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An excerpt from The Raven Witch of Corfu

The path led to the beach. This part was where Lizzie used to swim with her family. She had booked online a room close by. When she arrived at the boarded walkway that ran the length of the beach, she left her luggage there and ambled to the edge of the shore in her flat, open sandals. She stopped so close to the water that her toes got splashed with every feeble wave that came to lap on the sand.

She didn't mind. It felt like a welcome, but it caused her heart to constrict with feeling too. She could almost see her brother before her in the shallows, the way he used to

paddle with her right there as their parents watched from the sand.

Tom had the knack to hide coins in the pockets of his swimshorts, then place them on the sand near her when she wasn't looking. He'd sit there patiently talking or playing with her with a ball until she noticed the spare change glinting on the seabed. Then, he'd tell her it was mermaid gold... that it was going to give her luck all day. It was something he'd come up on his own and loved to play this charade with her, just to make her smile.

Tom had always enjoyed making up stories to entertain her. He was fanciful like that, believing in the impossible, in magic and fairy tales. It often struck Lizzie, the irony of it, that eventually he was taken from her by something that didn't belong to this world.

Taking a deep breath, Lizzie turned away from the water and looked around her, her eyes scanning both sides of the beach. It was still too early for the holiday makers to arrive here in droves – just gone nine o'clock. They probably were in their beds still, sleeping off the extra glasses of alcohol of the night before, or snoozing, half-awake, making plans in their blissful minds for another day in paradise.

Her bittersweet thoughts ended when her eyes drifted to the distant view of the bay. The two familiar mountain tops were too imposing and magnificent to ignore. First, her eyes caressed the tall mountain of Chlomos to the left, her eyes widening to spot two antennae on its top, something that wasn't there the last time she'd looked.

Her breath caught in her throat when she shifted her gaze to the right. The pyramid-shaped mountain of Martaouna stood there, robust and lush, a beauty to behold, no doubt admired by so many who didn't know the kind of evil it nurtured at its core.

The idea brought a bitter taste in her mouth, and she scrunched up her face looking down at her feet again, to find her sandals were half-sunk in the golden, wet sand.

'Hey, is this yours?' echoed from behind her, and she turned to see a woman in her late twenties. She was standing on the walkway pointing to Lizzie's luggage.

Lizzie approached and gave a tight smile. 'Yes, it is.'

The woman's expression turned cheerful. 'I take it you've just arrived. Welcome!'

'Indeed, I have. Thank you.'

'Are you looking for accommodation? My family owns a guest house right there.' She pointed to a line of business establishments across from a pier.

Lizzie saw a small guest house where the woman was pointing. Her booked accommodation was supposed to be around there too. *This could get awkward!*

'Our guest house is called Pitsilos Apartments. It's very nice. Come! I'll show you!' insisted the woman and began to beckon urgently.

Lizzie gave a frown. 'Pitsilos, you said?' She took a folded piece of paper from her shoulder bag and opened it. 'Why, that's where I've booked!'

The woman's face lit up. 'Wonderful! What's your name?' She took Lizzie's luggage by the handle and began to pull it along speedily, beckoning her to follow.

Lizzie hurried behind her along the wooden walkway to catch up, a bright smile on her lips. It amazed her, her own ability to feel amused, given the circumstances. Where had her light-heartedness come from? Perhaps Messonghi had inspired it... Being here made it impossible to stay in low spirits long enough, and the jovial locals certainly helped with that. *You have to love the Greeks! So spontaneous, so easy-going!*

The woman looked over her shoulder to speak, snapping Lizzie out of her reverie. 'I do all the bookings at Pitsilos. We're expecting two young ladies today. Are you Miss Roberts or Miss Doherty?'

Lizzie giggled. 'I'm Miss Roberts.'

‘Pleased to meet you. I am Nia.’ She looked up ahead again as she continued to stride along.

‘Nia?’ asked Lizzie to make sure she’d heard it correctly. She found it hard to keep up with the Greek woman in the heat and was about to ask her to slow down when Nia halted abruptly, much to Lizzie’s relief.

‘Yes. It’s short for Evgenia...’ the woman said as she stood, two hands on her hips, before an ancient-looking white-washed building. It had beautiful cypress-green shutters and a flight of stairs that led to the upper floor. Its banister made of polished dark wood glinted in the sunshine like fresh tar.

The front door of the property was wide open and cypress-green in colour as well. Terracotta flower pots, mainly with geraniums, daisies, and basil, lined the front path. A purple bougainvillea stood on the far corner, creeping up the front wall, the edges of its branches reaching up to the terrace on the upper floor. The place looked so quaint that Lizzie couldn’t help but smile brightly.

‘Your room is upstairs, but it’s not ready yet. I’m sorry. You’ve come very early,’ said Nia, but without a hint of accusation, just stating a fact.

‘Yes, I know, I’m sorry.’ Lizzie apologised, absurdly enough.

Nia waved the apology away. ‘Don’t be. But you won’t have to wait for long. My aunt has already started cleaning the rooms upstairs. I will go now and start preparing yours. The guests left last night.’ She pointed to a taverna next door. ‘You can go there and have a drink while you wait. Come back in an hour. You may leave your luggage here, if you wish.’

Nia pointed to the taverna, then to the guest house with an air of authority, her voice firm, causing Lizzie to admire her for many things. Not just for her impeccable command of English, but also for her confidence, the general way she carried herself... as if nothing could sway her, as if no matter what life could ever throw at her, she could handle it.

Lizzie felt a pang of jealousy inside. She hadn't had much confidence or self-assurance while growing up. Lost in her thoughts, it took her a while to realise Nia was looking at her intensely, her head tilted to the side. 'Is it okay? Are you happy to wait at the taverna, Miss Roberts?' she asked with a twirl of her hand mid-air.

'Yes, of course. Sorry, Nia. See you in an hour.' Lizzie gave a quick wave and walked to the taverna. It was a small establishment with a covered porch at the front where the seating area was. It looked idyllic. The simple notion that Messonghi hadn't been marred by mass tourism delighted her enough to put a spring in her step.

She sat at one of the tables near the sand and placed her shoulder bag on the chequered tablecloth, a huge sigh escaping from her lips as she sat back in the chair.

I've made it here. I can't believe it. Her eyes drifted to Martaouna again. Only she knew what the mountain meant to her. What it had taken from her. *Tomorrow is the day. Tomorrow I'll get my brother back.*

Thoughts of Tom flooded her mind. They were staying at a guest house in Spileo back then, a tiny village nestled on the foothills of Martaouna. Oh, how they used to play up there... in the mountain groves mostly. *Oh, it was heavenly there... until that dreadful morning, of course...*

A single tear rolled down her cheek, and she bent her head, brushing it away. She looked up again, just as a burly, middle-aged man came to stand before her. His piercing blue eyes and shock of salt-and-pepper frizzy hair caught her eye before all the rest did. He wore a tattered shirt and cotton trousers, a pinafore tied loosely around his midsection, and a huge smile on his face.

He was too old to be a hired waiter so Lizzie guessed he was the owner. His smile never fading, he took a pencil from behind his ear and placed the tip on the tiny notepad in his hand. 'Good morning,' he offered in pigeon English, 'Yes, please?'

'*Kalimera, ti kaneis?*' she said, savouring the sound of the first Greek words she'd uttered in twenty years. She'd spoken English to the taxi driver earlier, but now that she was in Messonghi she felt compelled to switch to her basic Greek with the locals.

The man's eyes turned huge. 'Very good Greek! You from England? You here before?'

Lizzie looked away and gave an awry smile. 'Yes. Many years ago. A coffee please?' she said, eager to change the subject.

'Greek coffee? Frappé? Capuccino?'

Lizzie didn't have to think. She knew what she wanted. 'Greek coffee, please. *Kafe. Glyko.*'

'Sweet?' he asked for confirmation.

'*Nai, glyko. Efcharisto.*' She'd tasted the honey-sweet Greek coffee only a couple of times during her last visit, having begged her parents to let her try it. She'd been waiting eagerly for the moment where it would touch her lips again.

'Okay. And I bring you *koulourakia*. My woman make now. I bring you two. For welcome!'

As soon as the man dashed back into the building, she brought out of her bag her pocket dictionary to look up the unknown word. Now that she was here she wished she'd learned some Greek back home all these years but, of course, all this time, the very thought of Greece or anything Greek had been impossible to bear.

She looked up '*koulourakia*' and couldn't help a tiny giggle. *Cookies! How sweet of him... Oh, my! How I've come to miss the Greeks and their generosity with food!*

Lizzie had almost finished her Greek coffee. The small plate of warm, delicious cookies the owner had brought was now

empty. She'd dunked them in the hot, velvety liquid, the way she'd seen the locals do so many times all those years ago.

Sitting back in her chair, she watched the world go by as holiday makers began to arrive, spreading out on the sand beach mats, towels, and even deck chairs. The sea view was spectacular, the water sparkling, the soft susurrus echoing from the water's edge reaching her ears like the sweetest angel song.

Just as she reached for her phone to check the time, she noticed a small fishing boat arriving to moor at the pier nearby. The boat had a cheerful azure colour and a white stripe running across its hull at the top. A tall, bearded young man wearing a fisherman's hat skipped onto the pier from it, then took two crates from the boat. Even though they brimmed over with fish he piled them onto his shoulder effortlessly as if they weighed nothing.

Lizzie leaned forward in her seat and watched as he made his way along the pier towards the shore. She felt magnetized by him and admired his lank figure and beautiful olive skin. He was wearing jeans, but their tight cut suggested he had a muscular body. His bulging arms and shoulders confirmed that. He wore a flimsy, tattered t-shirt, its neckline grown out of shape. As he walked, a long black fringe danced before his eyes in the gentle breeze.

He was holding the crates in place on his shoulder with both hands, the muscles in his biceps and neck tightening and flexing as if little mice lived under his skin and scurried about.

The notion made Lizzie chuckle as she continued to watch him, mesmerized. He was walking on the sand now and, to her delight, was coming towards her.

Sitting up in her chair, she looked away just as he stepped onto the seating area. As he hurried past her, she tossed back her mane of long auburn hair, her eyes darting at him again as soon as his back was turned to her. Now, he was making his way into the taverna, the sight of his muscular retreating

form making her skin prickle and causing a rush of heat to course through her.

She fanned her face just as the owner inside greeted the man cordially. She was sitting directly opposite the door and could actually see them. She couldn't understand much from the volley of Greek they tossed at each other and wondered if the fisherman had come to sell his catch.

As if on cue, he rested the crates on a table inside, and the owner handed him a few notes. Next, the two men came to stand at the threshold, where the owner gave the fisherman a friendly pat on the shoulder. The latter smiled cordially and put the notes in the back of his jeans pocket. When he caught Lizzie looking, his smile froze in place.

Startled, Lizzie looked away, but not before registering a glint in the man's eyes in the few seconds that he'd captured her gaze.

The whole thing had made her heart beat in a crazy rhythm. She willed it to calm down and ventured another look his way to find him chatting to the owner still. Lizzie gave an inaudible gasp when the owner said something pointing vaguely towards her. Before she knew it, the handsome stranger had come to sit at the next table to hers.

Sitting back, he let out a long, luxurious sigh. Lizzie threw a surreptitious glance his way and saw that he'd just taken out a pack of cigarettes placing it on the table. Bemused, she looked away, twisting her lips. She was allergic to cigarette smoke.

Even though she'd seemed mesmerised by the look of him earlier, the very idea that he smoked was enough to put her off him at once.

She wondered if she should complain to the owner, imagining it must be illegal to smoke in restaurants in Greece just like it was in England. She darted her eyes at the threshold only to find the owner had gone back inside.

How about asking the man not to smoke? She could ask nicely. After all, he wouldn't like it if she started coughing

uncontrollably as soon as the toxic smoke reached her nostrils. He had a kind face... surely he would be thoughtful enough to put it out if she asked? Or... she could move instead. But why should she? It was a matter of principal, after all. He was the one breaking the law.

'Excuse me...' she piped up, turning to face him, and leaning towards him somewhat.

The man turned to her, a startled look in his eyes, but she was sure there was a hint of something else in there too. Intrigue? Admiration? She couldn't tell. But it gave her more courage to continue. She'd caught him right on time. Both his hands were mid-air, one holding a cigarette between two long, surprisingly well-manicured fingers for a fisherman, the other hand about to use a lighter.

'Yes?' he answered, a ghost of a smile playing on his lips.

'I wonder if you'd be so kind not to smoke here? I am allergic. Or perhaps you could sit a little further away?' she suggested, waving her hand vaguely towards the tables at the far end of the seating area.

To her surprise, alarm ignited in his eyes, cigarette and lighter disappearing from view. 'Oh, I'm so sorry!' He ran a hand through his thick black hair. 'How thoughtless of me!' He leaned forward and gave an awkward smile, his neck muscles rippling.

Lizzie thought her throbbing heart would jump right out of her chest. She froze, captivated by the rugged lines of his jaw, his high cheekbones, and sparkling green eyes. *What's wrong with you, girl? Five minutes ago men were the last thing on your mind!*

'Have I seen you before? You look familiar...' he said in perfectly enunciated English, his eyes twinkling in the streaming sunlight. Sitting right at the edge of the porch, showered by the soft morning light, he seemed nothing short of a bronze Greek god.

As well as admiring him, Lizzie also wondered how a fisherman could speak her language so well. Finally, she cleared her throat and said, 'No... I don't think so.'

He gave a grin so huge in response that his mirth reflected in his eyes. 'One thing's for sure – you haven't been here long.' He leaned back in his chair and tilted his head. He seemed to study her now, playfully, and it made her mad.

Lizzie huffed. 'What makes you think that?'

He looked away, then shot her a meaningful look, his hand pointing at her with a little wave. 'For one, you're pasty white. And there's the other thing...' He seemed hesitant and looked away again.

Lizzie gave a frown. 'What other thing?'

He gave a soft sigh, then turned to her and said, 'Well, to tell you the truth, you seem a little... how do you say... worked up?'

Lizzie's brows shot up. 'Do I?'

'Yes, you do.'

'And? What if I do? How did you surmise from that that I haven't been here long?'

He threw out his arms. 'Well, isn't it obvious? Messonghi is a paradise. And I don't think there are stressed people in paradise if you know what I mean?' He gave an irresistible smile that made her stare for a few moments, despite her annoyance.

Finally, she tore her eyes away from his face. For a moment, she wondered how he could be causing her to fume with vexation and to gawp with admiration at the same time. 'Excuse me, but this is not very nice,' she mumbled, venturing a look his way again.

He wrinkled his brow. 'But why? I was merely stating a fact.'

'No you weren't, you were being rude! And let us not forget you were about to light up a cigarette a while ago! You didn't even plan to ask me if it's okay to smoke, did you?'

He put up both hands, eyes widening. 'Hey! I've apologised for that.' He winked at her, a lopsided smile spreading on his face, head tilted playfully.

There was something in the way he eyed her then that made her blood boil. 'You apologise but you're still being an arse, excuse my French!'

'French? You don't sound French!'

Despite herself, Lizzie chuckled. 'It's a saying...' She gave a dismissive wave and looked away, making a point of ignoring him by turning in her chair towards the beach. She was mad at him but, at the same time, she scolded herself. *Have I gone too far? It's not like me to be on a short fuse...*

Just at that moment, she heard the owner come out, offering the obnoxious man a rapid volley of Greek. She heard the chink of china behind her, a soft thud, then footsteps. She turned quickly for a peek. The owner had just served the man a Greek coffee and a glass of water and was now walking away.

She threw another furtive glance towards the stranger, catching him as he emptied the long tumbler of iced water in one go. Droplets of condensation ran down the glass, then onto his hand as he held it drinking, and she felt a stir inside at the sight of his big manly hands. He had his eyes closed as he drank, his long lashes mesmerizing, as thick and dark as his eyebrows.

She panicked as he opened his eyes and put the glass down, having just enough time to look away as she heard him say, 'Well if I caused any offense, I apologise. I was merely stating what I saw.'

She turned to meet his gaze, happy to accept the apology. Besides, she wasn't sure if he'd done anything wrong. Her life was in ruins, and she'd come here to try to end the tragedy that was her life. It was true; she wasn't happy or relaxed. Why would she hold it against him?

She let out a soft sigh and said, 'Okay... Maybe we started on the wrong foot. I apologise too. I went a little crazy on you

back there. Truth is, I am a little stressed. And yes, you're right. I've only just arrived here...'

He smiled broadly, his laughing eyes sending butterflies to dance before her own. But, somehow, she managed to conceal the mesmerizing effect he had on her. Her ability to appear collected even in the most difficult situations was a gift she owed to her long years of service at state hospitals as a nurse back in England. *It takes a lot to faze a nurse... thank goodness!*

'Miss Roberts!' came a voice from behind her.

Lizzie turned in her chair to find Nia beckoning to her from the front patio of Pitsilos Apartments.

Lizzie jerked upright and brushed her cheek with an urgent hand. It felt hot as if she'd been sitting by a raging fire. 'My room's ready?'

'Yes! It's ready. Come!' said Nia as she waved frantically.

Lizzie nodded, then turned to give the man a little wave. 'Bye, nice to meet you...' she said breathlessly as she picked up her shoulder bag from the table.

'Are you sure... that it was nice?' he asked with a lazy smile, an arm draped over the back of his chair.

'Absolutely!' She gave a wicked grin. 'And, lucky you... Now that I'm leaving, you can smoke to your heart's content!'

She turned away just as his eyes ignited with mirth. A visceral sound rose, filling the air behind her, and he erupted in a loud belly laugh just as she began to walk away.



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