

Souls of The Sea

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**This Book is dedicated to my own three, strong,
independent women,
My beautiful Daughters,
Beccy, Kristy and Evie.
Each of you inspires me everyday.**

'I love you like the stars above and I'll love you till I die'
Dire Straits.

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PART 1

Allada

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Chapter 1- Irisa

It was dark, the dark was the nothingness and the nothingness was deep. She felt herself drawn through into its undefined edges, slowly immersing herself in the darkness, nebulous in its depth. She felt it shimmering silk-like at the edge of her vision, grasping for the spirits that hid within the heavy and oppressive darkness. She could sense their hunger to be released. They may have been lurking in the dark but they were awake and they were watching.

She rubbed her temples, releasing the tension she could feel building within her head and pulsating within her body, pounding and painful. She concentrated harder, refocused her mind and sought out the energies within the maelstrom, for the spirits she felt were vengeful.

She forced herself back into her body, breathing in deeply, harnessing the darkness, pulling it to her, merging with it, making it part of her, hauling at those desperate, hungry energies, as they became her.

She sat up, discomfited and gasped, she could feel the darkness inside of her, she could feel it trying

to entice her in, willing her to give her essence to it, to become them. She wrestled with it, controlled her mind, fought it down and slowly opened her eyes.

Irisa felt dream-like, split into a thousand pieces of energy mingling together high above herself, feeling decomposed viewing herself from above, sitting within the shade of the jambackto trees, leant against their scratchy bark, giving the impression she had merely peacefully fallen asleep beneath the sage green mottled canopy, away from the searing heat.

She was not alone in her slumbering. The hazy midday heat was unbearable and the trees provided the only real shade closer to their huts, many had their siesta now rather than face the cramped, dusty heat-filled dwellings, so no one would think she was anything other than snoozing before getting ready for the work of the afternoon.

She felt her soul soar through the warm blue sky, her long russet brown tight curls flowing behind her, golden as the sunlight lit them from within, her deep nut-brown eyes wide and fearless. Irisa felt as though she were on the edge of the living and the dead, neither part of this world or the 'after'.

Fleet of foot, carrying the strength of the monstrous, she swept through the hut where Cumo

was langoring and found herself staring into deeply wicked eyes.

Cumo had arrived in their small village of Allada six months earlier as the rains fell hard and swift, filling the canopies with dew-drop diamonds and flooding already muddy paths. He'd arrived with a bag containing a few personal belongings; a wooden cup, cooking pots, blankets, the clothes on his back and a story of how he had travelled from his village after the sad death of his wife and child from a sweating sickness.

Irisa had felt his rotten soul from the moment he had arrived and didn't believe his story of his family's death. However the village elders had taken pity on him and after just one short meeting had welcomed him with open arms, seeing him as an asset to their small community; a young, strong male could work hard. He said he was a pumpkin farmer and could sow a crop for them on the edge of the village.

She'd felt waves of death swarming around him and instinctively sensed that he had killed someone close to him and that he'd derived pleasure from the violence and intimidation he'd metered out.

In the past few weeks he had started to reveal

more of his grotesque nature. Since he'd moved to Allada he'd been forcing himself on many of the village women and young girls and many people already wished he had never found them on that cold wet night.

It had been almost midnight when Irida had been awoken by an unfamiliar sound, unknowing then, that as she stirred it would be the start of one of the longest nights in her life and one that would ultimately end with her using her gift from the God Durnos - God of Darkness. She sat up sleepily in her blankets, thinking she could hear a howling, was it a wild dog? Was it one of the big cats that leapt out of the jungle to pick them off one by one? She'd heard travellers sharing stories of what had happened in other villages; blood thirsty tales of bright orange and black cats, with paws as colossal as the head of a human man, dagger-like claws that left only pieces of whomever they chose as their prey.

She wrapped one of the coarse woven blankets tight around her, picked up the blazing torch and tentatively began searching the huts perimeter. She heard a soft sobbing breaking through the silence of the still night and tip-toed a little closer to the sound, mouse-like, trying not to wake Amara and her mother.

It was such a dark, murky night, Irisa could only just make out what looked like a tiny bundle of cloth by the door. Gently, she extended her leg and poked at the bundle with her bare foot, unsure of what was lurking there. She was startled as she heard a very human ‘Dermal!’ If able to shout ‘Go away!’ it was definitely not an animal.

Irisa made her way closer to the huddled bundle and realised with alarm that it was one of the younger girls from the village, bound in clothes by their front door. It took Irisa a few moments to recognise the girl as Semali, one of the young ones that helped her mother with the goats and kept an eye on the corn and beans.

She knelt down next to the tenderfoot girl. ‘Semali, what are you doing here? What happened?’ she whispered. Irisa could see Semali was shaking her head but would not raise it, keeping her eyes firmly cast down towards the dusty floor. ‘Semali, you came here for a reason, come inside and tell us what’s happened so we can help you.’

‘I can’t’ she whimpered, ‘If I tell you, you will have to tell my family and they will disown me! I didn’t know what to do Irisa, I didn’t know where to go. I knew I couldn’t go back to my family’s hut , then

I thought about you and your Neena'

Irisa didn't answer, simply opened her arms to the tenderfoot, who gathered herself within them. She held Semali gently whilst she sobbed, her eyes wide and terror stricken, her breath coming in rasps as she became more distressed. 'Shhh little one, whatever it is, you will be o.k, you're safe now, shhh.' She stroked Semali's tight black curls, trying to soothe her, fingertip strokes, featherlight touch, starting to sense Semali's body relax. As she continued to stroke Semali's hair she began to notice raised marks on her neck, she looked closer observing that they were actually deep scarlet scratches, clearly made by rough fingernails ripping through flesh. Gently she began to sing a lullaby to Semali, one sung to her as a tenderfoot. She went back to stroking Semali's hair and noticed that there was also a gap in those dense midnight curls, where a clump had been frayed clear away. Irisa felt a growing sense of unease as she tried and failed to ignore the evidence in front of her, tried to ignore the ragged tear in Semali's pretty cotton dress that was currently hanging from one shoulder and what all this might mean. 'Semali, I need you to come inside, it's only Amara and my mother and you know them don't you? We will look after you and keep

you safe, please let us help.'

Slowly Semali nodded, her breathing calming, her sobbing easing whilst her tears remained streaming from her eyes. She stood and grabbed her dress tightly to herself. Just as they reached the door Hestia, Irisa's Neena, yanked it open.

'Irisa! What in the blazes are you doing? It is the middle of the night, we all need to ...' She stopped abruptly, noticing Semali, taking in her appearance and concern on her daughter's face. She swiftly formed an idea of what could have transpired, she swept back into the hut, waking Amara. 'Girl!' she bawled, shaking Amara from her dreams. 'Quickly now, warm some water and make some kirni teas for Semali'

Amara sat up and rubbed her eyes, Hestia lit a lantern. She still felt dazed and confused, was she slumbering? Was this actually happening? The sudden pinch on her arm from Hestia gave her no doubt as to that answer. Amara went to the shelves of jars, looking for the leaves they used to make calming teas with. 'What is Semali doing here? And what is going on?' Although still slumbersome, Amara could sense the urgency in Hestia's voice but was not able to work out what it could have to do with the sweet

young girl that danced and sang with her sisters after their hours of toil and who helped Hestia with the crops.

Hestia took charge, wrapped a warm woven blanket over the girl, a hot cup of tea in her hands and bade her speak. As she did so, Irista took a small piece of cloth, dipped it into a clay vessel of warm water and began to wipe the blood away from the scratches she could see on Semalis neck and body.

As the warmth of the tea and feeling of safety enveloped her, Semali began to calm, her words flowed more freely, the other women knew to give her space and silence and to let her fill it when she was ready.

‘I woke in the middle of the night and needed to pass water. It was really dark and foggy when I came out of the hut and it was so hard to see. I thought I could make out something moving about outside, it made me jump at first but then I recognised the shape, it was swaying and then I heard it singing and realised it was Cumo, the newest villager, so I thought it would be fine, that he would just make his way back to his own hut.’

Irista felt a shudder, felt her blood run as cold as her body gave way to goose pimples and fear for this

young girl, this tenderfoot. She instinctively knew that her own unease about the man was about to be justified as Semali settled back to tell her tale.

‘If I could have held on until the morning I would have done, I thought about running back inside but I just couldn’t wait. He stunk of Mwengi, he’d vomited it all down the front of his clothes, he got really close to me and asked me what I was doing. I told him I needed to pass water and asked him to leave me alone but he just laughed at me and said he’d hold my dress and that he would keep me warm as the night was cold. I shouted at him but he wouldn’t go, he got closer, this time so close the stench of him made me nauseous, he grabbed at my dress. I tried to pull away but he kept tugging at me.’

Semali paused and took a sip of tea. The woman left the silence, letting her re-group. Having a little more experience of the world than a tenderfoot, they could tell where the tale was going and however intolerable it was, however much they didn’t want to hear that something sinister could have happened to their sweet Semali, they knew they had to let her tell her tale until the end in order for her soul to begin to heal and her mind to make sense of the violence and abuse forced onto her mind, body and soul.

Semali took a deep breath, put the cup down beside her, drew her knees into her chest and wrapped the blanket around her like a warm cocoon, trying to protect herself from the story she had to finish.

‘He asked me if I wanted intercourse, I didn’t know what that was, I didn’t understand the word. He said that he would show me, that he’d shown lots of girls what it was, that he was a really good teacher and that if I was a good girl it wouldn’t hurt. I tried to get back into the hut, I didn’t understand what he was talking about but I knew it was something wrong because he shouldn’t have been so close and when he smiled, It wasn’t a real smile.’ She looked imploringly at Irisa. ‘Do you understand what I mean?’

Irisa nodded gently, ‘yes sweet one I understand.’

‘I was too scared to move then, I didn’t know whether to shout for Baaba and Neena, but then I thought they might be cross with me, they might think I was being disrespectful to an elder because I wouldn’t do what he asked, I was so confused.’ Semali brushed her hair from her eyes and continued. ‘He put his hands either side of my face, telling me to shush, he held it so tight I couldn’t move it anywhere. He

looked into my eyes, right into my eyes and asked if I knew what fucking was, when I said no, he was furious, said that I was lying, that I was a prick tease like all the other women he'd met, he shoved his big, fat hand over my mouth, he whispered in my ear "have you seen the goats rutting?" "Then I understood, I knew what he was going to do to me!"

Semali wailed, huge wracking sobs that tore at the women's hearts. They knew that not a soul in the village would condone the vile behaviour of this man, but they also understood that as women they were expected to just accept rape as part of their lives, another couple of years and Semali could be raped and fucked by anyone in the village or anyone that the elders decided to give her to in marriage.

Hestia and Irisa were outraged, red-faced and struggling to hold their composure, to remain calm and quiet for Semali. Amara, always the delicate one, began silently crying, tears soaking into her coarse woollen wrap. She found a piece of clean cloth and gave it to Semali to dry her eyes, although she was so distraught she made no move to wipe her face and instead let her tears fall to the ground.

'I tried to shout, I think I screamed but I can't remember hearing anything coming out of my mouth,

so maybe I imagined it. I just wanted my Neena or Baaba to hear me, to come and make him stop and leave. I was terrified of what he was going to do. He tried to pull my dress off. That's when he ripped it. I pushed against him and he fell. I tried to run away back to my hut but he grabbed me by the neck, I squealed and he slapped me really hard across the face.'

Semali quietened, smoothing her dress, feeling the edge of the hem, beautifully embroidered in bright reds and greens. She remembered making it with her mother, Neena, showing her father when she had finished, he was so proud of her for creating something so beautiful, telling her one day she would be a wonderful wife. As she continued to stroke her careful work she looked up to Irisa.

'This is my favourite dress, my family were so proud of it and now it is ruined!' Semali's tears continued to stream, dripping onto the rush floor and soaking away. She watched them as they disappeared into the grassy floor, wishing she could be washed away, cleaned by all the tears. She felt dirty, she knew what other people would think of her and it made her feel sick to her stomach.

Hestia moved to her side, frustrated at

the girl's innocence, that a dress could seem so important in light of what else the wretched man had done to her. 'Oh Semali! We can soon help to weave or embroider another for you, your dress being ruined is neither your fault or your worry, come finish your tale girl.'

Semali gazed up at Hestia and nodded. 'When my ripped dress wouldn't come off he started pulling my skirt up. I was crying "no Cuomo! This is wrong! I have not been cut and I'm not clean!" She looked wild eyed around the room, 'I have not been cut yet you see, my mother says I am not old enough yet. When I said that he laughed at me, he said I was a stupid girl who needed teaching about rutting and that he didn't care if I was a dirty whore. He slid his hands up my dress, pulled the cloth away from between my legs. I knew then that he would do whatever he wanted. He forced me to turn around and face the hut, grabbed my neck, his nails were digging in, I could feel them tearing my skin, then he kicked my legs apart.' Semali stopped, her eyes cast to the floor of the hut, shaking her head, wishing it was all just a bad dream.

Irisa urged her gently, 'Semali, tender-foot, can you be brave and tell us all?'

Semali sniffed, wiped her face on her ruined

dress and continued. 'He leant over me and pushed his thing into me, it hurt so much but he would not stop! He moved faster and faster and then he made a noise like a pig grunting and he stopped. I could feel his slime running down my legs, I fell next to the hut crying, I pulled my clothes around me and wiped myself. He told me I was filthy and should live with the pigs in the sty, that I was not a proper girl or I would not have let him do it and that I should never tell anyone, but Irisa it hurt! And I knew it was wrong, I didn't know how to tell Neena. Please help me, what have I done!'

Semali's deep black eyes implored those in the room to listen to her, to take the hurt and shame away and to hold her until she felt safe, betraying both her youth and her innocence.

Hestia, Irisa and Amara whispered late into the night around the fire, trying to think up solutions to aid the pitiful young girl. Semali slept deeply and peacefully in Hestia's bed, thanks to one of Irisa's tisanes. Irisa could hold her tongue no longer, incensed with rage at Cumos' perverted behaviour.

'We'll never get real justice! He will get away with it, he has that way about him, he can persuade others to believe what is unbelievable. I

could make sure that he never does this again, he has a sickness, it won't leave him, it will fester and he will become more dangerous. You know I'm the right mother.'

'I know' agreed Hestia. 'But we can't very well tell her Neena and Baaba about this without telling them about you and what power you have girl, do you really want us burnt as witches?'

'Oh Ma, of course not, but if I deal with Cumo, Semali lives without a troubled conscience and her parents are none the wiser. I know Fugra has teas and douches that can be used so a child does not occur.'

'Well if you think you need to, I think she is too young to make a child, she is only a child herself but I suppose you are right to be thorough.'

Irisa felt herself redden with anger 'Why would he do this? Why hurt a child in this way?'

Hestia sighed, 'I can't give you an answer my child, some people have cruel persuasions. They have deficiencies that we cannot understand that may make them do the things they do. I wish I could say that they do not.'

Amara had been quietly listening to the too and fro between Irisa and Hestia, she looked thoughtfully from one to the other. 'Well I know what I think' she

said, wiping her eyes, red and puffy from crying throughout Semali's story. ' I think if he has done this once, he'll do it again and will it be worse next time? He has forced himself on a child! She will be classed as unclean and no man will touch her, her own parents will have to disown her. Why have that life for her when we can make a difference this time? If Irisa can use her gift we would be ridding the village of a dangerous, evil man and I don't see how that is wrong'

Hestia sighed.' We are all in agreement then. We will help Irisa so she can use her gift, we won't tell Semali's parents and we will make sure she has the right medicine to recover.'

The remaining part of the night was long and unsettled for the three women, sleeping stubbornly refusing to come despite the tiredness that bore into their bones. They all wrestled with their conscience over what was about to happen, wondering whether they would be angering the gods if they committed a god-like act and delivered justice on others.

By the time the soft pink haze of dawn light began to filter through into the hut they were tired but resigned as they spoke to Semali and outlined their plan. Rather than being scared as the women had thought she would be, Semali was still of an age where

everything felt magical and she was excited that Iriisa had a gift from the gods and that it could help her. She had no trouble with promising not to tell anyone about Iriisa's secret, she couldn't do that without revealing her own and wanted to stay in the village, marry a farmer or a fisherman and stay close to Neena and Baaba. She could only do that if everyone, including her parents believed she was clean and untouched, so she swore a blood oath and was grateful for the help of the women.

Then as though nothing had happened, it was a day like any other and they all headed out into the bright sun to start their day as usual.

Chapter 2- The Gift

For a long time Irisa had been scared to use her gift, frightened of the accusation of witchcraft. Villagers were still burned for being witches by the white people who arrived in boats, worshipping one God. They forced their way into towns and villages across the known and unknown world, professing that their christian god was the only god to worship and in his name they burnt women on wooden stakes. Irisa knew that despite the fact that many of the villagers would quickly search out wise women when their children were sick, would leave them with platitudes and prayers and marvel at the affinity they had for herbs and plants, however, she also knew that behind their backs they called them witches and did not trust them, just as they did not trust Fugra who had taught them in their small village.

That lunchtime the women enacted their plan. Irisa went and sat under the shade of the trees and began to meditate, she could feel the darkness surrounding her, holding her, she felt the coldness, the desperation and loneliness, the vengeance waiting to be metered out. She made herself concentrate, breathing deeply, gaining control.

Cumo was alone in the hut he shared with another farmer, they were all out in the fields, Cumo lazy and belligerent had said he had no need to go with them and would complete the tasks around the hut, however as soon as he was alone, he went back to his blankets and fitfully napped. He felt rather than see someone in the hut with him and jerked back in surprise, startled.

‘Where the fuck do you want? Decided you can’t resist my cock? Everyone wants it, did your little friend Semali tell you how good it was?’ He laughed to himself, giving her a crooked smile more filled with menace than mirth.

Despite his arrogance he was nervous, she could feel it, it was emanating from him in waves. He had seen Irisa appear from nowhere, he didn’t have the knowledge to comprehend the magnitude of the shadows surrounding her. This was the power of the monstrous, they could deceive as well as inflict their wrath.

Irisa returned Cumo’s smile, then opened her mouth, jaw seemingly breaking. Cumo screamed, hands trying to protect his face. Unimpeded now, with her mouth impossibly agape, the darkness flowed from her, wave after wave, scolding Cumo with

the intense sickly accent of rotting flesh, enveloping him while he was trying to back away from the seething cloud. But it was too late and as Irisa began to keena a high pitched whine, the creatures within her left her and found Cumo.

She clutched her chest, her heart beating impossibly fast, startled as the force that came from her. She felt no remorse as she heard the screams from Cumo, the growls, the hungry mouths, the ripping and devouring. His screams for mercy began to fade away as the darkness filled the room, pouring into his lungs, his heart and then it was gone and so was Cuomo.

She had made him feel terrified, that he was nothing, just as he had done with Semali and all the other women he had tortured. Sighing deeply, she smiled and closed her eyes.

She felt a jolt as her essence returned to her body, slowly she opened her eyes, relieved to find herself still under the dappled shade of the jambakto trees where she had first sat. She yawned, taking in deep breaths of clean, hot air, scented with deep red hibiscus blossoms, the smell of spice and herbs wafting from Fugras' home as twilight turned to black blanketed sky mottled with stars. She stood,

straightened her tunic and made her way back to the women huddling around the cooking pot they shared.

‘Hey, sit down Irisa’ whispered Amara ‘ We saved some stew for you, Fugra made it, it’s goodIrisa smiled at her friend, ‘thank you, I’m suddenly feeling quite empty.’

Amara placed her hand on Irisa’s thigh, they shared a discreet smile and nothing more was said.

Chapter 3- Vengeance

Amara had known Irisa since they were tenderfoots, growing up in the lush green valley by the coast of Africa. She lived in the tiny village of Allada, a hard working community consisting mainly of farmers of brazil nuts, watermelons, pumpkins, beans and some fisherman who had boats at the nearest cove.

Amara and Irisa worked together gathering herbs for the bent-backed medicine woman, Fugra. She had taken care to teach them how to identify every herb, flower, root, plant and bark that was safe to use and would give the best effect for one condition or another, how to soak them in oils or crush them into powders or pastes and how much was needed to cure and not to kill. The villagers now relied on them for their knowledge and skill of herbs, how they could blend them together to make healing teas, pastes and poultices and how their skills and magicks kept them safe and would cure them of most ills.

At times it felt like a thankless task, especially when others their age had finished their farming chores and were chanting, singing, dancing by the fire whilst they were still helping Fugra gather plants and

herbs that she insisted could only be collected by the full moon or they would not be as potent, or they were helping her to prepare sacrifices to the gods, another duty they had to perform as wise women. They would then eventually stagger exhausted and empty to their flat, hard beds, late into the night, where they would still be expected to rise from if a woman needed them for a birthing.

Amara was the only one who knew of the darkness in her friend. At first she had laughed, Irisa had struggled to explain the darkness and the monstrous spirits she could sense within her, how it could leave her and enter another. She'd thought Irisa had been listening to too many of the folktales often told on a cold night, huddled around the fire, blankets wrapped around their cotton slippers, many talking late into the night until the velvet blue sky of twilight turned to the russet and pink silk of dawn. She knew Irisa loved to listen, learn and remember.

Amara knew how hard home life had been for Irisa and her mother, Hestia. She knew Irisa's father was an unpleasant man, quick to anger and even quicker to raise his fist. Irisa often tried to protect her mother which meant that she was often the target for Dumas's blows. So when Irisa told Amara that she was

going to try and use the god gift to rid them of Dumas, she understood the wish but could still not even begin to believe that Irisa could actually achieve what she was promising she would do to her father.

Irisa however, could take no more of her mother being black and blue, now that he had started to beat her as well, she was afraid he'd soon want more than that.

Amara had cried at the thought of all the hurt and pain that Irisa and her mother had suffered at the hands of Dumas and had thought that was why Irisa had started to talk about ending people with darkness. Amara believed in Irisa's cunning, she believed a true gift had been given to her from the gods, she believed in the wise women, in the tales from the village elders but struggled to comprehend how her beautiful, frail looking friend could control evil spirits hidden within a darkness.

One night as the moon cast its luminescence over a small clearing by Hestia and Dumas's hut, Irisa and Amara had sat chatting, laying amongst the fragrant lemongrass, staring up at the glittering stars.

Amara I can't take this anymore, last night my father came to my bed thinking mother was asleep, he got into my blankets, tried to lift my shift, mother

woke and he said he was soothing me from a bad dream. I know she didn't believe him, but nothing else was said, tonight I am going to end him.'

Irisa was very calm, resigned to what needed to happen. She'd thought long and hard about what she had to do, she knew he would kill her mother if they told anyone what he had been doing to them. Irisa was still considered too young to be cut then, too young for Fugra to cut her to make her clean and respected ready for a husband. If the village knew she had been touched by a man, she would have to leave, ostracised for something she had no control over.

She'd tried to talk to her mother, trying to convince her to run away, to try and get to another village, taking the fishing boat with them and getting to the next cove, but her mother was resigned to the fact that wherever they went, Dumas would find them, she feared he would never let go of something he viewed of as his property.

Irisa turned to Amara, smiling, 'Stay with me, see what happens please?'

So Amara swore that whatever happened she would stay with her friend. She rested her head on Irisa's shoulder and waited. She felt Irisa's body tense, neck bent back, mouth agape and widening

grotesquely, eyes rolling back in her head, then she watched as Iriša's eyes filled with a blackness, she could feel herself being drawn into the shimmering within the dark. She jerked away frightened but when she looked back all she could see was her life-long friend Iriša doing something dangerous to try and save herself, her mother and others from yet another man who wanted to hurt and control them. She suddenly felt a great compassion for Iriša and what she had been going through and remembered her vow. Whatever was happening, this was her friend, her family and she would not abandon her, so she calmed herself, rested her head against Iriša and waited.

They sat peacefully for some time, the fire burning down, Iriša stiff as the standing stones at the edge of their village. Suddenly Iriša gasped and fell backwards, Amara held her head in her lap until she came to.

Iriša's father had never been seen after that night and no-one could find a reason why but he was not a well liked man, with his quick temper and selfish ways and he was soon forgotten, especially by her mother who moved about the home with a new sense of purpose, growing crops on a small patch of earth outside of their hut, which she bartered for cloth to

make clothes for her and her daughter, freed from a life of pain and anger.

Hestia told Irida that she had been asleep, that she knew nothing of what happened but smiled at Irida as she said it. She then spread a story throughout Allada and the nearby villages that he had never returned after going to the cove to check on his fishing boat. It was a journey of less than a mile but everyone knew how dangerous the deep cove and the tides that ravaged it were, so no one asked questions. The villagers were happy that Hestia had still got the boat and could make a living from fishing for the bright silverfish that darted throughout the ocean and formed the main part of the villagers diet.

Irida had tried to talk to her mother about it afterwards but her mother had told her not to tell a soul, that it was their secret, that it was god given and not to be scared of it. She was just glad that her father Dumas was gone, her mother making a living and that there was a calmness in the house that they'd never had before, so she listened to her mother and told no one except Amara.

Soon after, Fugra, the wisewoman had taken both her and Amara on as apprentices. One afternoon as the sun melted in a puddle of russet and orange

into the horizon, Fugra had asked Irisa to stay and gather centrellus- a herb they gathered at sunset and sunrise, that they then made into a sticky paste that helped to heal open wounds, fought infection and saved lives, so Irisa had not refused such an important task. As they gathered the herbs together, Fugra stared at Irisa intently, muttering an incantation as she did so, so deeply that Irisa had begun to feel uncomfortable, sensing the crone's gaze upon her.

‘Look at me child’

Irisa stopped and glanced back to the crone. ‘Have I done something wrong, Fugra? I am trying to learn the incantations as well, I just get so muddled with some of the words’ She put her head down waiting for Fugra to chastise her.

‘Child, I know there is a world in you, a power, a strength and a darkness’ Fugra paused and Irisa flinched and started to move away.

‘No! You have me wrong. I don’t understand what you speak of!’ She knew as she spoke that her heightened voice and speed of speech would not be convincing Fugra of her innocence, she was terrified of what she would say.

‘You misunderstand me child, I am not scared of this power, I’m not branding you a witch, but this

power is all encompassing and you will need someone to guide you through how to use it. I know you have used it before but I can teach you to look into that darkness, to harness the power that dwells within it and how to make sure no innocent is hurt by it, including you.' Fugra continued to gather herbs as though she had not spoken of something so full of magic. Irisa was unsure of how to respond, so took Fugras' lead and continued to gather centrellus and did not speak on it for the rest of the night.

Irisa had known there was no point in arguing with Fugra she seemed to see and sense all, and so was not afraid when one night Fuhra called for her, bade her drink devils claw tea, sat crossed legged, looking into the fire, thinking of the darkness. Irisa had become curious about her power but it also frightened her, so she gave her trust to Fugra and accepted her help with an open heart and a sense of relief.

She began to reminisce of all the times she and Amara had been called out to the sick or the dying and learnt how to help them from Fugra's instruction. Irisa came back to herself from her daydreaming, feeling the sting of a hot wooden spoon on her back. Fugra was bringing her out of the darkness.

‘Why do you not listen to me! If you do not stay strong and stop the damn daydreaming, they will bring you into them, you’ll become one of the monstrous and you will leave this earth! What use will that be? Durinos, our own god of darkness gave you this skill, have respect and use it well! I need you to find every evil spirit that hides in there, one by one, take control, then you will be able to bring justice to those who mean us harm, you can protect us more than any army the Elders can put in place.’

‘Some are not evil’ Irisa stated quietly.

"Of course they are girl," hissed Fugra ‘ They are just manipulating you.’

‘No!’ Irisa shouted, ‘ There are some who are hurt, angry, guilty and their anger is the power I sense, but not all the spirits are evil, some have unjustly become spirits, that’s why I can easily use them to seek out vengeance for us, I am using them, let us not forget that, it is not a purely innocent thing I wield, whether a gift from Durnos or not.’

Irisa’s body sunk to the earthen floor, they had been practising for hours, as soon as she felt herself slip away, she could hear them all, whispering,

seducing, caressing and she found it harder and harder to resist their calls.

‘Please let me rest, Fugra, can we not try again tomorrow, please?’

Fugra gave a sharp nod, choosing not to answer Irisa’s anger. ‘Mmm, I suppose child but as soon as dusk hits, I want you here at my hut with or without Amara.’

Irisa nodded her head in agreement, grabbed Amara’s arm and together they ran off to her mother’s hut.

Chapter 4- Control

Hestia came to the door rubbing her eyes, trying to shake off the pull of the dream that had held her hostage for most of the night, memories of desperately explaining to suspicious elders who did not trust women in any situation, where Dumas had gone, why he had just disappeared from the village and uncomfortable memories of most of the villagers talking in hushed whispers as she passed them as they got on with the days tasks, trying to protect Irisa from the gossip, trying to hide her own fright that her daughter may have to face the elders for practising witchcraft at some point in her life.

The dream had left her with a heavy heart and a flutter of confusion and anxiety for her daughter which tumbled out as anger towards the girls and she felt unable to control it.

‘Must she keep you so damned late? Come in the pair of you, you’ll freeze to death out there without blankets! Get into the bed I’ve made for both near the fire, I’ll bring you a pot of fish stew, you must be famished! If she is going to make you stay so long she needs to feed you! Stupid old Crone!’

Hestia went to the pot and filled bowls using a ladle, the stew, thick with corn, beans and fish. The warm,

moist smell wafted through the hut and Hestia finally smiled knowing that at least the girls would have full bellies while they slept.

Hestia had used the fast swimming lean silvery fish- Sardinillas, that swam in huge silver shoals off the coast, glinting and glistening through the clear sea as the sun shone through the azure blue coastline, knowing it was a favourite of Irisa's. It had always comforted her as a child and she knew that after spending all her energy and emotions learning her craft with Fugra that she would need something to warm her inside.

Hestia came close to her daughter,'Praise Durnos for your gift but can you truly do this Irisa? Can you control them? There have been others before you, spoken of in legends, but they went mad with terror and lost themselves, I am afraid for you my love.'

Irisa snuggled into the warm, fleshy arms of her mother inhaling her scent of soap and fish.

'I believe I can, Mother.' she said with a truth that she felt in her heart. 'It is hard, I am fighting but I do believe I can make Durnos proud and use the gift as he meant me to. Fugra is tough but she only wants me to be safe and to learn the monstrous and their