bright hazel eyes in the darkness.

'He will protect those of us who are loyal to Him.' Never had Reina heard her mother's voice so cold and low. 'Those demons outside are here for you. Why else would they come to our village?' Reina stood up as her mother pulled at her arm; she could feel something cold and sticky imprinted on her arm from her mother's hand and a metallic stench filled her nostrils. 'Get out, witch, go with your kind.'

'Mama, no!' Reina detached herself from her mother's sticky hands and threw her arms around Cassandra to stop her from leaving. 'Cassandra, please don't go!' Cassandra gently removed Reina's hands from her shoulders, pushing her back lightly.

'Reina, you have to promise me you will be brave.'

'I—'

'Please, Reina...promise me, let me take one small comfort from tonight.' Reina frowned and shook her head. How could she make such a promise? Cassandra opened the door and the moonlight shone into the small kitchen, flooding it with a silvery light. 'Please.'

'I – I promise,' Reina stammered, holding out her hand in hopes Cassandra would come back inside. But her sister merely stepped outside into the torrential rain, a serene smile on her pale face. The door to the cottage slammed shut, enveloping Reina into darkness once more. Her mother stood with her back to Reina, her forehead pressed against the door. 'Mama—'

'Reina, hush,' her mother scolded. 'Your papa and I should have banished that witch from our home long ago. The Devil has come for her...perhaps this is our fault...'

'Where is Papa?' Reina asked as she was shepherded back into the bedroom.

'I don't know. We were in the fields when the storm hit, several people were swept away. Your father and I became separated...' Her mother trailed off and Reina swallowed a hard lump in her throat. A frantic knocking on the cottage door caught both women off guard and Reina jumped to her feet. 'Reina, have you not been listening? There are demons outside—'

'But it could be Cassandra – or Papa!' she quickly amended, knowing her mother would not open the door for Cassandra. The fear in her stomach was no longer heavy rocks but a sharp pain which stabbed at her repetitively.

'Please, I need sanctuary!' a woman's voice called out over the storm.

'The church will give you sanctuary!' Reina's mother called out and Reina stared at her in horror. First, she had banished her eldest daughter and now she was refusing sanctuary?

'There is no church – it has fallen to these demons! Please have mercy! My sisters of Christ and I have been forced to flee, please!'

'Mama, we cannot ignore a nun!'

The woman continued to plead through the door. Her cries tormented Reina, mixing with her fear and making her tremble. She tasted salt on her tongue and realised she was beginning to cry. Her mother tugged at her arms, but the sound of the woman pleading was unbearable. Disentangling herself from her mother, Reina ran to the door and yanked it open. She was startled to find a woman dressed not in the dark garbs of a nun but a red silk blouse and elegant long skirt standing before her. Meeting the woman's pale eyes, Reina felt a sense of warmth envelop her. The fear in her stomach disappeared and she smiled at the woman.

'Will you offer me sanctuary?' The woman's ruby red lips curled up into a smile as Reina nodded, unable to find her own voice. Stepping back, she almost bowed to let the woman step through. It was clear the woman was no nun, but the sense of warmth she emanated pushed all thoughts of fear and doubt from Reina's mind. She was too hypnotised to see the woman's smile turn cruel. Her hand was still resting on the door as she turned to see her mother recoiling in horror.

'Reina – run!' her mother shouted as the woman turned her attentions back to the girl. 'Run to the next village – warn them!'

'She will not get far, scrawny little thing that she is.' The woman's voice had turned to boredom and she reached out for Reina's chin. 'Poor child, you will not survive the night. Why not

let me end your suffering now?' Nodding, Reina stepped towards the woman, her eyes transfixed to the woman's silver eyes.

'*Reina!*' Her mother's voice pierced through the warmth and Reina tripped backwards, startled. 'Go!'

The ground which had only a few short hours ago scorched Reina's bare feet was now flooded with the downpour, causing her to slip over several times. All around her the village was in disarray; doors were ripped from their holdings, the few cottages with glass windows had been smashed and several bodies littered the ground. Reina didn't pause, her mother's words fresh in her mind. *Warn the nearest village.* She didn't stop to think how far the nearest village was. If she could make it to the forest, then she could seek shelter and hide in there.

'Are you lost, little girl?' A large hand landed on Reina's shoulder, pushing her down into a puddle. 'Should I help you home?'

'No – I'm not lost.' Reina tried to stand up but the hand on her shoulder refused to relinquish its grip. 'P – Please I'm n – not lost.' She could see the outskirts of the village. If only she could break free. As the hand pulled her up she didn't resist and forced herself to go slack.

'Good girl.' The owner of the hand turned her around and she found herself staring at a man with long blonde hair and silver eyes. His handsome looks were marred by the sinister smile and crimson stained lips, a stain Reina was sure could only come from blood. 'Now – let's take you home.' The man stooped as if to pick Reina up and she quickly kicked him in the shins. Taking her chance, she turned and sprinted towards the outskirts. She had to get to the forest. It might not guarantee her safety, but it would surely have more places to hide?

'No!' Reina cried as a sharp pain tore through her scalp and she was pulled backwards. She craned her neck to see the blonde man pulling her plait. Strong fingers squeezed her throat, cutting off her air. 'I – I'm not lost!' Reina rasped as her vision clouded. 'Please...'