

CELTIC and the MAD GODDESS

The Deathless Chronicle 1



P.C. DARKCLIFF

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THE DEATHLESS CHRONICLE I

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To Rosa, my best friend and soulmate.

To my family, friends, and readers.

“A mighty race of hunters once roamed our woods, but Pandemia wiped them out. Tired from her gruesome work, Pandemia is sleeping. If you ever rouse her, she won’t rest until she brings doom to mankind.”

A Celtic legend.

PART ONE – SUMMER OF 14 AD

CHAPTER ONE

Rawena didn't know about the invasion. She sang to the chirping of sparrows as she left her town to mine opals and amber. Although she only wore a linen underdress like every common Celtic woman, the midday sun made her sweat, so she jumped off the stone path into the shade of the woods. Her hammer, pick, and wedge rattled in her shoulder bag as she landed. Dead leaves crunched under her bare feet.

She followed the fringe of a ravine where ferns and grass sprouted among mossy boulders. Pines, spruces, oaks, and beech trees towered above her, and tiny yellow flowers grew everywhere she looked. Their smell reminded her of honey and made her skip with joy. Then a raven croaked three times from a treetop above her.

Rawena's violet eyes filled with dread, for she knew it was a bad omen. As she rushed forward, she recalled seeing rats scurry through her dreams last night. She would have to ask the druidess if that also meant an impending disaster.

Anxiety made her chew her tongue until it bled. The apprehension and the taste of blood followed her to a wide merchant road. She was about to cross the road and walk on to the quarry when the sound of male voices stopped her in her tracks.

Rawena ducked and peered through the bushes. The thick foliage blocked her view of the men, who had stopped on the crossroads as if to discuss whether to turn for

her town or continue north along the merchant road. Although she couldn't make out the words, she realized the intonation wasn't that of her tribe.

The merchant road ran from the North Sea down to the Roman Empire, with Rawena's town standing roughly half-way. She assumed the men were southern merchants, who spoke a dialect of Gaulish or some other Celtic language she largely comprehended. When she listened closely, though, she realized she didn't understand a word. Their language wasn't the harmonious Greek or Latin she occasionally heard on the road. Harsh and guttural, it could only be Germanic.

She froze when she realized what it meant.

For four centuries, this land had belonged to the Celtic tribes of the Boii. The Romans even called it Boiohaemum, or Bohemia, the home of the Boii, but many Celts had returned to their native Gaul, yielding to the pressure of the Marcomanni, Quadi, Hermunduri, and other Germanic tribes that encircled the land. Rawena's tribe was one of the few that remained.

Eight years ago, a group of twenty traders, including Rawena's father, had failed to return from a trading expedition. It was rumored they had fallen victim to the Marcomanni that had invaded the east of Bohemia.

The Marcomanni had threatened to take over the entire land for years. And now they were here in the northwest.

The voices quieted, and the pounding of hoofs reached her ears and matched the thudding of her heart. The men were getting closer. They hadn't turned for her town, but they could spot her at any moment.

Rawena's instincts screamed at her to run home. Instead, she lay flat behind a raspberry bush that sprawled between her and the merchant road. Fright clenched her soul when the cavalry came into sight. The sun glistened on their helmets and

breastplates; swords dangled from their belts. The earth shuddered under the hoofs of their giant warhorses.

The beasts snorted when they caught her scent, and Rawena wished she could burrow under the ground like a rainworm. Although she feared the men would spot her checkered underdress, they rode by without glancing her way.

As their figures diminished, her thoughts and worries flew to her beloved Garux, who was hunting in the northern woods. Her guts twisted when she imagined what the soldiers would do to him if he crossed their path. She grabbed a lock of her auburn hair and pulled it in despair.

“My lover, please be safe,” she whispered as if Garux were beside her.

When the sounds of hoofs faded away, she heard numerous footsteps. Hundreds of men marched behind the cavalry, armed with spears, maces, swords, and bows. Fresh scars crisscrossed their skin, and gore stained their short tunics: they must have massacred a Celtic tribe in the south. Were they going to hide in the woods and march onto her town tonight?

Five or six bullocks passed her, dragging large wagons. More infantrymen brought up the rear, some of them with guard dogs. The dogs pulled on their leashes to sniff around the raspberry bush. One of them stuck its nose among the prickly twigs, so close to her she heard it pant. She clawed at her forearm, scratching off old scabs in her fright and making herself bleed.

Rawena’s head spun with relief when the men yanked on the dogs’ leashes and made them walk on, as they probably thought the dogs had sniffed a hare. When they disappeared behind a bend, she rose and crept out onto the road, wondering whether she should follow them or run home and raise the alarm. She feared her tribespeople might

not take her seriously: her weird habits and seclusiveness made them think she was strange... or mad.

She decided to look for Garux and warn him, when the ominous *shing* of swords being drawn hacked into her spine. She turned around, her heart fluttering, and found herself face to face with three Marcomannic stragglers. They leered at her and licked their lips.

“Please, leave me alone,” Rawena begged, although she knew they wouldn’t understand her.

One of them spoke in that guttural language, and the others grinned. They stepped toward her.

A long dagger hung from her belt, but she knew they would kill her as soon as she reached for it. She swung her shoulder bag and threw it at the nearest man. As he grunted and cursed, she turned and ran.

* * *

Rawena dashed across the road and into the woods. The men’s footsteps crunched behind her.

She slid down a grassy slope that led to a creek. Her town was upstream, but she ran the other way so as not to lead the enemy to her doorstep. She crossed the creek, hoping the men’s boots would get drenched and slow them.

As she rushed on along the muddy bank, Rawena glanced over her shoulder. The soldiers had crossed to her side of the creek, but their boots sank into the mud, and they fell back. Still, she ran as fast as she could, propelled by fear of what they would do to her if they caught her. They would probably kill her, but first...

Her mind screeched with memories of the night when she was about five and her uncle had lain on top of her and pressed his hand over her mouth. Mother had pulled

him off at the last moment, and the druidess had condemned him to a burning death, but Rawena still avoided men, and her strange ways made them avoid her. Although she had a lean body, a stunning mane of wild auburn hair, and large eyes that looked like a pair of agates, she was still a virgin in her late twenties.

Garux was the only man she would give her purity. The soldiers could soon finish Uncle's filthy work, though, and she might never see Garux again.

The men chased her far beyond her tribe's territory, into woods she had never explored. She ran until sweat gushed into her eyes, her calves throbbed, and her lungs burned. The men pursued her like three wolves.

As she plowed through thorny undergrowth, a putrid stench scurried up her nostrils and brought sickness to her stomach. When she crashed out of the undergrowth and glanced at the creek, Rawena gasped: the water had turned yellow.

Filthy fog wallowed along the banks, shrouding dead bushes. Fallen, decaying trees stretched their leafless branches up toward her as if they wanted to coil around her legs and trip her. Yellowish steam rose from the creek in the leprous air. A waterfall hissed ahead.

Rawena paused, her eyes darting through the fog for a way to run, and the men gained on her. Dead branches snapped under their feet just behind her. Despair drove her into the creek and toward the edge of the waterfall. She hoped the filthy water would discourage them from pursuing her.

The claws of a current grabbed her by her ankles and swept her down the waterfall. She swallowed putrid water, and she retched and vomited when she poked her head above the surface. Her head spun; her stomach felt on fire.

The current dragged her away from the waterfall. She struggled against it, but it kept forcing her forward like an invisible ghoul. When she already thought she would drown, the current ceased, and her feet found the bottom.

Rawena stood waist-deep in yellowish sludge. The creek and the woods had disappeared, and the swamp sprawled as far as she could see through masses of filthy steam that wallowed around her.

Although she would expect to hear the buzzing of flies, only the hiss of the faraway waterfall broke the silence. No breeze glided over her wet clothes; not a sunray rushed to dry her hair. It was as if only fog thrived in this dreadful realm.

The men hadn't followed her here, but as the fear of their swords faded, the dread of the supernatural scurried into her mind. A wave of panic made her scream.

Her voice rolled through the stench of the swamp. Something splashed in the sludge, and a light smudge moved toward her. Rawena screamed again. As she waded back toward the waterfall, she spotted a boulder. She scaled it, sat on its flat top, and peered down.

To her relief, the thing she had seen was just a white rat with a golden spot on the top of its head. The rat swam to the boulder and climbed it.

Rawena cringed and shifted to the edge of the boulder, as far from the rat as she could. The rat shook off the drops of the slough... and turned into a woman with white skin and short, golden hair.

Rawena wanted to slide off, but astonishment glued her to the boulder. When the rat-woman squatted, sludge ran down her bare body and pooled at her large feet. Her arms were as long as her legs; her beady black eyes were set far apart. A cleft in the middle of her upper lip revealed a pair of big yellow teeth. Her nose was long and pointed.

She leaned toward Rawena and sniffed, making Rawena recoil. The woman raised her hand to scratch her small ear, and Rawena noticed she had only four fingers, armed with nails that resembled daggers.

The woman opened her mouth and made a series of high-pitched cries. To her surprise, Rawena understood them, as if magic had turned the chittering into Gaulish. She was sure the woman had said, “What was all that screaming about?”

Fear squeezed Rawena’s throat, and she didn’t answer. Her tribe’s legends teemed with supernatural beings that assumed the form of animals, but few of them were benevolent.

The rat-woman yawned and rubbed her eyes. She squeaked and chattered, and again, Rawena understood: “I slept for a long time. Perhaps, if you didn’t scream, I would never wake up, so I guess I should thank you, darling.” She giggled and added, “So, thank you, darling!”

Although the woman seemed friendly, Rawena couldn’t banish her fear.

“Who... who are you?” she asked.

The woman scratched her nose and said, “My name is Pandemia.”

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