



Divination (Spells and Sins)

Author: *Jennifer Laslie, Cora Ward*

Category: LGBT+

Description: The veil between realms is thin, but so is the line between fate and choice.

When glimpses of a dark force invade Elysia Thornhearts mind, she realizes Hallow Ridge Grove is in peril. But seeking the help of her coven seems fruitless as the circle stands divided on a course of action, and Elysia is no longer certain who she can turn to.

Lunara Starfall needs to find a lost fae artifact, but during her search, shes unexpectedly drawn into the human realm, quickly realizing fate may have other plans. Yet, how can she complete her objective when she can't seem to keep her mind...or hands off Elysia?

Being from different worlds, can the two learn to trust each other in order to unravel the location of the Starfire Orb? And without it, will the fae realm and the town of Hallow Ridge Grove be able to survive the darkness?

Total Pages (Source): 24

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:21 am

Chapter

One

"The unseen is felt long before it is ever known."

Elysia

I shivered as the last flame in the circle of candles flickered out. The scent of sage hung heavy in the air, thick with the weight of my divination spell. Opening my eyes, I was met with complete silence, not a bird chirping or even a breeze blowing through the open window as I sat cross-legged on the kitchen floor's rug.

The water inside the scrying bowl in front of me sat just as still and calm, not a ripple in sight. I knew divination took time, but my gut told me I needed to hurry. My intuition was never wrong, which was why so much nervous energy ran rampant through my body, setting me on edge. I needed to calm down.

"Focus, Elysia," I said calmly to myself. Panicking wasn't going to get me anywhere.

My vision from earlier had nearly brought me to my knees as it flashed through my mind's eye. I prayed whatever horrors I'd glimpsed earlier were only a small event and not a tiny piece to something much larger. I clasped my hands together in my lap to keep them from shaking.

Patience. Focus and patience. I took a deep breath, held it, and then slowly exhaled. There, that was much better. I rolled my shoulders and straightened my back. I could

do this.

The dying light from the last golden rays of the evening peeked through my lace curtains, casting odd shadows all throughout the kitchen of my little cottage set in the woods. Hallow Ridge Grove—tucked away in upstate New York—was a safe town, too safe. And the townsfolk were unaware that witches lived among them. I planned to keep it that way, as did my coven.

If only I could make sense of what I'd seen. Staring intently at my scrying bowl, I placed a hand on the side of it, the coldness of its touch helping me to sharpen my focus. I whispered my incantation one more time, pulling hard on the power within me, and hoping to gain more insight.

The air grew dense as the candles surrounding me lit themselves one by one, sparking to life, and illuminating the vessel of water in front of me. My divination ritual, one I'd performed countless times, was supposed to bring me clarity, but the visions that materialized within the water's reflection were fractured and blurred.

Dark twisted shapes skidded across the surface, followed by other fragmented images, sounds, and symbols. Nothing made sense. The visions ended just as quickly as they'd begun.

"What the fuck?" I grasped my chest with my free hand and tried to catch my breath. Even though I couldn't discern anything from the water, I didn't like the feeling that it'd given me.

If me or my town was in danger, I needed more information. I'd be damned if I didn't use the powers the goddess had given me to get to the bottom of this. I grabbed my athame and pricked the tip of my finger, holding it over the bowl. A single drop of blood joined the water below, binding me more closely to the spell, and intensifying my connection to the process. I then cupped the vessel with both hands.

“Show me more. Show me what’s to come.”

The water rippled unnaturally, and my pulse quickened. Suddenly, an ominous face appeared in the reflection. It was faint, ghost-like, but unmistakable—a shadowy figure with glowing red eyes. The vision shifted rapidly, showing the town in chaos, strange figures emerging from the woods, and an eerie black mist rolling through the streets and blotting out any light in its path.

The water cleared yet again, leaving me with more questions than answers.

Clenching my jaw, I tried to recall some of the fleeting pieces: a silver crescent moon shrouded in shadows, unfamiliar whispers, a dark being with glowing red eyes, and...a woman’s face. Ethereal and striking. Fae?

Suddenly, the wind picked up and blew my tarot card deck off the kitchen counter, scattering them across the room like confetti. One card flipped end over end until it landed by my bare foot. The Moon card laid face up, one corner bent from its tumble, but the energy surrounding it felt off.

Pulling my cardigan tighter, I whispered, “What are you trying to tell me?”

Something was wrong.

The veil between worlds always grew precariously thin this close to Samhain. That alone should have explained the strangeness in the air, but this—this felt different . There was something dangerous stirring, and it was connected to the face in my vision. The woman with silver eyes. Yes, she had silver eyes.

As my fingers brushed across the Moon card, I gasped. Tears pricked the corner of my eyes unbidden as a feeling of doom and death settled heavily in my gut.

Something was coming—something powerful and dangerous. I'd had visions before, but this one felt different, more personal, as if it was a warning meant specifically for me.

A soft knock at the door snapped me out of my thoughts. The door creaked open a fraction before I could even move.

"Morgana sent me," came a voice from the doorway. Cassia Brooks stepped inside, her wild auburn curls illuminated by the porch light. "She sensed a shift in the energy. Did you feel it?"

"Feel it?" I pushed myself up from the kitchen rug and brushed off my long, black skirt. "I saw it."

Cassia's face paled as she stepped inside, shutting the door behind her. "You saw something?"

I nodded, but hesitated before I spoke. What I saw didn't really tell me anything of significance. If Morgana, our high priestess, had sent Cassia to check on me, it had to be either bad or important.

Maybe both?

"Elysia?" Cassia stepped forward and clasped my hands, giving them a shake. "What did you see?"

"I—A vision. I had a vision." I swallowed hard as I pulled out of her grasp and stumbled over to the couch to sit.

Cassia followed but remained standing. "Are you going to tell me about your vision or am I going to have to pull it out of you?" She raised her hands, a spell hanging on

her lips.

“No, no! That’s not necessary. I’m just a little shaken up by it. The vision wasn’t clear, but there was someone—a fae, I think. And something else...something dark...”

Before Cassia could respond, the room’s temperature plummeted, sending goose bumps over both our arms. The air grew thin and frosty as if sucking up all available oxygen, making it hard to breathe. The wind outside howled and whistled as if in warning. We both turned to the front window as a shadow darted across the yard, vanishing into the forest surrounding my cottage.

I stood, easing my back against the wall, suddenly leery with living off the beaten path, out here all alone, and vulnerable.

“What the hell was that?” Cassia’s voice was barely a whisper, and I didn’t blame her. Whatever that thing was, I didn’t want it to hear us and come back.

“Stay close,” I instructed Cassia, my voice coming out steady despite the fear gnawing at my insides as I crept toward the door. “I need to get closer. To get a better sense of whatever’s out there.”

“What? Oh no, we don’t! No, ma’am!” Cassia grabbed my elbow and spun me around. “We need to report this to Morgana. Maybe she’ll know what to do.”

Crossing my arms to ward off the chill still hanging in the air, I sighed dramatically. “As always, you’re right. Going out there to search for the boogeyman is like asking to be in one of those horror movies that doesn’t end well.”

“Exactly.” Cassia looked down and tapped wildly on her phone for a minute. “There. I just sent a message to the coven’s group chat to watch out for anything suspicious

and to stay inside.”

“Good idea.” I blinked. “Wait, how did you get cell service out here?”

“Just one of my many talents.” She winked and tucked her phone into her pocket, before nodding toward the door. “You should come with me to see Morgana and tell her about these visions.”

“What I saw doesn’t explain anything. It’s all just jumbled images and shit that makes no sense. Besides, I—I should stay behind and reinforce the wards on my cottage.” The thought of being out here all alone was still scary, but my resolve had settled. I refused to let someone—or something—run me out of the one place I loved the most.

I eased the front door open a crack and peeked outside with one eye. “I’ll walk you to your car.”

I helped Cassia get safely tucked into her vehicle, doors locked, before she disappeared down my gravel drive. My head was on a swivel as I looked left and right before I hightailed it back into the house. Taking one last glance behind me, my skin tingled as I surveyed the darkness. Something was out there ... watching.

Was it the thing that had run across my yard or something different? I wasn’t staying out here to find out. Racing inside, I threw my own locks into place, and prayed to every deity under the sun and the moon. The wards would be next.

My heart raced as my intuition screamed at me to pay attention, but there were so many missing pieces to the puzzle I didn’t know if I’d ever see the bigger picture. But Intuition also told me that whatever had arrived in Hallow Ridge Grove wasn’t just passing through. It was staying.

And it was looking for me.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:21 am

Chapter

Two

"The stars above are silent, but their wisdom never sleeps."

Lunara

The human realm.

This land both horrified and fascinated me. Such diversity and freedom, yet it still held just as much chaos as my own. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious about everything it held.

The transition from my own world to this one was disconcerting. My ears were still ringing from pulling myself through the portal. A headache was sure to develop because of this and I wasn't looking forward to it.

All week long, I'd been searching my own fae lands for a specific relic, the Starfire Orb. It was an artifact that could bring healing to my fae brethren, even if they treated me like utter trash.

The elders believed I was the perfect individual to send to the human world to search for this relic, but if I had to guess, they were just trying to figure out a way to get rid of me. That didn't explain where this unexpected pull came from, but as I stood amongst the trees, staring at the nearby cottage, I knew that whatever drew me here was within those four petite walls.

I could feel it.

As I stared at the quaint, little, ivy covered cottage, I noticed a hint of movement amidst the soft pale light glowing from inside and tried to make out a single distinct figure. Unfortunately, I sensed that whoever drew me here wasn't alone.

Fearing I'd been driven here only to be ambushed, I pressed my body against a large tree trunk, keeping my eyes on that mystical building, waiting for a sign that I wasn't in any real danger.

The woods were eerily quiet, only adding to my fears of being waylaid. It wasn't because I was alone. Quite the contrary, actually. I'd spent a great deal of time alone. That's just the nature of things when you're a half-fae, half-human being. You spend your life wondering where you belong, or even if you're wanted.

My past was riddled with fake friends and bad relationships that were all a product of my sullied blood. If my tainted DNA was what called to whoever was inside, then I would have rather returned to my hiding place among the fae realm.

With the frightening stillness of the forest, I could discern every sound inside the cabin, every footstep, every whisper, every frantic breath. One of the people inside had fear running through their veins so fast, I could taste the sour emotion on the tip of my tongue. Whether it was because they were planning their attack or because of the trouble I felt lurking in the forest, I wasn't sure, but as long as more than one person remained inside, I'd bide my time, watching and waiting.

On tiptoes, I crept as quietly as I could between the towering trees, standing over me like angry skeletons as I moved closer to the house to look for a better vantage point. I was determined to find out who, exactly, waited for me.

But all the curtains were drawn. The only light in the building seemed to pour from

one single source, making it harder to get a read on the outlines inside.

When soft, careful footsteps reached my half-pointed ears, I slipped even closer, keeping my eyes on the quaint front porch as the light filtered out from beyond the front door.

“I’ll walk you to your car,” I heard as a single eye peered through the opening.

As the door swung wider, two slender figures appeared, one with wild auburn curls framing her face while the other—a woman whose face seemed familiar—stepped outside. The porch light backlit her, hiding most of her features, but something tugged at my memory, something I just couldn’t shake.

While I couldn’t deny the first woman’s attractive features, it was that second woman with her striking green eyes and long, dark brown hair that held my attention as she turned to talk to her companion.

My feet yearned to move closer, to count every freckle on her face, to let my hands create a roadmap of the curves of her body, but I still didn’t understand the reason for my arrival here or whether or not I was safe. No amount of beauty would fool me into thinking that I was safe.

A van full of puppies would never work on me. Ice cream, maybe, but definitely not puppies.

As the auburn-haired woman got into her car and drove away, the lithe figure from my visions turned back for her cottage, her head looking in every direction as she bolted for the front door.

I scurried along the edge of the tree line, keeping us parallel to each other until the woman disappeared inside.

Using my powers, I pushed them beyond the front door, sensing the woman was finally alone. And while her fear continued to ratchet higher and higher, I determined she meant me no harm.

As I stood beneath the moonlight, contemplating my next move, a twig broke mere feet away. I turned to search for the cause of the noise just in time to spot a dark figure rushing beyond the tree line, sprinting across the front lawn of the cottage before disappearing on the other side.

The energy of the creature tasted thick and dark, like dried molasses in the winter, nearly choking me as I tried to will the taste away.

My own fear sent a shiver up my spine as I hurried to the back of the house, looking for a sign of movement beyond the door. If that creature meant to hurt either of us, I couldn't continue to stand out here, exposed.

Trying to keep my anxiety at bay, I hurried to the building's rear entrance, peering through the sheer curtains that blurred my view inside.

More footsteps alerted me to the presence of whatever was moving around in the darkness just beyond the cottage, causing me to frantically tap on the back door's glass, desperate to get to safety.

Through those sheer curtains, I saw that beautiful frame slinking closer. She froze just a few feet from the door, wavering in place as I waited impatiently.

I counted to ten, waiting for her to call out or open the door or something, anything. But, when she stood unmoving, staring at the back door, I chose to knock again.

"Who's there?" she cautiously asked, a tremble in her voice.

“My name is Lunara Starfall. I believe you summoned me here.” When the woman didn’t instantly open the door, I added, “Please let me inside. I—I don’t think it’s safe out here.”

Another excruciating second passed before the woman finally reached for the door, opening it just a crack before she poked her head out to look me over. “How do I know you aren’t going to hurt me?”

I sighed, feeling that uncomfortable chill creep up my spine, nearly causing me to push my way inside. “Please. There’s someone or...or something out here.” I looked over my shoulder, sensing its nearness.

Hesitation radiated from her as she looked beyond me, but made no move to grant me access to her home.

“Pretty please?” I batted my lashes for emphasis, hoping the flirtation would convince her to allow me to pass.

Her rich, green eyes scanned the landscape behind me before she eased the door open and let me in.

“Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.” I brushed past, feeling a spark traveling between us as I made my way into her home.

“What did you say your name was?” she asked once she’d closed the door and locked us safely inside. In her right hand, she clutched an athame, but instead of fear, I sensed a spark of attraction that matched my own.

“Lunara.” I extended my hand, arching a brow as I took in her features. “Lunara Starfall.”

The woman switched the athame to her other hand, then cautiously reached for mine, delicately shaking it as she said, “Elysia Thornheart.”

A ripple of energy coursed between us before I released her hand, letting mine fall to my side. “You called me here?” Was it a question or a declaration? I wasn’t sure, but when Elysia clutched her athame tighter, I knew the answer.

The unexpected pull that called to me intensified as I scanned the rustic furnishings, herbs, and potions. Was the Starfire Orb hidden somewhere inside this cabin? Or was I brought here because Elysia was the answer to finding that mystical artifact?

When she made no move to answer my question, I tried a different approach. “Look, my people are in trouble, and something tells me you can help.”

She eyed me curiously for a moment before she lowered the weapon and placed it on the kitchen counter. “I have my own troubles. Why should I help you?” Her gaze held so much weight to it that I could feel it clear to my soul.

“Because we’re not that different, you and I.” I moved closer, reaching for a tendril of her hair to sweep it over her shoulder. “I know you’ve had visions. Visions that weigh heavy on you.” I struggled with not reaching out to touch her again, wanting that connection between us bridged.

Elysia clenched her jaw. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I do.” I twined my fingers with hers. “I know, because I’ve had them, too.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:21 am

Chapter

Three

"In the dark, truth hides not from sight, but from certainty."

Elysia

I swallowed past the lump lodged in my throat. How did she know about the visions? But then again, the woman standing before me matched the silver-eyed beauty in my scrying bowl. Her long silver hair was so similar that her eyes nearly glowed as she held my gaze.

She squeezed my hand and leaned forward, her lips so close to mine as she whispered, "You've been in my visions, too. I don't know why, but you have."

Holding my breath, my thoughts raced at the speed of light. Living in a small town, you didn't exactly explore your sexuality. I'd always wondered what it'd be like to date a woman. The men I'd had in my life were lackluster and didn't quite know how to treat a woman.

"I—Well, how..." I sputtered as she finally drew back allowing air to enter my lungs again.

She ran her thumb over the back of my hand. "I know. It's a lot to take in. The elders sent me to recover a powerful artifact. I think it's somehow linked to the chaos threatening both realms."

“Elders? Realms?” I asked.

“Oh dear.” She brought her other hand up to cup mine. “This is getting all messed up. I’ve crossed over from the land of Faerie. Our two worlds are connected and depend on each other.”

My palm sweated within the two of hers, but I resisted the urge to pull away and wipe it on my skirt. It meant losing this connection to her that I wasn’t quite ready to give up. Her skin buzzed against mine and I felt her magic swirling beneath her skin. Never in my life had I ever touched anyone and felt the sensations coursing through me that I did right now.

Was she in my vision—not as a threat to me—but as someone I was meant to find?

“Wait, you mentioned something about an artifact?” I let out a shaky breath and finally removed my hand from hers to wipe it dry. The lost contact seemed to make my magic spaz out, bouncing around within me, and zapping my insides. “Ouch!”

“Are you okay?” Lunara laid a hand on my forearm and everything calmed.

I breathed a sigh of relief. “Yeah.”

This time, when she took her hand away, my magic didn’t rebel. I still felt the loss, but my body wasn’t trying to kill me from the inside out. “So, the—uh—the artifact?”

“I’m looking for—” She bit her bottom lip, and I inwardly groaned. “I don’t even know if I’m allowed to tell you about it.”

While I could sense she didn’t quite trust me, something told me I could trust her. I didn’t want to due to all these peculiar unknowns, and I had every reason to boot her out of my cottage, but I wouldn’t. “You can trust me.”

Indecision flickered in Lunara's eyes, but then she squared her shoulders. "I'm looking for the Starfire Orb."

"An orb? What is it for?"

"I'm not sure. The elders told me about it and I've searched my realm high and low but it's nowhere to be found." She paced momentarily, as if something more was troubling her, but as she returned, she stopped mere feet from me. "The only logical explanation is that it was brought here and hidden from us...by witches."

"I've never even heard of it." Did Morgana know anything about it? She was our high priestess. Surely if there was an object of that much importance, she'd know something.

"I believe you." She moved to lean her back against the kitchen counter next to me. "Something tells me that together, we can uncover whatever these visions mean and thwart this impending threat."

I glanced over at her, letting my eyes roam up and down before settling on her gaze again. She was a few inches taller than me, but with both of us slouching against the counter, we were more eye to eye. "There's definitely something coming and it's already been here."

Lunara nodded. "I could feel its presence when I stepped into this world."

"One of my coven sisters went to warn our high priestess." My eyes searched hers, then took in the pale, almost translucent skin, of her face. It was flawless. Her hair was tucked behind one of her ears and I could see they were somewhat pointed, but not like I'd seen in the movies. Maybe everything I'd heard about the fae from fiction didn't have any grain of truth.

“Good. The more eyes and ears we have watching, the better chance we’ll have of figuring things out, but we’ll need to be careful.” She ran her hand through her hair, bringing a lock of it forward to toy with mindlessly. “I can feel your magic.”

“And I can feel yours when we touch.” My cheeks warmed, no doubt turning bright red. It was a simple sentence, but my mind had taken it elsewhere.

“What if—” She chewed on her bottom lip again. “I mean, if we could combine our powers, it would be legendary.”

“Why?” Witches combined powers all the time when they needed to pull more resources to finish a spell, but I wasn’t sure if combining my magic with a faerie might bring about something more sinister.

Lunara shifted and was instantly in front of me, her hands on my shoulders, eyes glowing with power. Power I could now feel humming through my body. “No fae and witch have ever worked together before.”

While that statement only added to my unease, her hands warmed my skin beneath my cardigan, soothing my nerves.

“We could work together, fight the darkness, and...” Those glowing silver eyes shifted nervously back and forth as she searched my face for the right words to say.

“And?” I asked, my mouth was suddenly dry when she ran her tongue across her lips to wet them.

“And maybe along the way we can discover whatever this is...” She leaned closer, stealing all the air from the room before she finished, “...between us.” Reaching up, she lightly ran two fingers down my cheek, sparking something low in my belly that went beyond this mission she wanted me to help her with.

Closing my eyes, I savored the contact. I couldn't deny this connection with Lunara. She'd been in my visions and now she was flesh and blood in front of me, touching me, watching me. When I opened my eyes, I found her closer than before, noses nearly touching.

Heart pounding, I closed the distance, our lips softly touching at first. Such a simple act, yet it lit up my soul. Her hands sank into my hair and pulled me closer as she angled her head and deepened the kiss.

The temperature in the room plummeted and I pulled back on a gasp. That was not the reaction I was expecting, but then my brain caught up with the events. "Shit!"

"Did I do something wrong? I'm?—"

"We need to hide." I frantically searched my cottage.

"What?"

Something scratched the window in the living room, and I gasped.

"Here," I whispered. I yanked her along and then pushed her up against a wall cloaked in shadows to conceal us better. Only half the candles still burned within my circle. The other half had long since melted down and extinguished themselves.

Lunara's teeth chattered as she tried to get out, "Is th-th-this w-what ha-happens when that th-thing is near?"

"Yes. I reinforced m-my wards, but I honestly d-don't know what w-we're up against." Well, I was up against Lunara. I at least knew that much. Yet even with her body heat coalescing with mine, I couldn't keep my teeth from chattering.

The front of her molded perfectly to my form as I pressed her into the wall. This wasn't exactly the time nor place to be in such a compromising position, especially with the impure thoughts I had running through my head.

Her nipples must have felt the chill as well, because I could feel them through the fabric of my shirt where the cardigan didn't meet, which did nothing to keep those lascivious thoughts at bay.

"We need to get somewhere more concealed. Somewhere warmer." And I needed somewhere that didn't require me to be plastered against her side. I tugged her to the coat closet, hurrying us both inside.

Lunara's arm brushed my chest as she tried to situate herself more comfortably in the space, but with the cottage being so small, there wasn't much room in the closet. We'd jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire, but at least we were better concealed.

More scratching noises continued around the cottage.

"Ma-maybe it's just a tree limb?" But even as she said it, I could feel her tuck herself in closer to me. Perhaps it was for warmth, but maybe it was because she was scared, too.

I shook my head only to realize she couldn't see me in the dark. "The trees aren't close enough to my house for that."

"You're right." She wrapped an arm around my waist and leaned her head against mine. "I can feel its rage."

"You can sense it?"

“Yes.” She shivered against me. “It’s a vile, disgusting thing, sinister enough to send a shiver up your spine.”

“Is that why our teeth are chattering?” I managed a nervous laugh at my own joke.

I felt her hair move against my skin when she must have nodded in response.

As another scritchng sound reached our ears, Lunara pulled me closer. “Do you think it’ll leave soon?”

“I don’t know, but we should have a pretty good idea when things start warming up.”

Lunara wiggled against me and then her lips brushed the shell of my ear. “Well, now. I mean, I think things are kinda starting to warm up already.”

Unfamiliar with attention from the same sex, I laughed nervously. “Yeah, uh... maybe we should consult my coven to see what can be done?”

“About warming up?” Lunara ran a hand along the top of my skirt, then brushed her fingers against the skin under my shirt.

I closed my eyes and tried to breathe through the onslaught of images in my head. Us, in the closet, ripping clothes off and roaming each other’s bodies without breaking our kiss except to get our shirts over our heads. Were these my own thoughts or was I somehow seeing what Lunara was thinking?

I didn’t know.

Did I want to find out?

Suddenly, I was warmer, but I wasn’t entirely sure if it was because the shadow

creature had left or due to Lunara's flirtatious attention.

"No," I finally managed to say. "We—we should ask them about this thing , but I'm not sure how we can leave when we're trapped in the closet."

"Elysia," Lunara breathed against my cheek.

"Yes?" I whispered back.

"You should come out of the closet."

I choked on a laugh. "I see what you did there. Does that mean you will, too?"

She cracked open the door, slipped out, and gestured for me to follow. "Oh, I already did ... ages ago."

"Lunara! Come back in here before you're spotted." The curtains on each window were practically see-through and if the enraged creature was still out there, he would easily see her.

"It's fine." She tucked her hand into mine, whispered a small incantation, and suddenly I could no longer see our joined hands, or even her for that matter.

Where the fuck had she gone?

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:21 am

Chapter

Four

"A whispered spell can carry louder than a shouted command."

Lunara

With Elysia's hand still tucked in mine, I kept close to her while I stared at the condensation on a nearby window.

"Where'd you go?" Elysia's palm trembled against mine, but her fear must have kept her from realizing we were still touching.

Stepping around, I pulled her back against my chest, and whispered, "I'm right behind you." She shivered against me, inciting wicked thoughts as I tiptoed toward the front door, never letting go of her hand. "We should probably keep quiet until we're in your car."

"My car?" Elysia's hand slipped from mine, removing the cloaking spell I'd concealed us with. The paleness of her sheet-white face was only accentuated by her trembling pink lips. Whether those lips trembled from her fear or the chill that seemed to hang in the air, I wasn't sure. All I knew was that I longed to kiss those lips again, to still their quivering with my own.

"Didn't you just say we need to consult your coven?" I grabbed her hand again, slipping my invisibility shield back over her.

“What if that thing’s still out there?” Her hand gripped mine tightly, keeping my feet planted inside her cottage.

“Look.” I pointed at the window, then realized she couldn’t see me. “The window.”

“The frost is melting.” While I couldn’t see Elysia’s face, I could hear the surprise in her voice.

“I think it’s safe, but I’ll keep my invisibility spell in place, just in case.” While her grip had lessened on mine, I gave her a reassuring squeeze before I led her towards our escape.

I stopped just inside her front door, turning to face her, even though we couldn’t see each other then asked, “You ready?”

“What if I’m not?”

If I could see her, I would have touched her face, run my hand down her cheek in an effort to calm her nerves, but with our figures invisible to each other and the outside world, our joined hands would have to do. “It’s okay. I’m right here with you.” I gave her hand another squeeze. “I’ve got you. We can do this.”

Elysia’s deep inhalation echoed through the room before I reached for the door.

“Here we go.” I gave Elysia the slightest tug, pulling her behind me as I opened the door and rushed through.

The door slammed with a resounding thud and Elysia instantly began cursing with every step she took. “Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit.”

“Elysia. Quiet,” I whisper-yelled with a goofy smile on my face. But why was I

smiling?

We were likely in a race with a deadly shadow-figure and I was smiling. I'd officially lost it.

When we reached the hood I released her hand and didn't look back, as much as I wanted another glimpse at her beautiful figure. There'd be time for that later.

I hoped.

Once we were both safely inside the car, Elysia quickly hit the lock button and hit the power switch then rubbed her hands together as she stared back at her cottage.

"What's wrong?"

She sighed, continuing to stare a moment before she answered, "I forgot to lock up."

With eyes wide, I stared at her, convinced we had both lost it. "You wanna go back?" I asked, quirking a brow in her direction.

Her head swiveled my way with her lips pressed in a thin line. After she blinked several times, she responded, "Not hardly."

"Then let's get out of here."

We arrived at a home that looked nothing like the human homes I was accustomed to. The porch was riddled with potted plants while dried herbs hung from the rafters, all backlit by the lights that blazed from every window.

As Elysia and I approached the front porch, I stared up at the sigils that outlined the second floor windows and hoped my presence would be welcomed.

I stalled at the base of the porch steps, studying each of the sigils, trying to remember what each one meant.

“You coming?” Elysia looked back at me from the top step, before glancing left and right at the surrounding grounds.

“Yeah. Sorry.” I made my way up the four front steps and tucked my hands behind my back, hoping to hide my fidgeting.

“Just let me do the talking, okay?” Elysia suddenly seems to be the level-headed one in this pairing and I couldn’t help feeling like I’d been brought home to meet the parents.

“Fine by me.”

Elysia emitted such an adorable giggle, I almost grabbed her hand and dragged her back to the car so I could show her exactly what that laugh did to me. But before I could act, she knocked on the oak front door, keeping her eyes on the oval window as a figure approached.

“Who is it?” a gruff voice called from inside.

“It’s me, Morgana. Open the door.”

One of the lace curtains that covered the window to my left pulled back just enough for someone to see out, but I was unable to see in.

“Who’s with you?” Morgana didn’t seem to like surprises.

“I’ve brought someone who needs our help.”

When a breeze blew past, I spun in place, checking the area for another shadow figure, but this time it seemed to just be the wind. Still, I couldn't help how uneasy I felt. "Maybe I should wait in the car."

Elysia grabbed my hand, pulling me closer to the front door. "Just hold on. She'll let us in."

"Seriously, I don't mind waiting." I nodded my head toward Elysia's car, but she gripped my hand tighter.

"No. She'll open the door, Lunara."

While I wished her reassurance was the comfort I needed, I felt the negative emotions coming off of several people inside and knew my odds were better if I remained out here. "Seriously, you can just fill me in when you guys are done." I slipped my hand from hers, taking a step backward and bumping into one of the top-heavy potted plants, hearing it crash on its side as the front door opened. "Damn."

"Andromeda, no." An older woman in a long flowery skirt and a cream linen shirt with flared sleeves ran from the house, straight for the destroyed pot. "Girls, help me. Andromeda's down."

A slew of women poured out of the house while I stepped back on the porch, making sure not to knock over anything else. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to knock over the...plant?" I wasn't quite sure if she was more upset about the broken pot or the plant, but as she cradled the lavender stems in her hands to carry them inside, I knew I'd chosen correctly.

"Come, ladies. We must get Andromeda into a new pot immediately. We can't lose another."

While most of the women, including Elysia, followed Morgana inside, a couple stayed behind to gather up the soil and broken pot shards.

I watched from a distance, bound and determined to stay outside now that I'd taken out one of Morgana's beloved, but when Elysia returned looking for me, I missed out on my chance to run and hide.

"Come on." She leaned against the door so casually, as if this place was as much home to her as her own cottage in the woods.

I envied that feeling as I'd never had a place that really felt like home. Thanks to my tainted blood, the fae didn't want me and the humans weren't sure what to do with me. And right now, I definitely didn't feel welcome here.

I shook my head in response, but Elysia didn't take no for an answer. She marched right to me, looping her arm through mine before she led me inside.

Three women had settled into chairs in the living room, but Morgana was out of sight.

"Cassia, Thalia, Rowan..." Elysia tugged me closer. "This is Lunara."

"You're a fae?"

"Rowan," Elysia snapped.

"Half," I replied, extending my hand. "Nice to meet you." I may not have wanted to be here, but that had nothing to do with the present company.

Rowan dragged her gaze to Elysia before she looked at my hand and took it in hers. "To what do we owe the pleasure?"

“My elders sent me to the human world in search of a highly sought after artifact, but I fear my presence here may have more to do with whatever strange things are taking place right outside.” I peeled my hand from Rowan’s when her companions began to eye me warily.

A woman with mouse brown hair flipped her ponytail over her shoulder. “There’s nothing going on outside.” After her dismissal, she crossed one leg over the other and placed her hands in her lap. “It’s just fall. The weather is changing, leaves are turning, and the animals are getting ready to hibernate.”

“That’s not what’s happening at all, Thalia,” Rowan piped up, leaning over to get a better view of her opponent.

Thalia rolled her eyes. “Not you, too.”

“It’s true.” Elysia took a seat next to Rowan, leaving enough room on the only sofa in the room for me to sit beside her. “Cassia saw the shadow figure run across my yard tonight.”

Thalia pursed her lips, rolling her eyes once again. “You two are always seeing shadow figures and ghosts and goblins. Get a grip.”

While the women continued to argue about whether or not what we saw actually existed, I took a seat beside Elysia and kept my mouth shut.

“You expect me to believe that because it’s fall, the shadow I saw was just a figment of my imagination? The immense cold that showed up out of the blue and almost as quickly dissipated was just a seasonal wind?” Elysia huffed, falling back against the couch cushions as she defiantly stared across the room.

Everything in me screamed to comfort her, lay my hand on her leg or gently take her

hand, something that would ease the anger I knew she felt. But I was in a strange place and I barely knew this woman. These feelings needed to simmer down until we could actually explore what we felt.

“I think we all need to calm down and discuss this like proper adults,” Morgana said as she entered the room carrying Andromeda in a fresh new terracotta pot.

Needing to make amends, I jumped from the couch and said, “I’m so sorry about your plant.”

“Not to worry.” Morgana set the lavender on a nearby stand then patted me on the arm. “Andromeda only experienced minor trauma. I’m sure she’ll be fine.”

As Morgana took her place at the center of the living room, I stood alongside the couch, too afraid to take the only remaining seat when this was Morgana’s home.

“Please, sit.” She waved towards my vacated seat, urging me to reclaim it. “We have much to discuss about your presence here and the Starfire Orb.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:21 am

Chapter

Five

"Fear the silence before the storm, for it carries the heaviest truths."

Elysia

Lunara gasped as she slowly sank onto the couch cushion beside me.

"What's the matter?" I asked, placing a hand on her thigh and smoothing it over her cotton pants in comforting strokes.

"She never told me the name of the artifact," Morgana said. "That's what's wrong."

"How—" Lunara held a hand to her chest. "It could have been any number of faerie artifacts I was speaking of."

Morgana stepped around the coffee table and then perched on the edge of it, right in front of Lunara. "Because I can feel its power growing."

"So you know where it is?" Lunara asked.

Morgana shook her head. "No. I've only heard rumors about it."

Thalia cleared her throat. "The Starfire Orb is just a myth. You're probably just feeling the power of the veil as we get closer to Samhain."

“I don’t think that’s it.” Morgana rose and made her way back around the coffee table to address us all. “Just because you brush off what the rest of us think doesn’t mean it’s going to go away if it’s true.”

“I still think it’s all hogwash.” Thalia crossed her arms and leaned back in her seat.

“It is,” a voice calls down from the top of the stairs. “All of this is ridiculous. Hallow Ridge Grove is a safe town. There’s nothing that goes bump in the night and there isn’t some magical orb that’s going to save us either.”

“How long have you been hiding up there, Nova?” Rowan asked.

“Long enough.” Nova said as she appeared to float down the stairs despite the sound of boots hitting each step, all while pulling her long black hair into a high ponytail with little effort. “I don’t know why you all believe in all those hokey legends.”

Rowan glared at Nova as she entered the living room. “Most legends exist with a little bit of truth mixed in.”

“Some things are just that—fairy tales.” Nova straightened her leather jacket and smiled at Thalia. “You understand.”

“Yup.” Thalia popped the P on her word.

More footsteps echoed in the stairwell just off the living room. A woman with shoulder length black hair and dark, piercing eyes, gray and foreboding—just like her serious expression—descended, decked out in a button up shirt and slacks. She was followed by a girl that was her opposite with platinum blonde hair and bright blue eyes sparkling with mischief.

The darker one paused on the last step. “The Starfire Orb isn’t just a myth.”

“Yes, it is,” Thalia interjected.

“Regardless of your thoughts on the Starfire Orb or the threats I can feel present in our town, I want you all to stay vigilant.” Morgana pierced each of us with her stare, one by one, and made sure we all knew how serious she was.

I raised my hand to get her attention. “If you can feel the artifact, but you don’t know where it’s located, do you have any idea where we could start our search?”

“Even though this town knows nothing of the witches that live in it, there may be a grain of truth somewhere in the local library if you have a keen eye.” Morgana dismissed the others with a wave of her hand. “I wish I could be of more help.”

I looked to the one person who might know more. “Aeron? Isla? Do you have any information that would help?”

Aeron tucked a strand of black hair behind one ear, revealing gauged ears. “I’ve only heard whispers of it from the townsfolk. They may not know we exist, but they still believe in magic.”

“Then how do you know it’s real?” I asked.

Isla skipped down the last couple steps and halted right beside Morgana. “I’ve seen visions of it. It’s hidden in a dark, bare place, but nothing that I can discern looks familiar.”

She was the other seer in our coven, but her powers weren’t as developed as mine. I’d been working with her to try to boost them up, but it wasn’t looking good.

Lunara stood up and looked at Morgana and Aeron. “If either of you think of any other resources or have any other visions that could lead us to the orb, please reach

out to Elysia.”

“I will,” both Aeron and Isla chimed in unison.

Rising from the couch, I smoothed out my skirt. “Welp, looks like we’re going to need to dust off my library card.”

Morgana gestured to the stairs. “You all can stay here where it’s safe. The library closed over two hours ago.”

“That’s my cue.” Thalia’s words were laced with derision as she hopped up from the couch. “Seeing as I live just up the street and Morgana only has so many guest rooms, I’m going to hit the road.”

“Me, too,” Nova said.

“You can’t be serious.” Morgana approached Thalia and Nova, her intentions etched on her brow. “With all of the strange occurrences lately, you two shouldn’t be out at night.” As she tried to guide the pair toward the kitchen, she urged, “Stay here. I’ll get the air mattress from the basement.”

“Oh no. I’m not sleeping on that thing again.” Nova twisted out of Morgana’s reach and backed up to the front door. “I couldn’t walk straight for a week after.”

“I can’t, in good conscience, let you leave.” Morgana approached the front door, trying to worm her way between Nova and the front door.

“You don’t have the authority to make me stay.” Nova’s defiance sent a cold chill through the room and I wrapped my arms around myself to ward off the sudden change in temperature.

“As High Priestess, I have more than enough power to demand you not leave this house.” With Morgana’s words, the room fell deathly quiet.

Nova’s jaw set as lines formed at the corners of her eyes. After she reached for the doorknob behind her, she said, “There isn’t enough room in this house for all seven of us and I, for one, would much rather enjoy the comfort of my own bed in my own home.” As she turned the doorknob, she added, “No mythical shadow creature will dare stop me.” Disdain dripped from her words as she mentioned the shadow creature. Before she swung the door open, she turned to Thalia and asked, “You coming?”

“You know I’m not about to sleep on that old musty couch and I’m damn sure not enduring that air mattress.”

“Right?” Nova laughed as if the seriousness of the matter was completely lost on her.

Morgana scrubbed both hands down her face and sighed. “I swear to the goddess, you two are the reason I have gray hair.”

“You’re welcome,” Nova chimed in. “It makes you look wiser.”

“Just leave.” Morgana shooed them both out the door. “Before I change my mind and lock you in the basement.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice.” Nova grabbed Thalia’s arm and dragged her outside, letting the door slam behind her.

Aeron’s forehead creased as she stared after the women “They obviously haven’t watched enough horror movies.”

“That’s what I was just telling Lunara earlier,” I said, giving a shudder. “But they do

both live close.” I rolled my eyes at their audacity as I scoffed. “In opposite directions, but still.” I couldn’t fight the snicker that escaped as I mentally wished them both good riddance.

Lunara hugged her midsection. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

“Worrying won’t solve anything.” I took Lunara’s hand and led her toward the stairs. “We call dibs on the queen bed.”

Rowan groaned. “That’s not fair! The other two rooms only have full size beds.”

“Too late!” I raced up the stairs with Lunara in tow, unaware of the trap I’d just set for myself. I padded down the hall to the last room on the right and ducked inside with a giggle, shutting it behind me when Lunara was inside.

Lunara looked around the bedroom decorated in various shades of green and blue. The queen size bed sat beneath the only window in the room, a blue checkered quilt covering it. “We’re sharing a bed?”

My heart skipped a beat. Why hadn’t I thought this far ahead? I swallowed down my trepidation and nodded. “Yup.”

“What’s wrong?” Lunara closed the little bit of distance between us. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.” Patting me on the back, she leaned to my ear and whispered, “I don’t bite...much.”

“Dear goddess, help me,” I whispered to myself.

“What was that?” Lunara asked as she pulled back the quilt and fluffed her pillow.

I kicked my shoes off by the door and wandered over to the bed. “Nothing.” After I

peeled back my side of the quilt, I adjusted my own pillow.

Was I really going to share a bed with a complete stranger? And a fairy, to boot? Forget that I'd kissed her merely an hour ago, this was uncharted territory. I barely knew this woman—er fae.

I barely knew myself at this point.

What was going on inside this head of mine?

Lunara slipped off her sandals and set them next to my sneakers by the door, then she grabbed the hem of her shirt and lifted it over her head before shimmying out of her pants. She stood in just her underwear and bra, her beautiful, pale, translucent skin on full display. Nothing was left to the imagination at this point as her nipples pebbled beneath the sheer fabric.

My eyes widened. “What are you doing?”

I remembered how her body felt pressed against mine. She may be tall and lean, but she was also soft and supple. My eyes roamed over each angle and curve from the swell of her breasts to the slight slant of her hips.

“What does it look like I’m doing? I’m getting ready for bed.” She folded her clothes and set them on top of the dresser nearby. “I usually sleep naked, but figured I’d keep my undergarments on for you.”

“Oh,” was all I could manage to say.

Should I do the same? I usually slept in an oversized t-shirt, but sleeping with my skirt on wasn’t practical. My top, however, would work just fine as a night shirt.

“Are you just going to stand there?” She tapped the vacant spot next to her. “Come to bed, Elysia.”

Once my skirt was discarded on the floor I clambered onto the bed. Suddenly, this queen bed seemed quite small.

While there was a serious and unexpected attraction to Lunara, we’d only met a few hours ago. Regardless of the kiss we shared, we needed to take things slow. We couldn’t cloud our judgment when there were so many other important matters to attend to first.

Eventually, we’d have to decide what a relationship between us looked like. But we could make plans for the future later.

If we survived.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:21 am

Chapter

Six

"The past holds power, but the future bends to those who dare."

Lunara

I t had been quite some time since I slept in the human world. I was so accustomed to sleeping beneath the stars that something felt quite suffocating in this big, fluffy bed. Or maybe it was the intense infatuation I had with Elysia. Knowing that her body was close enough to touch was far more enticing than it should have been. If it weren't for the fact that I felt she was a bit withdrawn from my advances, I'd probably reach out and touch her right now.

As I tossed and turned for about the thousandth time, Elysia turned on her side to face me. "Is everything okay?"

Lying on my back, I dropped my hands onto the mattress and sighed. "This bed is too soft." I kicked at the quilt, tossing it off of my legs. "And I'm hot." In more ways than I cared to admit right now.

"We can remove the quilt." I didn't miss the hint of apprehension that hung beneath the surface.

"If you don't mind." I'd welcome the removal of the quilt if it meant there was less between Elysia and me.

“Not at all.” As soon as the words left Elysia’s lips, she ripped the quilt from her legs, rolling it into a bundle before shoving it between us.

With her intentions known, I turned away from her to stare at the moonlight drifting through the window. The bit of dappled light that crept between the leaves of the large Maple tree just outside made me feel a little more at home, if only marginally.

“Lunara?” Elysia’s soft voice seemed to echo in the quiet space.

“Yeah?” I kept my back turned, needing that soothing luminescence to get me through this night.

“We’ll find the Starfire Orb.” Elysia’s hand rested on my waist, halting my next breath. “Morgana will make sure of it.”

Folding my arm across my body, I reached for Elysia’s hand and twined her fingers with mine. “Thanks.”

If this was all Elysia could offer tonight, I’d gladly take it, letting it satiate me until morning.

When I woke, the bed was empty and there was a hubbub of commotion downstairs. I wasn’t sure how I slept so hard, but I was grateful for the rest I obtained with Elysia at my side.

As I rolled onto my back, the door creaked open and Elysia tiptoed in.

“Good morning.” Steam rolled off the two cups of coffee balanced in her hands.

“Ah. The nectar of the gods.” I sat up in bed, spreading out the quilt that was bunched beside me to lay across my bare legs.

While I wasn't cold by any stretch of the imagination, I suddenly felt exposed laying out in the open; a sensation I'd never felt before.

"Morgana made Belgian waffles if you're hungry." Elysia eased onto her side of the bed, handing over a cup of coffee.

I pulled the mug close, breathing in the bitter scent mixed with something sweet. "What's in this?"

"Cream, sugar, a splash of vanilla and a dash of pumpkin spice." The smile on her face said she was much better rested than I felt. "It's my favorite."

I breathed in the aroma once more then blew at the steam before taking my first taste. As the warm liquid hit my tongue, a world of flavors exploded in my mouth. My eyes fell closed as I savored the taste. "This is delicious."

"I'll make sure to remember that for —" Her mouth snapped shut before she finished her sentence, but I was delighted at the thought of enjoying many more morning coffees with her.

After Elysia settled against the headboard, sipping from her own mug, I asked, "Is everyone else awake?"

"Rowan and Cassia just came down and Nova arrived about twenty minutes ago." With her legs crossed, Elysia twitched her feet in the cutest fashion as she continued to sip her coffee.

"What about Thalia?" The woman seemed completely deplorable, but I didn't wish harm on anyone. Well, maybe that creepy shadow figure I saw outside of Elysia's, but beyond that, my heart was too pure and kind to wish anyone ill will.

Elysia merely shrugged her shoulders, seemingly uninterested in Thalia as a topic of conversation.

When my stomach growled, I looked to Elysia and said, “I guess I should go grab some of those waffles.”

“Try the blueberry maple syrup. Morgana makes it herself with sap from the Maple trees out back. It’s...” With her fingers pressed against her lips, she gave the standard Chef’s kiss gesture and smiled.

I breathed deep, searching for the scent of Maple syrup in the air, but Elysia’s lavender and sandalwood fragrance wafted through the space, blocking the sweet fragrance from my nose.

“I better get dressed so I don’t miss out.” I slid to the edge of the bed and set my feet on the wood floor.

Before I could get up, I felt Elysia’s weight abandon the mattress. “I’m gonna head back down.”

I glanced over my shoulder to find she’d already made it to the door.

“See you down there?” Her hand held the yellowed glass doorknob as she waited for my answer.

“Yup,” I responded then watched her walk out.

I snatched up my clothes from the dresser and quickly dressed then made my way downstairs, listening to the idle chatter as it coalesced, floating up the stairs.

“I’ve tried calling her several times this morning, but she’s not picking up.”

Morgana's worried announcement had me sending out my senses in search of trouble lurking nearby, but all seemed well in the vicinity.

The moment I entered the kitchen, everyone got quiet. Feeling out-of-place, per usual, I gave an awkward, "Good morning," while standing in the open doorway.

"Morning," Morgana replied, doling out a couple waffles onto a plate before asking, "Hungry?"

"Starving." I took the plate from her and perused the sampling of syrups on the counter. "Did you make all of these?" I asked, searching for the blueberry maple label.

"All but the sugar-free." She nodded her head toward Aeron. "That one's always watching her figure." Morgana shook her head with a smirk while I tried to hide my own smile.

"Aeron doesn't know a good thing 'til it smacks her in the face," Cassia teased. "Probably explains her miserable love-life."

"Hey, my love-life is just fine." Aeron angrily stabbed a bite of waffle while she stared daggers at Cassia. Sticking her nose in the air, she said, "I'll have you know, I have a date tonight."

While Aeron bragged about her upcoming rendezvous, Isla buried her nose in her coffee, slowly making her way across the kitchen.

"I don't know if that's the best idea right now." Morgana pulled another waffle from the iron and placed it on the stack.

"I'm telling you. Thalia is fine." Nova rolled her eyes then took another bite of her

red slathered waffles.

I kept to myself, leaning against the counter across from Elysia while I poured a good helping of the blueberry maple syrup onto my waffles.

“Well, I’d feel much better if we stopped by her place after breakfast.” It was obvious why Morgana was High Priestess. She was the most motherly of the bunch.

“Would you mind if Lunara and I head off on our own?” While Elysia asked for permission, I could tell there was no fear of Morgana, merely reverence between them. Her comfort was evident as she stuffed her mouth with another bite of waffles.

“Heading to the library?” Morgana poured the last of the batter onto the iron as she spoke.

“And the historical society.” Elysia mumbled around her mouthful of waffles.

“Good idea.” Morgana pulled the last waffle from the iron, dropping it on the stack before she offered it to each of us. “Take what you want before I dig in,” she warned. A few of the women grabbed another waffle before Morgana slathered raspberry jam on her pile.

“All those delicious syrups and you chose jam?” I was baffled by this development.

“I like to keep things interesting.” Morgana winked at me before propping herself up beside Elysia. “When you stop by the historical society, make sure you tell Serena that I have the poultice she’s been asking about.”

“Will do.” Elysia held her fork in front of her mouth, licking the last of her syrup from the tines before she headed to the sink to wash her plate.

My mind was bombarded with thoughts of her tongue running along every inch of my body, distracting me from the conversation that continued around me.

“You ready?” Elysia bumped her shoulder against mine while I stared at nothing in particular.

“Yeah. Let me...” I held up my plate before carrying it to the sink to wash it.

“I’m gonna run upstairs and grab my shoes.” She gave a little finger wave then disappeared, leaving me with a roomful of near perfect strangers.

As the conversation grew to whispers, I dismissed myself from the room, running upstairs to grab my shoes as well.

I barely made it through the door when Elysia crashed into me, her body pressing so firmly against mine that I could feel her racing heart beating against my chest.

“Oh goddess. I’m so sorry.” The wistful smile on her face and the rosy, red blush of her cheeks was a brilliant invitation that I couldn’t refuse.

“Elysia,” was all I managed before I gripped her waist and pressed my lips to hers.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:21 am

Chapter

Seven

"Magic flows in circles, returning to the heart that conjured it."

Elysia

As her lips met mine, I lost all self-control. My hands shook as they tangled in her silvery hair, tugging her face harder against mine. More. I needed more. I walked us backwards, taking this further into the bedroom where it could be more private.

She managed to close the door behind us, and for that I was grateful. Sleeping next to her all night had been pure and utter torture. I'd like to say I slept soundly, but nope. Even when I did manage to get a few winks, the only thing I saw behind my eyelids were visions of her tangled up in the sheets with me.

Her tongue slipped into my mouth, tasting, exploring, and driving me wild as it slid across mine. Was this how it always was with another woman? Soft, sweet, and sinfully sexy? We weren't even skin to skin and I was already way in over my head.

"Wait," I mumbled, trying to break away. We were in Morgana's house, and I didn't think she'd take kindly to us having sex in one of her guest rooms. "People—" I managed to squeeze out between breaths "—downstairs."

"Shh." Her breath feathered against my lips and sent goosebumps along my arms. She spun us around and pressed me against the dresser, one of her thighs finding a

home between my legs.

The moan that slipped from my lips echoed between our joined mouths as she put pressure against my clit. Sweet, delicious pleasure pooled in my gut purely from the contact. My hips, with a mind of their own, ground against her leg. I could feel the wetness already building in my panties and we hadn't even taken off any clothes.

House . This wasn't our house, but oh goddess, she felt so good against me and I was powerless to stop her.

Lunara ran her hands beneath my shirt, gripped my waist, and jerked my body closer, holding onto me tight as I rode her thigh. "That's it," she encouraged as I broke the kiss and muffled a moan in the crook of her neck.

The magic between us seemed to mingle, only adding fuel to the fire burning deep within me. With each thrust against her leg bringing me closer to climax, I was too far gone to put a stop to this. I released her hair and gripped her hips tightly as she pressed me harder into the dresser.

While one hand splayed open on my back, her other reached up to cup my breast, squeezing and rolling my nipple with the perfect amount of pressure through my bra. It was like she could read my mind.

I closed my eyes and ground harder against her, my breathing heavy and uneven as my core wound tighter. In the midst of our immense desire, I could barely fathom the things this woman was doing to me.

Lunara's soft lips brushed against my neck, followed by slow, lazy circles that she drew with her tongue along my collarbone. She nipped playfully at the skin as her hand still cupped and massaged my breast. Her long hair tickled my arm as it moved with her.

So many sensations ran through me, my mind and body were on overload. When was the last time someone else had fueled my gratification, when it wasn't just my hand helping me out, and I was able to lose myself without thinking too hard?

It had been far, far too long.

"Your skin tastes divine." Her breath blew across my collarbone before her mouth moved closer to the shell of my ear. "I wonder...What else might?" She pulled her leg away and I almost cried out from the loss of friction, but it was soon replaced as she glided her hand between my skirt and stomach, palming my body.

Her fingers dipped down lower to run through my wetness before slipping back up to rub circles over my clit. I gasped for breath, feeling what that contact did deep in my belly and nearly crumpled to the ground when my knees gave out, but the dresser behind me held me upright.

"Gods, yes," I cried out. Her fingers were magic as she worked me over and I couldn't hold back any longer. In no time, waves of pleasure washed through me. I jerked and shuddered against her hold as my pussy spasmed against her hand. My underwear was toast. I couldn't believe what had just transpired. Knowing I'd just reached climax in the High Priestess' home, I searched within me for some form of guilt, but found none. I was too happily sated to care.

If Morgana discovered our rendezvous, she would likely kill me.

My head fell back as I tried to catch my breath. "Fuck."

"Feel better?" Lunara whispered as she withdrew her hand.

"Much."

She brought her fingers up to her mouth and licked and sucked them clean. “You definitely taste magnificent everywhere.”

Turning in her grasp, I let my hands begin to wander as I locked eyes with her. “What about you?”

“There’ll be time for that later.” She grabbed a lock of my hair and twirled the brown lock around her finger, smiling widely as she asked, “Do you know how beautiful it was watching you come undone?”

As my cheeks flushed, I lowered my head. “I just feel bad that you didn’t, you know...”

“What, cum?” She laughed and stepped back, eyeing me up and down. “Are all humans, er witches, this bashful about sex?”

I shook my head. “Not all, but it’s been a while for me.”

“Not anymore.” She gave me a kiss, my essence still lingering on her tongue. Once she turned for her shoes, she asked, “Are you ready to get to the library?”

I pulled my lower lip into my mouth and instantly tasted my pleasure, remaining on my lips even as I watched her slip on her shoes. Turning away from her, I reveled in the taste, realizing what I’d been missing. I definitely didn’t hate it.

Gods, she was definitely good at recruiting me for the same team.

The sound of Lunara’s footsteps drew my attention and I turned to find a confident smile tugging the corners of her lips.

I was just about to lean in for another kiss when someone knocked on the door.

“Hey,” Nova called from the hall. “We’re all heading over to Thalia’s. You sure you don’t want to come?”

“I’m pretty sure you already did,” Lunara whispered, covering her mouth to muffle a giggle.

“No, we’re good,” I said, taking a deep breath. I hoped my face wasn’t red, and my expression didn’t give away what had just happened as I strode over to the door and opened it. “We need to get to the library and start doing some research.”

Nova eyed me suspiciously, but said nothing about my appearance. “Oh...okay. Good luck.” I didn’t miss her smirk and eye roll as she turned to leave.

The library was nestled in one of the oldest buildings on Main Street, its weathered stone structure standing as a testament to the town's long-forgotten history. Ivy crept up the corners of the building, wandering up to the arched windows framed in dark, worn wood. Inside, the smell of aged paper and polished oak filled the air.

As we entered, we were greeted by tall shelves, carved from rich mahogany. They lined every wall, reaching up to the ceiling. Sunlight poured in from the few windows, giving little pockets of places to relax with a good book.

“Where do you think we should look first?” Lunara asked.

My eyes roamed over each area, wondering where the oldest bits of history would be housed. Worn out armchairs were tucked here and there among the books, but when my gaze landed on a spiral staircase tucked in the far corner, my gut told me that was where all the forgotten tomes of history and lore would be stored.

“Look.” I pointed to the corner.

Lunara grabbed my arm and leaned in. “You think?”

I nodded and headed toward the stairs. Each step creaked and groaned under our weight as if these stairs hadn’t been utilized for quite some time. Just beyond the second floor landing, we discovered shelves lining the wall, each covered in a thick layer of dust and the occasional cob web here and there. From the looks of it, this floor hadn’t been visited in years.

“Shouldn’t the library maintain all of the building?” Lunara asked as she swiped a finger over the spine of a book, her finger coming away with a dark gray smudge across the pad. “Eww.”

“Right?” I chuckled as she blew the dust from her finger. “I don’t think anyone has visited this floor in ages.” I hastily wiped some of the dust off one particular shelf as I tried to get a better look at the titles, but all I managed to do was create a cloud that suddenly had me choking on its plume. I coughed and sputtered, waving a hand to try to clear the air in front of me. “I don’t know how we’re going to find anything in all this mess.”

“We need to lean into our intuition.” Lunara laid a hand on my forearm. “You’ve done it in the past. Hell, you did it just now with this staircase. I could feel it.”

She could feel it?

Shaking off that thought, I stared farther into the dingy space. “This floor appears to wrap around the whole building. There must be thousands of books.” How were we expected to find the proverbial needle in a haystack in all of this?

Lunara drew something in the air and a shape shimmered into existence then quickly broke apart, sending a glitter-like substance fluttering to the hardwood floor before it disappeared. When she touched my arm again, I could feel her power surging into

me.

“What did you do to me?” I asked. I’d never felt more powerful. My magic was one of the strongest in the coven, but it had its quirks. Sometimes it missed the mark, and I had to regroup, but this...this felt like raw power.

Lunara grinned and gave a half shrug. “Just giving you a push in the right direction.” Playfully bumping into me, she added, “Maybe together, we can find what we’re looking for.”

I stared at my hands as they tingled. Whispering a small location incantation, I pulled at my well of power deep within, asking the goddess for guidance in finding what we needed. A tug inside my gut urged me forward.

On shaky steps, I began walking down the aisle. Whispers echoed from the books I passed, but I couldn’t discern what was being said.

Lunara followed closely behind.

When I reached a particular bookshelf, my knees gave out.

“Oh shit!” Lunara grabbed me around the waist to prevent me from falling. “Are you okay?”

“I think it’s here.” I waved at the bookcase in front of me, trying to discern a precise location. “I just can’t tell which book.” The shelf was cast in shadows and covered in more dust than any of the others. Of course it would be the one we needed to look through.

“Let’s get to it.” Lunara reached for a book in front of her, instantly diving in.

Book after book, we examined the contents of each before sliding it back into place.

Dust clogged the air, slowing our progress, and sending us into the occasional coughing fit, but we had to keep moving. We needed to find something. Anything.

Reaching up high on tiptoes, I withdrew a book from the uppermost shelf. Unable to manage a solid grip, it slipped from my fingers and hit me in the head before plummeting to the ground. Its pages fluttered open and a yellowed piece of paper, folded in quarters, fell out.

“What’s that?” Lunara asked.

I reached down and picked up the book, grabbing the paper with my opposite hand. After I dusted off the cover, I read the title on the spine: *The Legends of Hallow Ridge Grove* .

“That’s interesting”. I flipped open the book to a section entitled *Morrigan’s Curse* . As I skimmed the first page, it felt like things were vaguely starting to make sense. I called to Lunara, wanting her to see what I’d just found. “Listen to this.”

“Peace was shattered by Morrigan, a powerful witch whose ambition eclipsed the wisdom of the old ways.

Morrigan had long sought the fabled Starfire Orb, a jewel of unimaginable power hidden deep within the realm of the Fae. It was said to glow with the light of forgotten stars, its radiance capable of altering the very fabric of magic. The Fae, protectors of the natural world, guarded it jealously, for its power was too great for mortal hands. But Morrigan, driven by greed, managed to slip past their watchful eyes and steal the Orb from its sacred resting place.”

“What else does it say?” Lunara leaned over my shoulder, scanning the text as I

continued.

“The Fae spoke their judgment, their voices as sharp as the winter winds:

"For by your hands deception bloomed and by our hands will come your doom.

A night of anguish comes each year until the orb is welcomed here.

Two centuries' time will be your sentence. Hence forward you will serve your penance.

In that final year ten months amassed, whence in that time the curse can pass.

If the light of Samhain appears, an awakening will come of all your fears.”

“As if the shadow figures weren't ominous enough, this definitely makes my blood run cold.” I rubbed my arms, trying to ward off the chill while Lunara stepped away, seeming to look out at some far-off place. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” She returned to my side, instantly flipping the page. “Is there anything in there about where the orb might be hidden?”

I turned to the next page, but the story ended almost as quickly as it began. “That's odd.” I began turning the pages again until I found a section referring to information about the clock tower at the town's center. It'd been standing vacant for years and I was fairly certain the clock hands no longer moved. It was more of a statement piece for the town than a functional timekeeper.

Lunara pulled the folded up note from my hands. Carefully, she opened up the page revealing elegant handwriting scrawled across the page. The neatness wasn't what stood out, however. It was the quote emblazoned in the middle.

Where time stands still,

the truth awaits those who can see beyond the ticking hands.

“That’s odd.” Lunara stared at the paper as if she was waiting for answers to be revealed.

“Just another legend to uncover.” I closed the book and tucked it under my arm. “I say we take this gem with us while we continue our search.”

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I pulled it out to check it. “Shit.”

Lunara moved closer, her energy giving me a hint of peace as she asked, “Is everything alright?”

“No.” I held up my phone so she could read the message.

Morgana:

Thalia is missing.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:21 am

Chapter

Eight

"Magic whispers where the wind refuses to speak."

Lunara

While Thalia's disappearance was troubling, I couldn't fight the feeling that she brought this on herself. Her dismissal of the recent strange events as we approached Samhain shouldn't have been denied.

I honestly had bigger fish to fry, especially with Elysia's most recent discovery of that mysterious note. But she had a connection to the woman, and I had to see where her head was at. "Are you okay?"

Elysia shrugged in response and looked away, but as I opened my mind to my senses, I felt her struggle with how to react. We'd all seen how dismissive Thalia had been to the warnings.

As she continued to stare at that one line of text on her phone, I reread the quote at the center of the frail, yellowed page and watched in skeptical wonder as gleaming letters slowly began to appear.

"Holy shit, Elysia. Look at this." I held the paper out to her, my hand trembling as cursive letters came into focus.

“I know. Where time stands still, the truth awaits those who can see beyond the ticking hands .” She reread the quote as if it was all that remained on the page.

“No. Look.” I pointed to the first line that was now fully revealed while another sentence appeared below it.

Elysia seized the paper from me, scratching at a dark smudge on the sheet just below the first line of text. “Are you freaking out about this mark? I think that’s just a stain.”

“No, not that.” I pointed to the first line again, which was now slowly disappearing as if it never existed in the first place. “That.” The moment my finger brushed the page, the first line quickly seemed to gain strength, rewriting itself as if I somehow charged the paper to reveal the message.

Reclaiming the sheet, I stared in impatient wonder as more and more lines slowly appeared below the couple that were present previously.

“Are you sure you’re feeling okay?” Elysia’s brow crinkled as she placed her hand on my forehead then stroked her hand tentatively down my cheek. “It is a little warm up here.”

“What? No, I mean yes. Yes, I feel fine. You seriously don’t see this?” I shook the letter in front of her face, expecting her to finally notice the text.

“Maybe we should head back downstairs.” Elysia slipped the book under her cardigan then tugged at my arm.

I pulled from her grasp and the page slipped out of my hand. When I went to pick it up, I noticed more writing on the back. The entire page—front and back—was now covered in a poem of sorts. “Listen to this,” I urged as I began to read:

“In shadows deep where time holds sway,

Beneath the chime of the ticking day,

A sentinel stands, both tall and proud,

Guarding secrets within its iron shroud.

Seek the structure where echoes reign,

Where hands of time weave joy and pain.

At every hour, when the world takes note,

Of the shroud of the orb for which I wrote.

When the moon casts its gaze on the dial’s embrace,

And the clock’s soft whisper unveils its face,

Listen close for a heart beating strong,

A rhythm concealed within its powerful gong.

Beware the glimmer, for not all is as it seems;

True treasures are hidden in the fabric of dreams.

Only the brave with intent pure shall find

The light that dances where shadows unwind.

For the one who unfolds this mystical rhyme,

There's no turning back the hands of time.

Should you fail at your task, heed this advice:

In the hands of time, all secrets suffice."

When I finally finished the riddle, I asked, "What do you think it means?"

Without answering, Elysia snatched the paper from my hand, rapidly blinking as she perused the page. "There...there's nothing there. Where did you read that?"

I pointed at the sheet again and huffed. "It's right there, silly." While I dragged my finger over line after line, I asked, "Can't you see it? It's literally glowing on the page."

Elysia shrugged as she flipped the page over and back, examining each blemish and crease. "Maybe the letter has a cloaking spell."

"But, the longer I held it, the more words were revealed." As my eyes stayed glued to the riddle, it slowly began to vanish again. "It's like it was enchanted to only be revealed to a particular person. Or maybe race? That's it. Maybe it only shows itself when a fae touches it!"

"Maybe," Elysia said softly as she held the letter out to me, scratching her head as she seemingly waited for the words to appear to her. "Hmph." When I didn't immediately take it, she pushed the paper back into my hands then made a beeline for the stairs.

"Where are you going?" I took off after her, but when she paused on the stairs, I nearly ran into her.

“I—I’m gonna check in with Morgana. You...” She peered back up at me with a perplexed look on her face. “Feel free to see if you find any other magical texts hiding within any of the pages up there.” The way she said magical made my heart lodge in my throat.

I blinked and was stunned to find she was already halfway down the stairs.

Needing to clear the air, I raced after her, folding the paper up and tucking it inside my waistband as I navigated the ancient stairs. “Elysia, wait.”

A woman seated at a desk on the first floor narrowed her gaze and shushed me rather forcefully as I rounded the last step.

“Sorry,” I whispered before continuing after Elysia.

For such a petite thing, she moved impressively fast. I wasn’t able to catch up to her until we were just outside the library’s main entrance.

“Elysia.” I clutched her forearm, halting her escape down the stone steps that led to the sidewalk. “Why do I get the feeling you’re pissed at me?”

“I’m not.” While she denied my accusation, her sigh and the sagging of her shoulders told me she wasn’t being completely honest. Had I struck a nerve somehow? What had I done wrong?

“Then why are you trying to brush me off?” Even if she denied it again, I felt the tension Elysia tried to bury like bile rising in my throat.

She turned and fled down the stairs then scurried along the sidewalk toward her car.

I followed closely behind.

The moment she reached her car, she leaned against the hood and toyed with her cell phone, now gripped in her hand like a lifeline. “I need to find out what information they have about Thalia’s disappearance.” She wouldn’t even look me in the eye.

I shook my head and crossed my arms, folding in on myself with the grief coming off of Elysia. “I can feel that it’s something else.”

She pushed off her car and started to walk around to the driver’s side, ignoring my statement.

“Elysia, talk to me.” I dropped my arms to my side and balled my hands into fists. “Did I do something wrong?”

Keeping her back to me, she shook her head ever so slightly.

As I walked closer, I noticed the way her head hung. “Then, are you pissed about the letter?”

Her heavy sigh was more than enough of an answer. But, when she chose to get into her car without acknowledging me, I couldn’t deny the overwhelming feeling of rejection.

I was conflicted with what to do next. Did I take the knowledge I gained from that letter and go in search of answers to help me find what I’d been tasked to retrieve? Or should I take my seat on the passenger side and try to work through whatever was eating at this person I had growing feelings for?

After a brief deliberation, I chose the latter.

When I opened the passenger door, Elysia’s voice drifted out. “So there’s still no sign of her? Nothing?” Her head rested against the steering wheel, the book she hadn’t

checked out resting on the dash, as the person on the other end of the line spoke. “Okay. Call me if you find anything useful or let me know if she happens to turn up.”

Once Elysia hung up the phone, I turned to face her, lightly laying my hand on her thigh. “Will you talk to me?”

She glanced at me defiantly, but then her expression softened as she took a deep breath and blew it out, letting her shoulders relax, if only marginally. “Do you have any idea what it’s like to feel inferior to someone else?”

I snorted, well acquainted with that feeling. “Elysia, I’m a half-breed. Of course, I know what it’s like to feel inferior. I’ve had to deal with that my whole life. Human or fae, those who know my identity all tell me my blood is diluted, tainted, deficient.”

Her gaze dragged from me to the ceiling of her car as she leaned her head against the headrest. “When you were able to read the riddle, I felt...” She sucked in another ragged breath and squeezed her eyes shut. “I felt useless.”

I snatched her hand in mine, squeezing it tight as I willed her to believe me. “You are so not useless.” Leaning closer, I rested my head on her shoulder and stared up at her. “I would’ve never found that riddle if it weren’t for you.”

“You mean the one that I couldn’t even see?” She pulled her hand from my grip and instantly grabbed the steering wheel.

“Hey,” I called, waiting for her to acknowledge me. When she finally lowered her head to look my way, I said, “Thanks for not thinking I was crazy. I can’t tell you how many times my own kind has looked at me like I was nuts.” I chewed my cheek, thinking of all the instances when the fae had made me feel like an utter outcast. “Well, I guess humans are my kind, too, but I’ve never really felt like I belonged here, there, or anywhere.”

“That must be so lonely.” While Elysia didn’t reach for me, I felt like I was breaking through her walls.

Pulling a leg up into the seat, I hugged it and rested my chin on my knee. “Being alone is all I’ve ever really known.” The feeling of vulnerability didn’t sit well in my stomach and I ended up turning my attention out the window.

While I observed a mother and daughter hurrying past, Elysia rested her hand on my shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

Lifting my head, my eyes followed her arm all the way up to where her hand rested. “Nothing to be sorry about. I’ve managed.” I offered her a half-smile, hoping to put her at ease.

“Still.”

A few beats of silence stretched between us until Elysia ripped her hand from my shoulder and twisted in her seat to face me. “Hey, do you still have that letter?”

“Yeah.” I eyed her curiously as I pulled it from my waistband, offering it to her.

She smirked, staring at the paper for a moment. “Can you read it to me again?”

Gingerly, I took the page from her and unfolded it, then read the riddle once more.

“Oh my goddess. I know where we need to go.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:21 am

Chapter

Nine

"A witch's greatest ally is not her power, but her patience."

Elysia

"At least I think I know where we need to go." The spine of the book I'd stolen glared at me from the dash. The Legends of Hallow Ridge Grove .

Lunara reread the poem again silently to herself and then glanced at me. "You mentioned the clock tower in that book earlier."

"I did, but there are other time pieces around town. It could be any number of places." I grabbed the book and flipped it open. Flipping through the pages, there were a few clock towers mentioned. We had our main one here in downtown Hallow Ridge Grove, but there was an old church built with a clock in it on the edge of town. There was also the old clock store with its eccentric little lighthouse that held a clock face where the beam should be.

All were original to the founding of the town. But were there any others I was missing?

"The poem mentioned tall and proud. Is there another tall building housing a clock that you suspect we'll find the orb in?" Lunara leaned over to look at the page I was reading.

“There are a few options, actually, and something tells me we shouldn’t be chasing down the obvious choice.” I stare at the photo of the lighthouse with its peculiarly placed clock. “I mean, if it were me, I definitely wouldn’t hide some magical orb in the town’s most infamous clock tower.” I ease the book closer to Lunara. “Look at these.” I pointed to the picture of the church, turned the page, and showed her the picture of the weird clock shop.

“You aren’t near any body of water, are you?” She nodded toward the lighthouse attached to the oddly shaped house and chuckled.

I closed the book and rested it between the two seats. “No, we aren’t.”

“So we have those three options?” When I didn’t immediately answer, she asked “Is everything okay?”

Gripping the steering wheel, I white-knuckled it to keep my hands from shaking. What if the dark creature had taken Thalia and any one of us were next?

“You want to go check on Thalia, don’t you?”

I dropped my hands to my lap and squeezed them into fists, then nodded. It was killing me not knowing.

“C’mon. Let’s go.” Lunara reached over and pushed the ignition button on my car and the engine roared to life.

I smirked at her as I put the car in drive. “We could also make a quick visit to the historical society and see what information they might have on our way over.”

Lunara opened her mouth, but hesitated.

“What’s wrong now?”

“I think we should check on your coven first.” She settled in her seat and pulled the seat belt around her, clicking it in place.

“But what about your orb?” I knew how important it was for Lunara and the fae to find the artifact. Who would blame Lunara for putting her needs above my own, especially when it wasn’t just about her? She wanted to save her people from whatever darkness was tainting it. Yet, here she was, putting my worry above her own desire.

While I was blown away by her thoughtfulness, I couldn’t deny that a part of me wondered if finding the orb would also help with whatever had invaded my small little town.

Picking at a hangnail, she said, “I won’t forgive myself if something happens to Thalia and we did nothing to help.” When her fidgeting suddenly stopped, she laid her hands in her lap, then turned to look at me with a near blank expression on her face. “Besides, if all of the fae lands have survived this long, what’s a few more days without the orb?”

I took a disbelieving breath, realizing Lunara had barreled into my life, took me by complete surprise, and weaseled her way into my heart. Knowing all that, I didn’t want to deny her anything. “Lunara?”

“Let’s go look for Thalia.” Lunara returned to picking at her fingers. “I’ll be much more at ease once she’s found. Then we can go about the business of locating the Starfire Orb.”

“Okay.” I secured my own seatbelt and put the car in drive. “If you’re sure.

“I am.” She tilted her head toward the road. “Let’s go find your friend.”

When we pulled up to Thalia’s house, her car sat in the driveway right in front of the garage. I scratched my head, wondering why she hadn’t put it inside like she normally did.

Once I parked the car near the curb, I jumped out and raced to the porch where Morgana was standing. “Did you find her?”

Lunara made her way up the stairs and Morgana eyed her as she answered. “No. She’s still missing.”

“But her car is here.” I waved a hand at the driveway. “Are you sure?”

“Positive.” Morgana’s hands shook as she straightened her sweater. I’d never seen her so rattled. She usually had the coolest, calmest demeanor, always setting us straight when we needed to take a step back and see the bigger picture; let cooler heads prevail.

“Maybe she went over to Alicia’s house.” Even though humans weren’t aware of witches among them, Thalia was fascinated by their company. Alicia was just her latest obsession.

The screen door creaked open and out stepped Nova. “She’s not there, I just called her.”

Fuck . There went that idea.

“Could she have gone for a hike and forgot to tell someone?” I asked.

Nova shoved her hands into her pockets. “Thalia may be stubborn, but she has always

told one of us before she went out on a hike alone.” Walking across the porch, Nova locked eyes with Morgana. “She’s not that careless.”

Lunara rested against the porch railing. “Where does she work?”

“At the coffee shop on Main Street,” Morgana answered, pulling her gaze from Nova and settling it on Lunara. “But they’re closed on Monday.”

Worry etched itself in every crease and wrinkle on Morgana’s face. She clasped her hands together in front of her, stilling the shakiness I’d witnessed.

“What aren’t you saying?” I grabbed a hold of Morgana’s hands and squeezed. “We have to work together or we’ll never find her.”

“I’ve lost contact with her,” she whispered as she stared at our joined hands.

“Look at me.” Morgana slowly raised her gaze. “We already knew that. No one can reach her.”

“You don’t understand.” Tears welled in her eyes. “I have a connection with each and every one of my coven members. A metaphysical link connects me to all of you. I—I’ve got a horrible feeling about this.”

I dropped Morgana’s hand, taking a step back. “Are you sure?” After a quick glance at Lunara, I said, “Maybe she found some way to sever the connection.” I couldn’t face the idea of Thalia being gone, even if she was a royal pain in the ass most of the time.

Morgana’s face turned as pale as a full moon. She leaned forward and whispered low enough for only me to hear, “I have to consider the idea that she could be dead.”

“Don’t say that. Don’t even think it.” I took a few broken steps backward, then brought my hands up to cover my heart. “There must be a logical explanation.”

Morgana shook her head. “Even if she were halfway across the globe, I’d still be able to feel our connection. There’s just nothing more I, as the High Priestess, can do, but...” Morgana’s words trailed off as she approached Lunara. “Do...do you think maybe you could help?”

“Help how?” Lunara asked with a curious expression etched on her face.

Morgana waved her hand around Lunara, vaguely encompassing her as a whole. “Use your fae magic.” She tapped the end of her nose and asked, “Could you maybe track her scent?”

I stepped between her and Lunara. “She’s not some hound dog, Morgana.”

Morgana’s eyes widened. “I?—”

“It’s okay.” Lunara rested her hand on my arm before gently nudging me aside. “I haven’t tapped into that sense for quite some time, but I’ll see what I can do.”

Lunara stepped off the porch cautiously wandering through the front yard. With her hands held out in front of her, she splayed her fingers in the strangest manner then drew in the air like she had back in the library. A gasp escaped her when more shimmery symbols appeared in the air.

While I watched her lips move, they weren’t accompanied by any audible sound. She was either speaking too low or mouthing the words to herself. The spell she’d drawn in the air expanded and then suddenly burst apart. The glitter-like substance raced around in a line before shooting off in one direction.

Lunara ran after it while we all stared in awe. Like a flash, she disappeared around the side of the house.

“Wait!” I threw out a hand and ran after her, nearly slamming into her when I rounded the corner of the house. “Lunara?”

“She was here.” She pointed toward the field behind Thalia’s house. “Look.” She crept closer to the forest and I followed right behind her, tiptoeing in each of her abandoned steps. “Do you see that twinkle near the tree line?”

“Yeah.” I squinted, just making it out. “I do.”

“It doesn’t appear to go any farther, as if the trail runs cold.” Lunara turned to face me. “I don’t think she went for a run or a hike.” She took a couple more cautious steps toward the trees. “If I’m to believe my magic, it appears Thalia just suddenly disappeared right before she reached the forest.”

“People don’t just poof and disappear,” Morgana said as she and the others stepped up behind me.

I clutched my chest, feeling my heart suddenly racing from their unexpected arrival.

The rest of our coven must have come out of the house while Lunara and I made our way out back. The weight of their presence was like a warm, heavy blanket easing my uncontrollable nerves.

Lunara looked at me and let her gaze wander to each of my coven sisters. “They can.”

I shook my head in disbelief. “Why would she have walked out toward the trees?”

“I don’t know.” Lunara eased an arm around my waist and turned me to face the

others. “If she disappeared there, perhaps she reappeared somewhere else?” Trying to guide me away from the forest, she said, “I think we should search the town and see what information we can dredge up.”

“Would finding your artifact help locate her?” I asked.

“I—Well, if the legends I’ve heard from my elders are true, there’s a good chance it could.” Lunara’s shoulders tensed and she refused to look at anyone but me. I sensed there was something she wasn’t willing to share, but I didn’t fault her for that. Maybe she’d give away her secrets when it was just us.

“Lunara’s right. We should split up and see what we can find.” I laid my hand over Lunara’s as it remained on my waist. “We’ll go in search of the orb. Maybe if we find it, it’ll help us find Thalia.”

Morgana gave a solemn nod. “Go. Coordinate your movements. If you find anything, report back to me.” As we all headed toward the front of the house, Morgana added, “I’ll keep a running list of information so it’s all centralized.”

“Got it.” I grabbed Lunara’s hand when she removed her arm from around me, but I didn’t miss the look of disgust from Morgana as we walked by on our way to the car.

I didn’t understand why a witch and a fae couldn’t combine powers or intermingle. What was so volatile about any kind of relationship between them. The other coven members had looked at her warily too, like some kind of ick was going to rub off on them if they got too close.

Squeezing Lunara’s hand, I glanced back at Morgana.

Her gaze burned brightly with hate and prejudice.

My coven needed Lunara's help to find Thalia, but what happened when she was no longer useful?

Chapter

Ten

"A circle unbroken is a heart unguarded."

Lunara

"So, where should we look first?" I asked the instant I reclaimed my seat in Elysia's car. I did my best to ignore the judgmental gazes that stared back at me from the yard.

"I figured we'd check the lighthouse." Elysia peered over her shoulder as she checked the street for passing cars.

I glanced at the rearview mirror, seeing Elysia's coven finally disband once we were off of the property. "The lighthouse." My murmurings were just a small indication of how uncomfortable this entire situation made me.

While I knew fae who had disappeared before, I'd never met a human who had crossed planes. But, then again, these witches must be some of the most powerful in existence if the elders sent me here.

Elysia snickered. "Are you okay?" She turned my way for a brief moment then looked back at the road.

Meanwhile, I chewed the inside of my cheek, more unsettled than I wanted to admit that Thalia's trail had just gone cold. "Can I be completely honest with you?"

“I’d accept nothing less.” Her half-smile did nothing to settle the unease I felt.

“I know I didn’t say so before, but the fact that Thalia just disappeared without a trace is a little concerning.” I crossed and uncrossed my ankles as I stared at the sidewalk rapidly passing by.

“But you said that people can disappear. That if she disappeared from that spot, she could’ve reappeared somewhere else.” Elysia’s driving grew more erratic, only adding to my anxiety.

“I know what I said.” As Elysia’s tension grew, so did my own and I just couldn’t think with all of this angst passing back and forth between us.

When Elysia continued to pick up the pace, I reached across the center console to rest my hand on her thigh. “Try to stay calm.”

“Stay calm? Stay calm?” Her head whipped in my direction and her piercing green eyes seemed to burn a hole right through me.

I pulled my hand from her thigh, realizing that point of contact only intensified the nervous energy I felt rushing off her. “Look, it’s possible that Thalia is still out there, but in order for her to cross planes, she would’ve had to be taken.”

“Is that so?”

I continued to study Elysia’s face, but her sudden defiance made me hate myself for keeping this from her back at Thalia’s. “I’m not trying to upset you more —”

All at once, Elysia jerked the car to a stop, turning her intense, judgmental stare on me. “Then you shouldn’t have lied, and you definitely shouldn’t underestimate the power of our coven.”

The weight of that judgmental ogling only reminded me that I didn't belong here—or anywhere. “Look, I'll get out here. Then you can carry on with your search for Thalia.” I reached for the door, prepared to walk away, but Elysia's hand stopped me.

“Wait.” Her hand clung to my arm, keeping me in my seat. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap at you, it's just...” She blew out a breath, grudgingly releasing my arm as she turned her attention to the road.

I sat in silence, pressing my back against the door as I put enough space between us to take a full, stabilizing breath.

With her head hanging, Elysia said, “I've been lied to a lot in my life.” Slowly, her head lifted, but her stare stayed pointed straight ahead. “Before I met Morgana, my boyfriend told me he wanted a future with me, a life.” She sighed, her shoulders sagging as she continued. “Then, one day I found him in bed with our next-door neighbor.” Her hands tightened on the steering wheel as the memory took her back to a place that I didn't want her to go right now.

“It's okay. We don't have to—”

“I want to.” Her brows lifted as she finally looked at me again. “I told him I was leaving—that I refused to be manipulated, but he fed me some sob story of how she'd come over searching for her lost cat and they'd somehow ended up in bed together.”

If I ever found the guy, I'd make sure to remove his genitalia, inch by inch.

“I shouldn't have believed it. After that betrayal, I should've known he was a snake.” Her upper lip curled into a sneer and her nose crinkled as she recounted the events. “When I came home from work the next day, our house was empty, and so was my bank account.”

When her head fell this time, I did the one thing that felt natural; I reached for her face, pointing those beautiful green eyes back at me.

While my thumb swiped back and forth across her cheek, I said, “What an asshole.”

Her face grew tense, as if she felt guilt or shame for what happened. “If it weren’t for the coven, I don’t know what I would’ve done.”

“You’re lucky to have them.” My thumb continued stroking her face. “I wish I had just one person that I could turn to when life got hard.” I’d spent so much of my life wandering the forests while I wished for more, but I always ended up alone.

“You do now.”

Her green orbs, strikingly similar to the grass I fell asleep on each night, seemed to breathe new life into me. There was a peace there that drew me closer until our lips were pressed together, our mouths joined in a passionate kiss that I could feel to the depths of my soul.

Her soft moan radiated into my chest as my hands roamed her body, stopping only briefly when I reached her waist. Darting my tongue to the seam of her mouth, I tasted cherry Chapstick and waited for her to welcome me inside.

When her lips fell a breath apart, I let my tongue delve further, instantly tangling with hers as her hands grabbed a fistful of my shirt and pulled me closer.

I reached beneath the folds of her skirt, desperate to feel her wetness against my skin, but when my hand slid up her thigh, she reached between us, stopping its movement.

“Wait.” She eased from my grasp, taking a moment to compose herself before she opened her eyelids. When she finally set her eyes on me, she said, “I want this.

Goddess, I want this, but not here. Not right now.”

I felt a little wounded, but she was right. There were more pressing matters than the feel of her naked body against mine. And, damn how I wanted our bodies mingled in a moment of intense passion. But, it would wait. As much as it pained me to say it, I told her, “You’re right.” I eased my hands back to my side of the car, forcing those tempting thoughts to the deepest recesses of my mind until the current situation was resolved.

While it took a few minutes for the two of us to regain our composure, Elysia finally pulled away from the curb. “So, the lighthouse?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

We searched high and low, literally, and found no hide nor hair of anything even remotely magical. As we descended the numerous steps on our way out of the lighthouse, Elysia said, “Maybe you were right. We should’ve checked the clock tower.”

I snatched her hand, stopping her on the staircase before I spun her around and pressed her back against the wall. “Say it again.”

Her brow furrowed as her breathing slowed to a crawl. “Say what again?”

“That I’m right.” There was no containing my smirk as she smacked my shoulder then continued her trek down. “Come on, babe. It was funny.”

Her head shook as she kept her back to me.

“A little funny?” Teasing Elysia was just too easy and I loved how her cheeks flushed every time I made her uncomfortable.

“Even if you were right, I won’t make the mistake of saying it again.” She flipped her dark, wavy hair over her shoulder as she reached the ground floor and marched for the exit.

“Oh, come on. Was it really that painful?”

Elysia stopped in her tracks, spinning on her heel to face me. “Are all fae as headstrong as you, or are you just a rare specimen?”

I shrugged. “You could say I’m pretty rare since I’m the only half fae, half human I’ve ever met.”

All humor left our conversation as Elysia slowed, allowing me to catch up with her. When I fell in stride alongside her, she asked, “Is it hard being the only one like you?”

“Being alone, in any capacity, is never easy.” To say my existence had been lonely was definitely an understatement, but I’d managed. “After a while, you get used to the quiet.”

“I’m sorry.” Elysia’s sincerity reminded me just how alone I’d been.

After so many years living in the faery lands by myself, I’d started to get accustomed to being alone, but her apology reminded me how nice it was to have someone to turn to, even if just for a little while. “It’s okay.”

I picked up my pace marginally, only stopping when I reached the passenger side of the car. Once it was unlocked, I took my seat, closing myself inside with the quiet surrounding me once again.

Holding my breath, I waited for Elysia to join me, needing her presence to ground

me, to help me feel like I wasn't alone. It hadn't even been a full day, and I was already growing used to having her around. This could be dangerous.

The moment Elysia was closed inside the vehicle with me, she fired up the engine and backed out of the lighthouse parking lot, never sparing me a glance.

I got the feeling she felt uncomfortable by my revelations. Maybe it was for the best that she put some distance between us before I got too attached and was unable to fulfill my duty of returning the orb to my homeland.

When Elysia finally broke the silence, her confession alerted me to an unexpected problem. "I hope we're able to get into the clock tower."

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:21 am

Chapter

Eleven

"Energy flows where the intention goes—be wise where you send it."

Elysia

"What are you doing?" I asked as Lunara picked up the book between us and began flipping through the yellowed pages. The paper sounded like it would fall apart and crumble into dust at any given moment.

"Wasn't there a section on the clock tower in here?"

"Yeah, it was the first thing I saw when I opened it at the library. Why?" I turned the car into a coffee shop parking lot and pulled up to the drive thru speaker. "Do you want a latte or something?"

"A chai tea would be amazing." She continued turning each page and scanning the contents while I ordered drinks for us.

When we got to the window, she gasped.

"What's the matter?"

She practically smashed the book into my face. "What do you see here?"

“Nothing with it that close to my face.” I chuckled and pushed the book to a more reasonable distance. “It’s just the clock tower.”

“No, there?—”

“Here you go.” The attendant at the window handed me two cups. “Have a nice day!”

After handing Lunara her chai tea, I set my pumpkin spice latte in the cupholder and pulled into a nearby parking spot.

Taking a much needed sip of my latte, I let out a contented sigh. “Much better. Now, what did you find?”

Lunara placed the book in my lap and pointed. “Runes. Do you see them?”

I squinted and looked at where her finger rested. “They do look like runes.”

“Right? They’re fae runes!” She continued pointing at different areas on the page. “Here. And here...oh, and here!”

“Our town has always had some kind of supernatural past, but what do you think it means?” I took another sip of my drink and put it back in the cup holder so I could pick the book up and look closer. “I’ve passed that clock tower numerous times and never noticed any runes on the building.”

“I wish I could read them.” She leaned closer, squinting her eyes as she studied the page. “I’ve seen these runes before in some of our historical texts.”

Trying to ignore her earthy scent, I said, “It’d be nice if you could figure out what they mean.” I smirked as I flipped through the book to get a better idea of what it contained. It was filled with cryptic stories about my town's supernatural past, but

nothing solid.

When I turned to the next page, I was back on the section about the clock tower with the photo of its freshly constructed countenance standing tall and proud on Main Street. It spoke of the founding of the town, but I couldn't find any mention of a supernatural layer to the old monument. But then a piece of paper slid out and onto the floorboard from the back.

Lunara reached down to retrieve it and unfolded it delicately. "It's an old newspaper clipping."

"It looks like some kind of puff piece to me with a title like that."

Tall Tales of the Clock Tower

We both leaned over and began to read it in silence.

Skimming the tattered piece of newsprint, I couldn't believe what I saw. "Oh my, look here." I pointed at the page, still stunned by what I found. "It says there were whispers among the townsfolk about a hidden artifact tied to Hallow Ridge Grove. Do you think...?"

"Possibly." Lunara finished reading and folded it back up then turned her attention back to the book. "I think I saw something about blueprints of the clock tower somewhere."

"You did?" I zeroed in on the picture and frantically searched the writing underneath it. "The caption under this photo doesn't explain anything about the runes or mention anything magical."

"I know. It's frustrating." She rested her head on my shoulder and gestured to another

paragraph. “Look toward the bottom.” Her finger jutted out to point at the lower portion of the page. “There. The Hallow Ridge Grove Historical Society.”

“It’s just a couple streets over.” I closed the book and hugged it to my chest. “Maybe the blueprints could hold a clue as to what the symbols mean on the building.”

“Maybe.”

“Let me call Morgana and tell her what we’ve found.” I eased back marginally to look at Lunara’s face. “I should probably ask if there are any updates on Thalia while I’m at it.” Dialing her number, I pressed the phone to my ear.

Morgana picked up on the third ring. “I don’t have any good news.”

“We don’t either, but we’ve got a lead.” I stared into the distance as I said, “We’re going to go check it out.”

She was silent for a spell, and I started to wonder if we’d gotten disconnected. “Morgana?”

Letting out a heavy sigh, she mumbled, “I’m here.”

“What’s the matter?” I couldn’t shake the feeling that she’d been withholding stuff from me lately.

“Someone.” She cleared her throat. “Someone saw you and that...that fae kissing ,” she said harshly.

The latte soured in my stomach at the hate from my mentor now radiating through the phone. She was like a mother to me, but at that moment, I didn’t feel like she was the same person who’d taught me how to use my magic, who’d been patient with me

when I'd gotten things wrong.

No, the person on the other end of the line was a stranger now, because I'd never heard her talk like that about anyone or anything. She'd always been so understanding.

"I don't think that's any of their business or yours." I closed my eyes against the bile rising in my throat. I'd never opposed Morgana and the feeling didn't sit right with me.

"It is if it affects our coven," she hissed out. "A relationship between a witch and a fae is an abomination."

Opening my eyes, I glanced over at Lunara who sat patiently with her forehead creased, probably wondering what in the world was going on.

Morgana seemed to forget that Lunara was also half-human. The abomination she spoke of had already taken place.

"I—I don't understand what the problem is. It's not like we're going to have kids."

"Kids?" Lunara asked.

I side-eyed her. "Shh."

Morgana swore underneath her breath. "It's not about children, it's about magic. Mingling your magic with hers can be devastating."

"How?" I asked.

"It doesn't matter how." She paused for a moment. "Just... drop her back off in the

woods and come help us look for Thalia.”

My hand gripped the phone tighter as I hissed, “No.”

“Excuse me?” A brief moment of silence spread between us before she said, “I am your high priestess. You’ll do as I say and get your ass over here to help us search for your coven sister.” Her heavy breathing told me I’d struck a nerve, but I wasn’t backing down.

“I need to find this orb thing.” I rolled my shoulders to ease the tension building up in them. “I think if we find it, we can help both the town, Thalia, and the fae.”

Morgana’s heavy sigh blew through the line. “Look, I know you think it might be helpful, but if we band together we won’t need her.” After Nova called for Morgana in the background, Morgana’s distant voice called, “I’ll be right there.”

When I was certain she’d put the phone back against her ear, I asked, “You had her help us just an hour ago. What’s changed?”

Lunara leaned over and whispered, “Are you talking about me?”

I placed a finger over her lips and asked her silently with a look to keep quiet.

Morgana seemed to wrestle with what to say as she sputtered a moment. “I—well, I didn’t realize how much she’d weaseled her way under your skin. You need to get away while you can.”

“While I can?”

“Yes.” More curse words were flung around under her breath. “Please, for everyone’s safety.”

“Because Lunara is so dangerous.” I wasn’t even going to get into the fact that she was half fae or that she’d already empowered me with her magic back at the library to help locate a book that appeared to be helping in our search.

“You have no idea what the fae are capable of. They may not be able to lie, but they know how to twist the truth for their own agenda. Just get back over here.”

The line disconnected and I pulled it away from my ear to stare at the screen.

“What did she say?” Lunara’s warm palm rested lightly against my thigh. “You’re troubled about something and it sounds like it’s about me.”

“Apparently, you’re dangerous.” I choked on a laugh. “And we shouldn’t be kissing.”

“Are my kisses dangerous?” She smirked and withdrew her hand.

I grabbed it and placed it back on my leg. “Your kisses are definitely dangerous.” I winked and leaned over to lightly press my lips to hers. “So, so detrimental to my health.”

“I see,” she said against my lips and backed up to gaze at me. “She wants me to leave, doesn’t she?”

“Yes.” There was no sense in sugar-coating things. We’d both been nothing but honest with each other from the get-go.

“Are you going to take me back?” Her breath hitched as she waited for me to answer.

“No.”

“No?” Her hand gave a squeeze. “Are you sure?”

“Are you going to hurt me?” I asked.

“Now, why would I do that?” She used her free hand and cupped my cheek. “Do you think you’ll hurt me?”

“Absolutely not.” I grinned and shifted to kiss the inside of her palm. “Let’s go check out the historical society.”

As I backed out of the parking spot, I wondered if one of us would end up getting hurt, but not physically. She had to eventually go back to Faerie, and when she did, I was more worried about my heart getting broken.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:21 am

Chapter

Twelve

"In magic, as in life, intention defines outcome."

Lunara

" T his place definitely looks historical." The aging brick crumbling at the corners gave me pause. If the exterior was in such bad shape, there was no telling what the interior would look like. Elysia and I could very well be putting ourselves in danger if the inside looked as dilapidated as the exterior.

Even in Faerie, we made sure to keep up with our homes. If not, the elements made sure to sneak in and ruin things.

Elysia chuckled. "Yeah, it looks more like a home for the elderly." As she located a parking spot, she added, "Actually, I think it might have been one previously." She parked and got out, staring up at the structure that had seen better days.

The gutter on the right side hung lower than the rest and the front window had a crack in the corner. The closer I looked, the more I found wrong with the facade.

As I climbed out of the car, my concerns turned to those who worked inside. The evenings had a bite and would be turning bitter cold soon, so I hoped they were going to get the imperfections fixed before winter moved in.

I sauntered up next to Elysia on the sidewalk. “Hopefully, they take better care of the things inside than they do the outside.”

She shrugged. “We’re a small town with an even smaller budget.”

I laced my fingers with hers. “Maybe you should come to Faerie with me when this is all over.”

“To visit?” she asked.

It was my turn to shrug. “Maybe? Maybe not.” I winked and tugged her toward the front door of the historical society. “Let’s go check out some blueprints.”

My heart raced as we entered the building. Each step forward was a moment closer to finding the orb and my return to Faerie. Could I convince Elysia to go with me? Would she be happy there? Hell, would I still be content with my life in a place that ridiculed me?

While returning didn’t sound the most appealing right now, I wasn’t sure staying was a better option; not with the disdain Morgana seemingly expressed to Elysia.

Maybe if we just lived out on our own like Elysia did now, we could focus on the two of us, tucked away from society and living our best life.

At the front desk, Elysia pulled over a worn notebook and jotted down her name on an empty line, then slid it over to me. “We both have to sign in.”

“What?”

“It’s a visitors log.” She held out the pen to me that was chained to the desk.

Signing my name, I set the pen down. “Makes me wanna steal the pen out of spite.”

Elysia snorted. “Be good,” then took my hand in hers again.

I snickered, running my thumb along the back of her hand. Stealing the pen was the least naughty thing I had planned where Elysia was concerned. But those thoughts needed to wait. We were on a mission, and I needed to point all of my thoughts toward finding the blueprint before I made another move on Elysia.

We were just about to step away from the desk when an older woman approached, her curly dark hair was like heavy curtains at the edges of her face, almost covering her dark brown eyes.

“Can I help you?” Her eyes drifted down to our joined hands with a skeptical scowl that had Elysia easing her hand from mine.

“Hey, Serena.” Elysia took a step towards the counter before resting her elbow on the surface. “Morgana said to let you know she’s got that poultice ready for you.”

Serena’s assessing gaze made me tense, but I tried to shake it off as I scanned the nearby bookshelves full of ancient looking texts.

“I’ll have to stop by after work.” Serena’s response should’ve eased my anxiety, but the way she spoke through a clenched jaw only made me more restless.

“Give her a call first. We’ve had some...” Elysia paused to bite her lip before she continued, “...issues that may keep her away from the house today.”

“Will do.”

As I glanced in Serena’s direction, I didn’t miss the judgmental stare she tossed my

way. Did she know who, or what, I was? Was the animosity I felt because Elysia and I had been holding hands, or was she more than just another human in this realm?

“You ready?” Elysia asked, pulling me from my troubling thoughts.

I nodded, following a couple feet behind her as she headed deeper into the historical society. Thankfully the interior didn’t seem in as bad of disrepair as the exterior. It was a small miracle.

The dust, however, was stifling. Every breath I took was filled with the musty scent that nearly sent me into a coughing fit. “Let’s find that blueprint and get out of here as quick as we can.”

“Fine by me.” Elysia’s smile was enough to pull me out of my anxious funk.

We seemed to set out at a snail’s pace, scanning the various contents of the historical society until we came to a room with some of the larger texts. One massive bookcase full of long rolled up documents caught my eye, and I felt a pull that said I was headed in the right direction.

“Over here,” I called without ever looking back to see if Elysia followed. As I pulled the first roll from the shelf, I unwound the paper and found a blueprint inside. Unfortunately, this one was for the courthouse in the center of town; not the clock tower.

“What’d you find?” Elysia nestled in behind me, leaning so close that her body heat radiated into mine.

“It’s not the right blueprint, but at least it appears we’re moving in the right direction.” I rolled it back up, a little more haphazard than I found it and hurried onto the next.

Elysia headed to the opposite end of the bookcase, starting at the top as she began to unroll one of the blueprints to examine it. Roll after roll, we searched for the mysterious clock tower's blueprint, but as Elysia and I grew closer and closer in our search, I started to fear it wasn't here.

There was only one column of shelves left to search and I got a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. "Do you think there's somewhere else it could be?"

Elysia held an unfurled blueprint in her hands, studying the contents with a curious expression on her face.

"Did you find it?" I tucked the latest roll back in its spot as I headed Elysia's way.

"Why would the blueprints for Morgana's house be here?" She carried the drawing to a shorter set of shelves and flattened it on the surface. "This is strange." Elysia seemed enamored by one portion of the draft in particular.

"What?" I peered over her shoulder, wondering what she'd found.

"There's a room drawn on the second floor that no longer exists." She leaned closer, studying the measurements and exact location of the door.

"Maybe they decided not to add it to the floor plan." What other explanation could there be? Surely Elysia's been in every inch of that house, so she'd know if it was still there.

"I wonder if Morgana knows about these plans." While I appreciated Elysia's curiosity, time was of the essence and we came here in search of one blueprint in particular.

As I turned back toward the collection of blueprints, I noticed the clock on the wall.

“We better finish going through these rolls before this place closes.”

Elysia curled Morgana’s blueprints back up, but the lines at the corners of her eyes told me she was still unresolved about that mysterious room, real or not. Hesitantly, she reached for the tube, looking as if she’d pick it up to return it to its spot, but then left it where it lay.

“You good?” I asked as she wavered in place, her eyes glued to that document.

“Huh?” As if emerging from a trance, she looked at me, blinking the confusion from her eyes.

“Just one section to go. You coming?” If we were going to look through every last one of these before closing, I was going to need her help.

“Yeah.” She took one last look at Morgana’s plans then joined me at the shelves, taking a seat on the floor as she started at the bottom.

I pulled the first roll from the top shelf, noticing the tattered edges and stained paper as I carefully opened it. With every inch, I feared the paper would crumple in my hands. Holding my breath, I opened the document and studied the contents.

The Crystal Lantern

The letters were harder to read, written in an old English style, but as I realized what the letters said, a distant memory came to mind; one where the elders discussed what I’d assumed was an object at the time, but suddenly made so much more sense, knowing it was an actual business from yesteryear.

“Did you find it?” Elysia asked, as she returned one of the drafts back to the shelf.

I shook my head, still studying the plans and spotted a pair of runes at the bottom of the page. As I ran my thumb over the symbols, I marveled as words began to appear surrounding the outer walls of the drawing. “What the heck?”

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:21 am

Chapter

Thirteen

"The path of magic is never straight, but the journey always reveals the way."

Elysia

"That's not the blueprints for the clock tower." I sat cross-legged beside her and eyed the document. "I'm pretty sure that's where the coffee and bookshop stand now."

"Coffee and books together?" Lunara's brow eased, erasing the lines of worry as she glanced over at me. "That sounds amazing."

"Facts." I pointed to an area on the paper that appeared to be blank to me. "You're seeing words again, aren't you?"

Her eyes widened. "You can finally see them, too?"

"Unfortunately, no." I pinched the edge of the plans and lightly pulled them closer to me. "But what can you read?"

"I—" Lunara sighed. "It's a bit cryptic, but I'll read it to you."

"Beware those who seek beyond the mortal veil. Here lies a threshold marked by the ancient pact, where realms once converged under moonlight's watchful eye. The land

is bound by oath, its roots intertwined with the power of fae and mortal alike.

The lantern that once shone here was more than a beacon for weary travelers; it was a sentinel, guarding the passage between realms. The heart of this place, sealed with the Orb of Starfire, keeps the balance. Woe unto those who awaken what was meant to rest, for shadows and silver light will reclaim their due.

When the sigil's glow is mirrored in the blood of its bearer, only then will the path reveal itself. What was taken can only return where fae and mortal vows were broken."

"What do you think it means?" I glanced at the lines of words I could actually read, trying to figure out a connection. Reading the headline to myself, something familiar tugged at me. I skimmed more and gasped. "This is for The Crystal Lantern. It mentions the business was originally established by the Astor family."

"Do you know the Astors?" Lunara asked.

"Astors...Astors..." I sifted through memories, trying to figure out why that name rang a bell.

"Were they a founding family perhaps??" Lunara asked, searching my face. "Wait, when did The Crystal Lantern cease to exist?"

"One question at a time." I rolled up the aged document and set it on the floor in front of us. "I feel like I should know the Astors. I just can't place where I've heard the name. And as for The Crystal Lantern... the gods only know how many different establishments it's been through the years. It was converted to a diner before I was born and became a coffee shop and bookstore about a decade back."

Lunara stood up and then retrieved the rolled-up paper I'd placed on the floor. "I

wonder if another fae portal once existed where The Crystal Lantern was built.” Lunara gently tapped the rolled-up blueprint against her palm as she seemed to mull something over. “There were rumors floating around about human lands once owned by the fae, but they never mentioned where.”

“I’ve not felt anything magical at the Mystic Brews and Tomes, which is what the Crystal Lantern is now.” I rose from the floor, quickly dusting myself off as I tried to recall any sense of portals in any other spots in town. “Surely, I would have noticed a magical portal to another realm.”

Quirking her brow, Lunara asked, “Did you sense the portal that brought me here?” She pressed her lips into a thin line before continuing. “If whoever guarded it didn’t want it discovered, I doubt you’d know it existed.” Lunara set the roll on a nearby table and began pulling out other blueprints. In an instant, her attention returned to our task. “We still need to find the plans for the clock tower.”

“I don’t think we’re going to find them here.” I gestured to the bottom shelf that now stood empty because we’d gone through everything it held. “There’s nothing left to search through.”

Lunara’s shoulders sagged. “You’re right.”

We gathered up all the rolls and gingerly placed them back on the shelf.

“We could always go check out that coffee and book shop,” Lunara suggested. “What’s it called?”

“Mystic Brews and Tomes.” Which was fitting considering we’d just pilfered through all the tomes in the historical society.

As we stepped out into the cool, brisk air, a chill took over my body. “It’s getting

colder out here.”

“I don’t think that’s the weather.” Lunara rubbed her hands up and down her arms while looking left and right for signs of trouble. “I can feel something creeping nearby.”

I quickly looked to my car and back at her. “Do you think it’s after us?”

“I can’t tell intentions, just somewhat of a location, but I’d rather not stick around to find out.” She hightailed it over to my car and slipped inside as I hit the button to unlock the doors.

Following closely behind her movements, I dashed to the driver’s side and hopped in. “Damnit, I should have taken pictures of the blueprints for the coffee shop and Morgana’s house.”

Lunara lifted a single eyebrow. “You know... you should have.”

“We can’t go back in now.” I threw it into reverse and exited the parking lot. The need to get as far away from the dark force hovering nearby overrode needing to take pictures of anything. “Maybe we can swing by tomorrow.”

“No need.” Lunara drew a series of patterns into the air and revealed two scrolls that somehow materialized from out of nowhere.

“Lunara!”

“What? You said we needed them.” She tucked them back into the invisible pocket in front of her and sealed it with a spell. “We can look at them later.”

“But you stole them.” I huffed out a breath of frustration. “I only wanted to take

pictures of them to review.”

“Sometimes pictures don’t hold all the pieces to the puzzle.” That pondering look returned to her face as she stared blankly in front of her. “No camera is capable of capturing the magical words that appeared when I touched the blueprint.” Lunara’s hand settled on my shoulder. “With them in our possession, I can see if my heritage, or the history of a particular place can bring about any other words that may be on that one or maybe even the one for Morgana’s house.”

“You really think there’s something there that I don’t know about?” Morgana was my mentor. If there was some magical history of her property, I think she would have told me by now.

Lunara angled her head my way, pursing her lips. “Are you certain there isn’t?”

I shook off her question as I turned onto Sycamore Street and rolled to a stop at a red light. “We’re returning the blueprints as soon as we’re done with them. Got it?”

Lunara removed her hand and sighed. “I understand. We’ll return them as soon as they’re no longer needed.”

“Good.” I got through the green light and veered onto Hickory Lane then parked near the curb of the Mystic Brews and Tomes.

A gasp escaped Lunara and she clutched at her chest.

“What’s the matter?” My eyes roamed over every inch of her, trying to figure out if she was having a heart attack or a stroke. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, but I can feel that darkness following us. It can’t travel as fast as your car, but it’s inching closer and closer.” She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, then

slowly released it. “I hate the way dark energy makes me feel.”

“Should we go back to my cabin? We should be safe there with the wards?” Peering up and down the street, I expected to find some dark, nefarious black cloud drifting toward us, but all I saw were humans and witches alike meandering in and out of shops, oblivious to the evil lurking in the town.

Lunara’s face seemed paler than usual, but she shook her head. “Hopefully whatever is following us will refrain from attacking us out in the open.”

“Hopefully?” I swallowed hard. “I’d rather bank on certainty than a fleeting hope.”

Lunara shook her head. “There’s no time to waste. We need to look around the coffee shop and see if we can get any leads before more dark energy slips through the veil.” She eased out of the car and waited for me on the sidewalk. With a wave of her hand, she beckoned me to follow.

“Fine,” I grumbled to myself as I opened the car door. “We’ll just leave the safety of the car and get ourselves killed.”

“What was that?” Lunara asked.

“Nothing.” I ushered her toward the door to the establishment. “Let’s make this quick.”

Inside, the coffee shop was warm and inviting, a stark contrast to how I currently felt. The smell of roasted coffee and new books bombarded me, but I wasn’t mad about it. Old wooden beams ran across the ceiling making the place feel rustic, yet chic. Along one wall ran bookshelves filled with both fiction and older antique-looking books. As my senses took in the sights and smells and sounds, my anxiety eased a bit.

Glancing to the other side of the shop, I tried to keep my mouth from watering as I saw the counter with a display case full of pastries. Behind it, a menu written in different color chalks displayed the prices for different coffees, enchanting herbal teas, and magical-themed sweets.

“Those antique lanterns add a nice touch, don’t they?” Lunara's eyes stayed trained on the light fixtures as she gestured to the ceiling that housed a row of lights directly above the counter. Those same fixtures were sprinkled here and there over tables and couches to lend light to the darker spaces of the establishment.

“Makes you wonder if it was on purpose with what this place used to be,” I said.

“Mmmhmm.” Seemingly distracted, Lunara slowly stepped up to the pastry case then lowered her gaze to eye all the sweet morsels inside. “How do you choose?”

The cashier giggled demurely behind her hand. “It’s tough picking out just one, but might I suggest our extra-large cinnamon rolls?” She rolled open the sliding door on the back of the case, reaching a set of tongs inside toward the massive treats. “They also pair well with our cinnamon dolce latte.”

“Oh?” Lunara straightened and gave the barista a mischievous grin. “That sounds heavenly.”

I was about to ask my own question about an item in the case when my phone rang.

With my phone in hand, I answered. “Hello?”

Morgana was crying and my heart instantly plummeted as she began to speak.

Chapter

Fourteen

"Not all that is hidden is lost; sometimes it waits to be found."

Lunara

"Y ou're not serious." All color drained from Elysia's face as her eyes grew wider.

"Who is it?" I whispered while she continued to listen.

"There's no way, Morgana. There's just no way." A single tear slipped down Elysia's cheek before she rested her hand on the counter and squeezed her eyes shut. "We'll be there soon." When her eyes opened again, I found a world of pain etched into her features. Every worry line was a map laid out to showcase her grief and I wasn't sure what was wrong or how to fix it.

"What's she saying?" Part of me was scared to know the answer. Had they found out what happened to Thalia? I tugged her to the side, allowing the next customer to order.

While her shoulders fell, Elysia sighed, nearly dropping her phone from her trembling hands as she hung up.

"Elysia?" I snapped my fingers in front of her face desperate to know what she'd just learned. "What did she say?"

A hiccup escaped as she stared blankly out a nearby window. “She said—she said Nova’s dead.”

“Nova? Are you sure?” While there was no love lost for Nova’s cynical ideals, I couldn’t deny the way my stomach twisted in knots at the sight of Elysia’s single tear. I resisted the urge to wipe it away and whisper fake words of hope or how everything would be okay. She didn’t need that right now.

How much more pain was she locking deep inside?

Paying no mind to the patrons in the building, I wrapped my arm around Elysia and pulled her close. “I’m so sorry, Elysia.” My hands slid up and down her back, trying to ease her trembling body.

She eased from my grasp, looking up at me “I don’t know why I’m so upset. It’s not like we were close, but...” Another hiccup escaped her as more tears created tracks down her cheeks.

“Come on,” I urged, taking her hand in mine as I led her away from the counter toward the numerous shelves of books and trinkets.

I guided Elysia down a secluded aisle, trying to gain some privacy, but as a mother and son approached, I felt the urge to shield Elysia’s emotions and hurried her to someplace else that might be more private.

Somehow, though, every aisle seemed too exposed; the patrons were everywhere, milling about and exploring, imposing on our private moment.

A single beige curtain hung nearby, shielding its contents from the average customer. Needing to get Elysia somewhere a little less vulnerable, I tugged her hand, leading her toward that flimsy barrier.

“Where are you taking me?” Elysia dragged her feet with every step as if sorrow had filled her shoes with lead.

“Somewhere away from prying eyes.” I pushed the fabric aside, gesturing for Elysia to pass before I followed behind her, then closed us inside.

Wielding my hands, I cast a spell of protection that would hinder any passersby from eavesdropping on our conversation as I asked, “What did Morgana say?”

“Sh—she said that—” She choked on a sob. “That Nova had gone out looking for Thalia. That she...she...she’d headed toward the forest in search of her.” Elysia’s breaths grew heavier as she struggled with every word.

“It’s okay.” I pulled her against my chest, feeling her soft curves molding against mine as she melted into my embrace. “I’m here. I’ve got you.”

Elysia eased her head back, looking up at me with red rimmed eyes while her tears continued to fall. “Morgana...Morgana said that...that Nova.” She stopped, taking a deep breath before continuing. “Morgana said that they were all supposed to meet back at the house, but...but...but Nova—” Her voice cracked as her head fell against my shoulder. “They found Nova...Nova’s body...” her words were cut short by her shuttered breaths.

I ran my hands frantically up and down her back, trying to ease her pain, but knowing there was little I could do to console her as she recounted what Morgana told her.

Slowly, her head lifted from my shoulder, her face twisted in anguish, cheeks red and tear stained. “Morgana said it looked like she’d been dropped from a great height.”

My heart sank, remembering how contorted Jareth's body was after he jumped from the cliff, choosing to take his own life so he wouldn't be strapped to me for all time.

“I’m so sorry, Elysia. So truly sorry.”

The longer I held her, the more her own pain and grief seemed to seep into the depths of my soul, as if there were an invisible tether connecting us together.

“I don’t know what to do, Lunara. I just feel so useless right now.”

I framed her face in my hands, running my thumbs across her tear-stained cheeks. “You’re not useless.” I tilted her head, forcing her to look me in the eye. “Do you realize how lost I’d be if I didn’t have you here with me?”

She pulled her head from my hands, looking toward that beige curtain, gently billowing as someone passed. “First Thalia. Now Nova. Who’s next?” Elysia’s words were so soft, I wasn’t sure she intended for me to hear them, but I instantly wanted to snap her out of that way of thinking.

“Hey. You can’t think like that.” I gently shook her shoulders, drawing her attention back my way. “We’re going to find the Starfire Orb and put an end to this madness.”

“I can’t lose anyone else, Lunara.” Her head hung between us as her shoulders quivered with irrepressible sadness.

“You’re not going to lose any—” As my feet shifted to a different plank on the floor, a warmth spread beneath my shoe, humming with energy. When I wiggled my foot to figure out what was going on, a mystical energy shot up my leg. “What the—” I stared at the floorboards, noticing a gap alongside a few of the planks. My eyes followed the space, noticing a distinct square created by the gaps.

When I knelt to the floor, Elysia asked, “Did you find something?”

“I’m not sure.” I ran my forefinger along the crack, feeling that buzz of energy as I

dragged my thumb along the dusty boards. When I neared the middle of one side, I felt small grooves in one of the planks and stopped my perusal. “What’s this?” I asked, brushing away the dust to find intricate carvings that seemed to have deteriorated in the years since they were first inscribed.

When Elysia knelt beside me, she ran her fingers over the carvings and, much to both of our surprise, a soft, shimmering glow appeared from within the engravings.

“What in the world?” Elysia continued to run her fingers over the silvery light, illuminating a collection of runes. “What does it mean?”

Immediately, I recognized some of the markings. “This one...” I pointed to a rune at the center of the light. “...says Key to the forgotten gate. ”

“These are more than just runes. That one over there is a witchcraft symbol.” Elysia drug her hand along the surface, emblazoning a new section of runes and symbols. “I don’t know how to read them, but I’ve seen them in some of the books in Morgana’s library.”

As I followed behind her, I pointed to another rune. “This one says Bound by blood. Found by kin. ” My brow furrowed as I considered the last rune. “Found by kin?”

Unphased by my confusion, Elysia continued to move her hand within the square, revealing rune after rune until some sort of sigil was revealed, suddenly glowing beneath a silvery blue mist that seemed to emerge from within the floorboard.

“There must be something down here.” I returned to the rectangular gap, searching for an opening large enough to slip my finger beneath. Near the middle of one side of the square, a lip suddenly appeared, allowing me to lift a trapdoor from its resting place.

“It’s a door?” Elysia’s apparent surprise mirrored my own as I slowly lifted the square piece of wood from the floor, worried about what we might find within.

“Looks like it.” After I leaned the trapdoor against a nearby utility shelf, I peered inside the hole at a set of rickety looking stairs that appeared to descend into a black abyss of nothing.

“Should we go down?” Elysia peered into the hole, swallowed hard, and then met my gaze.

Quirking a brow, I asked, “Would you like to go first?” and gave a playful smile.

Elysia quickly shook her head, alerting me to her own apprehension.

Still, I needed to know what lay hidden beneath the floor; and why it appeared to be guarded by a magical sigil. Lying on my stomach, I lowered my head into the opening and looked around for some sign of magic or remnants of fae.

“What d’you see?”

“Not a lot.” As I spoke, a plume of dust kicked up, swirling around me, and sending me into a coughing fit. “Looks like...” Cough . Cough . “...no one’s...” Cough . Cough . “...been down here...” Cough . “...for ages.” I was just about to ease out of the hole when a glimmer of light drew my eye.

“Do you need help?” Elysia’s hand rested on my back while I continued to stare into the unknown.

“I think I see something.” Squinting my eyes, I stared at that glimmer, watching as it expanded along a far wall.

Chapter

Fifteen

"To walk between worlds, one must first understand their own."

Elysia

"What is it?" I asked, trying to lean my head into the hole next to hers, but I couldn't manage a safe enough vantage point to not lose my balance and fall in.

Lunara tilted her head to look at me. "I—I think there's a fae ley line running along the edge of this building, which is crazy!" She pushed herself up and sat back.

"Why is that crazy?" I asked. Magic had always run through this town in some capacity, whether it was fae or witch. It just so happened that it had been primarily witch for quite some time. So it didn't surprise me that there was some secret fey sorcery lingering beneath this particular historic establishment.

She shook her head and gazed at the square hole glowing faintly of magic from down below. "We've lost so much, including our ley lines. So many things have crumbled in the human realm, long forgotten, or faded away. It's almost as if the humans had tried to wipe our existence completely away."

"But there were also witchcraft symbols on the door." I nodded toward the piece of flooring leaning up against the utility shelf. The runes and witchcraft symbols were no longer glowing like before. Instead, it looked like an ordinary piece of wood

flooring.

“I just need more hazelnut creamer, Becca,” someone called out nearby.

“Shit,” Lunara muttered under her breath as her eyes widened. “Come on...”

She grabbed the square door and shooed me toward the opening.

Looked like I was the one being volun-told to be the first to go into the creepy dark hole glowing of fae magic. Could it hurt a witch?

I hoped not.

Footsteps stopped just outside the flimsy curtain. “I know! I’ll grab that, too,” the worker shouted back at whoever called orders from the coffee shop.

Jumping feet first into the hole, I landed hard against a dirt packed floor and crumpled to the ground. I’d barely rolled out of the way in time to avoid Lunara landing on top of me.

A grunt escaped her chest as she collapsed into a heap on the dirt-riddled floor beside me. Somehow, she managed to quickly recover, getting back to her full height and nearly bumping her head against the rafters overhead.

“Are you okay?” I could only marginally make out the shape of her face in the dim glow that crept through the cracks overhead.

“Shhh!” She leaned down to place her finger against my lips as the worker clomped into the storage room.

They muttered curse words above us as it sounded like they were searching the

shelves for something that may or may not be there. “I don’t see it.” The girl’s voice carried down to us even with the trapdoor firmly in place.

We remained quiet until the worker finally left, but as I pulled away from Lunara’s finger, I sent a ball of light through the room, illuminating the mysterious space. As I looked around at the area we’d fallen into, I couldn’t believe my eyes. The room was vast, stretching underneath the cafe and probably down the whole length of the block in one long hallway.

Large, gray stones lined either side of the corridor with more runes and witchcraft symbols seemingly coming to life, as the symbols became a beacon of soft blues and purples. Decrepit wooden beams extended overhead, lining the low ceiling and appearing to give minimal support to the building overhead. “There must be some serious magic keeping this place together.” My murmurings seemed to echo through the space as I lifted a hand to run my fingers along the beams.

“What is this place?” Lunara asked.

I lowered my hand and shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine.” As my fingers sensed the energy that passed through every inch of the space, I said, “There’s some serious witch magic vibrating in the stones and rafters, as if they’re teeming with life. It’s gotta be really old magic, too.”

“I’m sensing some ancient fae magic as well.” Lunara inched closer, pressing her palm against one of the rune emblazoned stones. “The fae runes are screaming at me to turn away and go no further.” Lunara winced as she took a miniscule step forward, straining against some unseen force. “I can’t do it.”

Attempting to take a step myself, I was met with resistance. “Ouch!”

Lunara growled, her hands balled into fists. “How are we going to find anything if we

can't even move beyond this point?" Her hand slapped the nearest stone. "This is some bullshit."

I gazed around at the different symbols littering the walls, both fae and witch. What had happened all those years ago that caused the witch and fae to band together to build this place? It didn't seem right.

Morgana had practically told me I was forbidden from seeing Lunara and that it was dangerous for us to be together, yet here was proof that the two races had worked alongside each other as one at some point.

"I have an idea." Capturing Lunara's hand, I gave it a squeeze. "Remember what you did in the library?"

"Um, with my powers helping you find something. Yeah?" Lunara answered skeptically.

"What if we combined our magic, shared it." Hope welled within my chest. "Maybe it's what's needed to break through this barrier."

"I thought you weren't allowed to do that." Even as Lunara said it, she moved to stand right in front of me, our noses nearly touching. "I'm forbidden, Elysia." Her mischievous smile was a temptation that I was feeling less and less able to resist.

Our breaths mingled as I searched her features. "I know I was told I shouldn't want you, shouldn't share anything with you. Hell, we shouldn't even be talking according to Morgana, but what my coven doesn't know won't hurt them." I ran my forefinger down the length of her arm, refusing to step away from her. "They don't own me."

"Are you sure?" she whispered. Her lips feathered against mine and I felt her magic pool within her hand. "There's no going back after this."

I let my own magic settle in my palm to mingle with hers and pressed my lips more firmly against hers. The space around us lit up like the Fourth of July. Fae and Witch magic alike circled around our bodies, racing in some unknown competition.

Letting my tongue dip into her mouth, I deepened the kiss as her magic soaked into my pores, weaseled its way into my body, and took up residence within my soul. I'd never felt more complete, more whole, in my life.

Lunara released my hand and raised it to sink her fingers into my hair for one last kiss before she pulled away. "That. Was?—"

"Amazing!" A shiver ran down my spine as I ached to kiss her again. "Amazing, phenomenal, and every other adjective in between."

"How is anything that glorious forbidden?" Lunara ran her fingers through my hair, combing it out, and laying it over my shoulder.

Her actions calmed my frayed nerves and while the grief still ran deep within from the loss of two friends, it no longer felt like it would consume me entirely. "That's a good question; one I don't have the answer to, but I know we're about to uncover the answer to a different one."

I took a step down the hall, meeting only a small tug of resistance before my ears popped. As I made my way through that mysterious invisible wall, I felt my breaths coming a little easier and continued forward with no problem at all.

Lunara hesitantly followed, stepping forward then immediately cringed. "Ugh, my ears."

"Same here, but keep going." Taking several steps across the dirt floor, I turned to face her, and held out my arms wide.

“We did it!” Lunara did a little jump and clapped her hands together. As she turned back to face the invisible wall, she said, “I hope there aren’t more of those walls down here. I’m not sure my ears could stand to go through that repeatedly.”

“Right?” With her attention seemingly stuck on the wall we’d just burst through, I took her hand in mine, drawing her attention to the path that continued beyond the walls of Mystic Brews and Tomes.

“Let’s keep going.” I tugged her hand, guiding our path as we made our way down the corridor. More magical symbols lit up as we passed, this time illuminating in orange and yellows.

When I glanced down, I found my skin aglow with bluish-green iridescent sparkles. I yanked up the sleeve of my jacket. “Oh my gods!”

“It’s our magic settling.” Lunara ran a finger over my forearm, mesmerized when the little sparkles swirled in her wake, then held up her own arm to show me the same thing was happening on her skin. “How beautiful.”

My stomach dipped and my steps faltered. “How am I supposed to hide this from Morgana? She’s going to notice all this magic on my skin!”

Lunara smiled sweetly. “It’ll fade soon. It’s only temporary until our magic finishes integrating. At least that’s how it works when other fae share magic.” She held up her hand, palm down, to show me the orangish glow of her own skin, then linked her fingers through mine. “No one needs to know except us.”

“Is this—is this permanent?” I asked. Not that I was worried. I totally wasn’t worried, but there were still so many what-if’s floating around in my head.

She nodded. “So long as you’ll have me. I’ve heard of fae breaking the bond, but it’s

painful and risky.”

“Oh.” The euphoria of our shared magic was still riding high in my system. Would I have any regrets later? I hoped not. So long as Morgana—or anyone else in the coven—didn’t find out, I would be good.

She ferried me down the hall, taking the lead as we walked in companionable silence; only the echo of our shoes scuffing against the ground filled the silence as the runes and sigils guided our way.

I squinted into the distance. “What is that?”

At the end of the hall stood a stone arch structure covered in moss and ivy. Little pink blooms adorned the vines here and there. A soft, green ethereal glow emanated from each stone, but I could clearly see through it to the wall beyond where the tunnel came to an end.

Lunara approached and laid a hand on the side, closing her eyes. Her silvery hair reflected the green hue emanating from the stones, giving her an unearthly appearance.

“Do you feel anything?” I held my breath as she concentrated.

“The ley lines seem off. It’s like they’ve shifted since this archway was erected.” She opened her eyes and searched the area. “That must mean that the fae portal was moved somewhere else.” With her hand moving from stone to stone, she closed her eyes once again. “It’s as if the fae magic was stripped away in order to allow the witch magic to take over.” Her eyes flew open, wide as saucers. “I can feel remnants of the fae magic, like this place was once sacred, but somewhere along the way, what once belonged to my people was stolen and all that remains is the witch magic that now runs through this place.”

“You think witches are behind this?” I grew a bit defiant, feeling as though Lunara was casting judgment on my sisters.

“I don’t know.” She peeled her hand from the wall and turned to face me. “All I can say is that, based on the proximity of the ley lines and the fact that the sacred fae magic has almost completely been removed, someone must be responsible for relocating the portal.”

“But why would anyone want to move a portal? It seemed safe enough down here, hidden behind that invisible barrier.”

She shrugged, her head lowering slightly. “All I know is that ley lines need fae magic in order to work properly.”

“Do you think the Starfire Orb could have been here and they moved the portal and the orb at the same time?” I asked.

Lunara began lightly running her hand over the stone walls. “Probably not. They wouldn’t want two magical items too close together.” Her index finger paused, hovering over one rune in particular. “I’ve never seen this one before.” She leaned closer, studying the intricate lines and curves. “It looks like a combination of time and power if I’m reading it correctly.”

“What did you say the runes on the trap door said?” I wandered over and took a good look at the symbol she was pointing to.

She lowered her hand and looked away in thought. “ Key to the forgotten gate and Bound by blood, found by kin . But none of it makes any sense. With it being mixed with witchcraft runes, is it talking about fae kin or witch kin?”

“Maybe the gate is the portal,” I suggested. “And with it having both sets of symbols,

maybe it's blood from both?"

"But I don't know what to do with that information even if it's correct. With the fae magic gone, I just feel stuck." Lunara sagged against the wall and lowered her head. "Like we're at a dead end. Literally."

Suddenly, the wall gave way and Lunara fell through it with a scream as dust and debris clouded between us, cutting everything off from view.

"Lunara! "

Chapter

Sixteen

"Beware the power you summon, for it may ask more than you offer."

Lunara

The stones seemed to have disappeared, at least from my vantage point, but as Elysia continually called my name, I realized she couldn't see beyond that wall to where I now stood. "I'm okay," I called, watching terror turn to panic as her hands pressed against the stones between us.

Stretching out my arms, I reached for her hands, but there was no way back through. An impenetrable force field seemed to have emerged between us. If I didn't know better, I'd think that Morgana had something to do with this, trying to keep us apart.

Elysia grew more panicked, moving her hands from side to side along the wall as she seemingly searched for a path through, but something kept us separated; her in that long, mysterious tunnel and me now trapped in a tomb of sorts.

Why was this small room hidden and how did I pass through, but Elysia was still trapped on the other side? The only way to find the answers was to search, but Elysia was quickly crumbling into hysterics and everything in me wanted to burst back through that wall to console her.

"It's okay, Elysia. I'm okay." Even though I shouted the words, it was obvious she

didn't hear any of it.

Tears streamed down her face as she crumpled to the floor. "Please be okay, Lunara. I don't think I can help the coven without you." As she said the words, the ball of light she'd created to illuminate our path slowly dissipated, leaving us in almost complete darkness.

I hated that she had so little faith in herself, but there was nothing I could do to help her right now. I had to keep my wits about me so I could discover why I ended up passing through alone and how to get out of this crypt.

There was little light around me. What I could see was thanks to the magic that still hadn't settled against my skin. Once that soft shimmer sank into my body, I'd be in utter darkness. When that happened, I'd have some hysterics of my own. I'd never liked completely dark spaces. I was used to the moon, stars, and lightning bugs adding a subtle glow to my world when the sun set.

With little time to investigate my surroundings, I got to work, feeling the walls, searching for sigils, trying to find another way out.

"Lunara." I turned to face Elysia, expecting to find she'd finally found her way through the stone wall, but she was still cowering on the other side of the wall.

As I spun around to survey the space, I heard my name called again.

"Who's there?" There was barely enough room for me, so I wasn't sure where this other person was hiding.

As I continued to spin around, searching for the other party in question, the woman's voice spoke again. "The face you seek will not appear. My words remain, but I'm not here."

“Riddles? Really?” I groaned, turning to study Elysia’s trembling figure as she continued to sit on the floor with her knees to her chest, arms wrapped around her legs.

“Your derision seeks to destroy.” At least her words didn’t come in some stupid rhyme this time.

I sank to the cold ground, leaning against the wall that divided Elysia and I. I needed to be close to her, even if I couldn’t console her myself. Turning my head upward, I asked the darkness, “Who are you?”

“I am who I am.”

My hands flew to my scalp and I grabbed onto my hair. “Oh my gods. If you don’t start explaining yourself soon, I’m going to lose my shit.” It was bad enough being separated from Elysia so soon after joining our magic, but to have to deal with so many cryptid messages at the same time was suffocating.

“The answers you seek will not be found here. You must first calm yourself. I will not share my wisdom with an errant child.”

As my ire swirled around in my chest, I forced a few deep breaths, struggling to bury the anger I felt rising up within me. While I wasn’t exactly apologetic for my attitude, I needed to at least pretend to be so I could get some answers and maybe make my way back to Elysia. “I’m sorry. Please continue.”

“Very well.”

I breathed a sigh of relief, satisfied that I’d convinced her I was actually sorry.

“The Orb you seek lies in a place where time itself trembles, where the veil between

worlds is thin. You will not find it easily, for its heart is not yours to claim.”

“Then why did the elders send me here?” Nothing made sense anymore.

“I do not speak for the elders, but know this, child of two worlds: the blood you carry is both a gift and a curse. The Orb will not be swayed by your human desires, nor will it bend to your fae blood’s whims. Should you reach for it, there will be a reckoning. The price may not come at once, but when it does, it will be a debt of more than just blood.”

“Are you saying they sent me here to die?” Why else would they send a half-breed to search for an artifact that might squelch my light?

“Do not ask me of the elders again. I only speak of what I know, so listen carefully. The path you walk is winding, and those who have sought it before you have paid the cost in ways they did not foresee. Your fate is not written in the stars, but in the ripples of your choices. Choose carefully, for the Orb will see through you—its gaze will pierce your soul, and you will never be the same.”

I was growing tired of this woman’s riddles. It would be so much nicer if she could just tell me what I needed to know. “Fine. I should be careful with the orb. Anything else you want to ominously hint at?” There was no point in hiding my anger any longer. It’s not like she was actually giving me gems here.

“I leave you with one final warning: Do not think to turn back, for the moment you seek it, you are already bound to its will.”

“The fuck.” I stood from the ground, still staring at the ceiling. “Bound to its will? Are you serious?”

I waited for a response, but I was met with only silence.

“Hello?” I began turning in circles again, searching for something I could not see.
“Hello? Are you still there?”

The voice was gone and I was alone. Worse yet, the magic that had sparkled against my skin had receded back beneath the surface, leaving me in utter darkness.

Panic clenched my chest in a vice. I didn’t want to be trapped in this pitch-black room all by myself. How was I going to find a way out when I didn’t fully understand how I’d gotten in?

My breath came in shallow gasps as I felt along the rough walls. There had to be some kind of door or mysterious tunnel I hadn’t seen earlier when I had that faint light from my skin illuminating the space.

I turned to a different wall when I found nothing on the previous one. As I reached out my hands, feeling for its surface, the darkness seemed to close in and swallow me whole. The room wasn’t that large, but as I leaned forward, expecting the wall to catch me, only air greeted me as Elysia cushioned my fall.

“Oww.” Elysia’s painful moan had me scampering off of her.

“I’m so sorry, Elysia.”

She didn’t respond. Instead, her arms wrapped around me in a crushing hug as she plastered me with kisses.

“Hey, what’s all this?” I asked, easing her back so I could get a better look at her.

Her head lowered, keeping her expression hidden. “I thought you’d passed through a portal and returned to fae.” Her soft sniffles nearly had me in tears of my own. “I didn’t know if I’d ever see you again.”

“You think I’d leave without saying goodbye?” I swiped her tears from her cheeks as I forced her to look into my eyes. “Besides, we have an orb to find.” Even if the damn thing might kill me.

With a gentle nod, she gave a half-smile and appeared to swallow down her emotions. After I gave her a moment to collect herself, I stood from the ground, then offered my hand to help her up as well.

When she was back on her feet, she asked, “If you didn’t go to faerie, where’d you go? What’d you see?” She glanced at the stone wall that had separated us for a time, her brow scrunched up in concentration.

I gave a half-hearted shrug, wondering how much I should tell her. There was a good chance if she knew that my life might be in danger because of that stupid orb, she would stop me from pursuing it. But she and her coven needed it if we were to put a stop to the impending darkness that continued to break through the veil. “Honestly, I didn’t see much. The only light came from our collective magic but...” I held out my arm, showing her that our shared magic had returned from whence it came. “...my last few moments were shrouded in darkness—literally.”

Elysia snickered. “Did you find the orb?”

I shook my head, then linked my hand with Elysia’s before I led us back towards the coffee shop. We walked in relative silence and made it past the barrier, our ears popping once more. If I thought Elysia would drop it, I was wrong.

“So, you didn’t see anything and you didn’t find the orb.” Her hand slipped from mine as she halted our progress. “Then why were you gone so long?”

I spun around to face her, anxiety trembling through my body. I couldn’t tell her. “I was trapped in there.” I took a step toward her, but she wavered as if she might put

some distance between us. “I could see you and hear you, but I couldn’t make it back through no matter what I did.”

“Yet, here you are.” Her arms crossed as I felt her mentally begin to close herself off from me, putting some space between us, just not physically. She hadn’t stepped back, but I could feel her magic pull away from me, and it made my heart ache.

“When—when the room finally went black, I reached for the walls. I felt around frantically as I blindly tried to find my way around, and I—I just fell through.” I couldn’t stand the distance stretching between us and stepped forward, reaching for both of her hands, needing her to believe me. Because I feared telling her the real truth might kill us both. I gave her hands a gentle squeeze. “And that’s how I ended up on top of you.”

She shook her head, keeping it lowered. “I must say, it’s not exactly the way I figured you’d end up on top of me again.” A teasing grin emerged as she finally met my gaze again.

“If that’s what you want, then...” I backed her against the wall and pressed my mouth against hers with a fiery kiss, our magic sizzling across my skin.

Chapter

Seventeen

"A witch's heart is her compass; where it points, the magic follows."

Elysia

It was definitely what I wanted, but I also needed her to be honest with me. I didn't like that it felt like she was holding something back. All that worry melted away though as her lips met mine. The shared magic between us warmed my skin and brightened the area around us as our skin glowed, even as the cold wall of the tunnel pressed against my back.

Lunara's lips set on a trail across my jaw down my neck to my collar bone. Each touch of her soft mouth sent flutters through my body.

"Is this wise to do here?" I asked as reality came crashing back. This wasn't in the confines of my bedroom where we were safe and in private. "Maybe we should?—"

Teeth grazed my shoulder, and a low growl brushed my ear, sending goose bumps along my flesh. All reason fled me as I dug my nails into her jacket and leaned my head back. "Lunara. The things you do to me."

She chuckled softly as she stepped back, threw off her coat, and ripped her shirt over her head. Both landed on the dirt floor at her feet. Her eyes swept from my face to my feet as she looked me over. "We have entirely too much on." With an enticing smile,

she shimmied out of her pants.

“What if someone comes down here?” I was stalling, I knew I was. Memories of the bedroom in Morgana’s house flashed through my mind. She’d made me climax so hard with just her fingers. I couldn’t imagine what else she could do to my body. This was all uncharted territory.

And I needed a map.

But even GPS wasn’t going to help me navigate my way around this. Swallowing my nervousness, I let out a shaky breath and followed her lead. After I discarded my jacket, she stepped up and grabbed the hem of my shirt, balling the material in her fists.

“Let me,” she purred, pulling the fabric over my head before letting it fall to the ground. Her gaze locked on mine as she reached down and grabbed the waistband of my skirt. Without breaking eye contact, she squatted and took the garment with her. “I’d forgotten the no underwear thing. Just means one less thing in the way.”

As she rose, I kicked the skirt off my feet and shoved it to the side with my toes. My heart pounded in my chest as a vision of her between my legs took over my mind. It was only a split second, but it was enough to make me weak in the knees. I’d never gotten premonitions like that before.

“You okay?” she asked as I wobbled in place. “Gods know I don’t want to stop, but if you’re not —”

I shook my head, halting her words as my cheeks flushed. I had to find my inner confidence to see where this led. Especially when I’d never shied away from men before. With the opposite sex, I found myself willingly accepting the challenge they brought. This would be no different.

Actually, I was hoping it would be different. This—whatever this was with Lunara—needed to be the thing that broke the cycle of horrible relationships.

As her eyes roamed my face, I finally said, “Just touch me.”

Her eyes sparkled with something devious as her lips crashed into mine. She devoured me like I was the last piece of cake and she wasn’t sharing. As her hands cupped my face, I reached behind me and undid my bra, letting it join the ever-growing pile below.

One hand left my cheek to cup a breast and she greedily kneaded it with her hand, rolling the nipple around as she swallowed my moans of pleasure.

“Mmm,” she murmured against my lips. “Your body feels perfect pressed against mine. She bit her lip as her eyes appeared to grow heavy with desire. I’m aching to taste you again.” She tugged me away from the wall and pushed me toward the slanted ladder.

I fell against the wood and gazed up at the trap door, knowing how well we heard the worker earlier when she was up there. “Someone is going to find us.”

“Not if you keep quiet.” Lunara dropped to her knees and wrapped her arms around my thighs.

She gave a tentative lick over my clit and I whimpered. “If we’re found out, this all stops.”

My hands fumbled for purchase on either side of the ladder as her head dipped between my legs once more. Her tongue was heaven as she licked around my clit, but as soon as she sucked it between her lips, I couldn’t contain the moans any longer.

“Oh gods,” I cried out, panting as I tried to hold in the next moan when she easily slid a finger into my wet pussy.

She let a second digit join the first. “I love that all this is for me,” she said between licks and nibbles. She crooked her fingers inside of me, hitting just the right spot. “No other woman has possessed you the way I am right now.”

My toes curled and I nearly slid down the ladder if not for the death grip my hands had on the railing. “Lunara,” I whispered between soft whimpers and choked down moans. “I’m—I’m so close.”

“Come for me, Elysia.” Lunara picked up the pace with her fingers, watching me grind and writhe on her hand, helping to escalate my own pleasure.

“Ahh!” My mouth fell open as my core clenched around her fingers. My body spasmed and shuddered as the pleasure washed over me in waves. “Good gods almighty, Lunara...”

She removed her fingers and licked up one side of her index finger and then down the other. “Victory tastes sweet, don’t you think?”

“Was I something to conquer?” I quirked a brow as I caught my breath.

“No, my dear. You were the prize.” She smirked and crooked a finger at me. “Come down here and sit. Rest.”

I sank to the ground and rested my head back against one of the steps. “Do you think anyone heard us?”

“You.” Her shoulder playfully bumped into mine. “You mean did anyone hear you.” She pressed a soft kiss against my neck as she teased, “Probably.” Lunara sat

confidently in her bra and panties, looking rather proud of herself.

She never got the favor returned to her in Morgana's spare bedroom and I still felt guilty for that. Though, we'd been interrupted and hadn't really had the chance to do anything else. I leaned forward and crawled over Lunara, forcing her to lay back.

"Elysia?" She gave a questioning look.

"Yes, Lunara?" I kissed her, my arms braced on either side of her body. My biceps shook, having had quite the workout from gripping the ladder earlier. Hell, my whole body ached deliciously from her, but I wasn't complaining.

Lunara broke the kiss and shook her head. "I know?—"

I pressed a finger to her lips. "Shh! Let me make you feel good." I placed languid kisses down her body, feeling little tremors with each press of my lips. I wanted to affect her as much as she affected me.

Easing her panties off, I tossed them aside, then placed soft, open-mouthed kisses across her hips. Each one went lower and lower until I teased the crease of her thigh.

She wiggled beneath me. With each lick, she spread her legs a little wider.

I stared at the junction of her thighs, trying to figure out what I wanted to do next.

"You're thinking too hard, Elysia." Her hand gently stroked the crease between my brow. "Just envision what you'd want done to you." Lunara ran her hand through my hair with the softest touch. "And you don't have?—"

I licked right up her center from the bottom of her wet opening to her clit, tasting all of her at once.

Lunara sucked in a breath so hard she nearly choked. “Dear gods. Warn a girl before you do something like that.”

Grinning, I lightly ran my nails over her thigh. “I’ll try to remember that next time.” My fingers walked over to her folds, teasing the edges of her opening. Her skin glistened from the moisture both from her and me. Secretly, I reveled in the fact that I was now in control.

“You still seem...hesitant.”

“Not hesitant, just pensive.”

“C’mere.” She guided me up and settled me against her.

What was she doing? I’d told her I’d wanted to give her pleasure.

“I don’t want you to overthink this.” Her hands briefly caressed my face before she shifted a little. “Let’s try something we can both enjoy.” She pressed her leg between mine and shifted a bit so one of my legs fell between hers.

And then she began moving.

“Oh!” The friction between us was sinful.

She ground her pussy against my leg and her soft moans echoed throughout the chamber.

“Shh!” I cautiously looked up at the trap door.

She pressed the leg between my thighs up against me. “Make me.”

I bit my lip and tried to contain the moan within my throat. “Fine!” My fingers tangled into her hand, pulling her head up as our lips crashed together. Opening her mouth, our tongues tangled together, each of us swallowing the other’s moans as we ground against each other.

We were nothing but a tangle of limbs, lips, and roaming hands as each moved against the other at a fevered pace. With each thrust against her, it brought me closer and closer again to climax.

Our skin began to shimmer the same way it had when we’d shared our magic the first time. I glanced at her forearm and saw it grow brighter with each passing second.

“Lunara?” I asked, concerned.

She shook her head, panting. “Don’t. Stop.”

I could tell she was close, because I was right there with her.

“Oh gods!” Squeezing my eyes shut, I saw stars as the first wave of my orgasm split me in two. Opening my eyes, I saw the whole tunnel was aglow in a greenish hue...from us .

My whole body convulsed from the pleasure and I could feel Lunara shuddering beneath me as well, her eyes squeezed shut like mine were moments ago.

I rolled off her and onto my back to find sparkles floating and swirling within the air like some magical fog around us. “What in the...”

“Our shared climax creates some pretty powerful sex magic.”

“Sex magic?”

“Yeah.” Lunara raised up on her elbows, breathing heavily. “Between two fae, it can help charge a spell that one of them might not be able to do on their own. I can only imagine it would have similar effects between a hybrid fae and a witch”

Suddenly, footsteps could be heard on the trap door.

Chapter

Eighteen

"One spark of doubt can smother even the brightest flame of magic."

Lunara

With her lips brushing against the shell of my ear, Elysia whispered, "What if they come down here."

As a shiver traveled up my spine, I eased away from her, snatching my panties from the ground, before slipping them on. "This place had been abandoned for years before we discovered it." I gathered up the rest of my clothes, dressing quickly, just in case. "I highly doubt they'd discover it now." Still, I didn't want to be in a state of undress if I was wrong.

Elysia followed suit, grabbing her clothes and haphazardly throwing them on, paying no mind to which direction her skirt sat on her hips. "Why do you seem worried?"

As the footsteps continued overhead, I kept my gaze focused on the sound. "Because we don't exactly have permission to be down here."

She blinked a couple times, weighing my response. "But you said?—"

I ripped my stare from the trapdoor, turning my strained brow on Elysia. "I know what I said." With my jacket back on my shoulders, I zipped it up halfway in the off

chance I'd put my shirt on wrong-side-out.

"We're going to get caught." Elysia's hands clung to the stairs as if they might somehow save her from a precarious situation.

Growing weary of my time in this tunnel, and feeling the weight of that ominous message on my shoulder, I gave a clipped response. "We're not going to?—"

Elysia's phone rang from her pocket, cutting off my words as it echoed off the surrounding walls, announcing our location to anyone in the vicinity.

"Shit." She fumbled around for her phone, barely sparing it a glance as she silenced it as quickly as possible. "Do you think they heard that?"

Wide-eyed, I lowered my head and flattened my lips in a judgmental line. "The only way they didn't hear it is if they can't hear at all."

"Hello?" A wary female voice called from overhead, answering Elysia's question.

"What if they come down here? What if they realize we'd been poking around the back room and?—"

I covered her mouth with my hand as a soft scratching sound echoed overhead.

"Is there someone down there?" If the inquiring woman poked around long enough, she would definitely discover the mysterious trapdoor and find us cowering down here where we didn't belong.

I kept my hand on Elysia's mouth, gently guiding her to a darkened corner in case the worker managed to find our hiding spot. While our skin still glowed with our shared magic, I tucked our exposed skin between us as best we could and waited with bated

breath.

“Hello?” the voice called again.

I begged the gods with everything in me to prevent the woman from opening that hatch. Seconds felt like minutes as my lungs felt the strain of limited oxygen.

When the footsteps finally receded, I breathed the smallest sigh of relief.

Once I removed my hand from Elysia’s mouth, she asked, “What do we do now?”

I shrugged, taking a step back from Elysia lest we end up in another precarious situation.

“How are we going to get out of here without being caught?”

She had a lot of questions that I didn’t have the answers to.

“I’ll go up first and see if the coast is clear.”

As I started to walk away, she snatched my hand, stopping me. “And if it’s not?”

“I’ll wing it.” It wouldn’t be the first time I had to explain why I was somewhere I didn’t belong. Not that I ever felt like I truly belonged no matter where I was.

I placed one foot on the bottom rung and instantly felt Elysia tugging on my jacket. “Wait.”

“What?” I spun around and ended up back in her arms as she plastered a kiss to my lips. When she released me, my eyes slowly opened. “What was that for?”

“For luck.” She offered a smile that had my heart beating a mile a minute. This connection we had was even stronger after sharing our magic. I didn’t know what I was going to do if she couldn’t or wouldn’t go back to Faerie with me.

I gave a smile in return, keeping my eyes on hers a moment longer before I ascended the stairs, then slowly hefted the hatch open a fraction as I peered into the private space.

With the light overhead suddenly blinding me, I was forced to blink a few times before my irises adjusted. I just hoped I didn’t end up face-to-face with one of the workers, forced to explain away how I ended up in this tunnel beneath their shop.

As the room slowly came into focus, I scanned my surroundings to find the woman who had called out moments ago was now gone. With the back room now safe, I pushed the trap door open, carefully resting it on the shelves before I climbed out.

“Coast is clear,” I whisper-yelled to Elysia and watched as she scampered up the stairs.

As her head jutted out from inside the tunnel, she took a moment to look around before setting her feet on the wooden planks that separated the shop from the tunnel below. “Let’s get out of here,” she said once she cleared the final step.

“You read my mind.” I did my best to lower the trap door quietly back into place, slowing its descent as the hinges gave a disobedient creak. When I felt the wood settle into place, I snuck toward the beige curtain that concealed our presence and stuck my head out, scanning for witnesses.

With no one in sight, I grabbed Elysia’s hand and yanked her out of the back room, darting down a side aisle before traversing the outer wall of the shop.

I barely had time to even think about breathing as I hauled us through the shop and out the front door.

As the fall breeze whipped around us, I finally took the opportunity to inhale a full breath as I leaned over, resting my palms on my thighs.

“Holy shit, that was exhilarating,” Elysia squealed as she caught her breath.

“Wanna go for round two?” I grabbed her hand, pulling her close.

“If you keep plying me with amazing sex, we’re never going to find that orb.” While her words may have been in opposition to my proposition, her hands roamed up and down my arms as if she could be convinced.

I shrugged, trying to hide my newfound disdain for the orb. “Orb, schmorb.”

Elysia laughed, playfully swatting my arm as she walked around me, heading to her car. “Joke all you want, but I know how important it is to you and the rest of your people.”

I was just about to tell her I no longer cared about the stupid artifact when her phone began to ring again.

Elysia withdrew her phone from her pocket and stared at the screen. “It’s Morgana. I should probably get this.”

As she spoke, I felt an icy chill in the fall wind and began looking around for the dark entity that had slowly begun taking over Hallow Ridge Grove.

Elysia stepped to the edge of Mystic Brews and Tomes while I waited alongside her car.

“No. No. NO!” She cried, tears pouring down her face again.

Shit. That wasn’t good.

I rushed to her, pulling her into my embrace as she white-knuckled the phone and listened to Morgana.

“She’s really gone?” Her voice trembled with every word.

That was really not good.

“First Nova. Now Thalia?” Elysia took a rattled breath. “We have to find out who’s behind this.”

I kept her close, running my hand up and down her back in an effort to console her.

While she didn’t pull away, I wasn’t exactly sure she realized I was there beside her, but that didn’t stop me from supporting her through this.

“I’ll be there soon.” It was the last thing she said before she hung up the phone.

I tried to pull her closer, but she eased from my grasp, sending an anvil ripping through my chest. When I couldn’t take the distance between us, I asked, “They found Thalia?” My words were solemn and cautious.

Elysia nodded, pressing her back against the bookshop’s outer wall. “I need to get back to Morgana’s before someone else goes missing.”

“I’ll come with you.” I stayed at her side, joining her as she rushed back to her car.

“No.” She stopped cold in her tracks. “You need to find the orb.” When she wouldn’t

meet my gaze, I knew there was no changing her mind. “We’ve gotta put a stop to whatever is tearing apart my family.”

I knew when I wasn’t wanted. Still, it ripped my heart out to think that Elysia didn’t want me with her, especially after what transpired in the tunnel beneath the shop. “Fine.” I tucked my hands inside my pockets, more out of a need to hide my emotions than to ward off the chill. “You go be with your family .” I didn’t even try to hide the disdain I felt toward being excluded from Elysia’s crisis.

“Lunara.” She called after me, but I was already walking toward the center of town. “Lunara, I’m sorry.”

I shook my head, refusing to turn back. I didn’t want to see the look of sadness on Elysia’s face. I didn’t want to feel the pain I knew she was experiencing. I just wanted to find answers and maybe, potentially, find the demise of my life on this planet.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:21 am

Chapter

Nineteen

"True power lies in knowing when to speak and when to remain silent."

Elysia

Sitting outside of Morgana's house, my heart broke in two for multiple reasons. I couldn't get the utter betrayal evident in Lunara's last words out of my head. Part of me just needed to be alone, but I also knew that Morgana would not take kindly to seeing Lunara.

I wasn't sure why she held such a deep hatred for Lunara. Was it just because she was fae? Was it because we were of the same sex and getting romantically involved? I knew Morgana didn't want me mixing magic with her, which...

Oops, too late .

But was that the only reason?

Wiping my tears away, I looked at all the cars parked around Morgana's. They were all waiting for me. She'd told me to meet her here so we could all carpool over to Thalia's. Rowan was already over there working to secure the area and ward off any evil that may be lingering. With her knowledge of herbs, she was a huge asset to the coven.

As I went to turn off the car, something on the radio caught my attention. I twisted the knob to turn the volume up, leaning in to listen.

“...and craziness has ensued. Several arguments have broken out between townsfolk in downtown Hallow Ridge Grove this evening. One such altercation ended in a stabbing and two women have already been arrested. Authorities are uncertain of what to make of this strange turn of events, but the mayor is calling for a 10 o’clock curfew tonight...”

I shut the car off and thanked the gods that I’d left downtown before all that had started. Did it have anything to do with the darkness creeping in? Did it affect humans differently? I knew there was a power greater than our coven and humans weren’t supposed to know about the existence of magic. But what would happen if?—

“Oh no...Lunara,” I whispered as I stared out the windshield at the leaves blowing across the road. I’d left her without transportation, but she’d been well on her way out of the area beforehand. With no cell phone, I had no way to contact her to see if she was alright. My only hope was that she’d made it far enough away from the area before chaos ensued.

Slowly pushing my car door open, I ground my teeth as it creaked in protest, wondering if it cried out in an effort to prevent me from going inside. The goddess knew I was dragging my feet without my car’s apparent objection. It was time to get this over with, however. I only hoped Lunara could find the orb and set everything right between our two worlds before someone else got killed.

After trudging up the driveway, I knocked on the door lightly. It instantly swung open and Morgana’s eyes widened in response, before looking beyond me.

“She’s not with me,” I said softly. I didn’t have much left in me to even argue, let

alone explain.

“Come, girls. We should get going. Rowan’s waiting.” Before I could enter, Morgana ushered the rest of the coven out the door. She brought up the rear of the group, but stopped to stand beside me on the porch, arms crossed. “Did you drop her off in the woods by your house like I asked?”

I side-eyed her, but remained calm despite wanting to tear her heart out so she could feel the way I did right now. “I didn’t have to. We went our separate ways after visiting downtown looking for clues.”

“Good, good.” She nodded sagely, like she held all the wisdom in the world. I didn’t know who she was anymore. She didn’t act like the mentor I had grown up with. I never thought she’d be such a hypocrite. She’d always preached inclusivity and acceptance of others, yet she’d shunned Lunara.

Morgana couldn’t even do it to her face either. She’d acted like everything was okay, asking for her help when she needed it, but when she was out of sight, she chastised me for even talking to her. When all of this was over, and the town was hopefully saved, where did I stand in the scheme of things? I was no longer sure if I wanted to stay in this coven.

When I remained silent, Morgana pointed to her car. “You can ride with me.”

What she wasn’t saying was she wanted to keep an eye on me. She viewed me as a liability. Nervously rubbing my forearms, I wondered if she could sense the fae magic swirling inside of me, mixing with my own, and changing me for the better. Lunara was the best thing that had ever happened to me and I’d abandoned her.

I bit my bottom lip to keep the tears at bay as we descended the porch stairs and divided up among two cars.

At Thalia's house, the mood was somber, which was to be expected. We'd just lost another friend and coven member. She'd been found at the edge of the woods, no tracks, no trace of how she'd gotten there. Not even any drag marks. It's like she'd been tortured in midair, but then dumped on the ground when whatever had taken her had had their fun.

Morgana stood at my right side, Rowan on my left, and the rest of the coven created a circle within the salt that had been poured around the body. A single candle rested by Thalia's hands, the flame flickering in the autumn breeze.

We'd created a sacred space to send off Thalia's spirit into the afterlife. I wished we could have known what had happened, but without any concrete evidence of whether it was a human or something supernatural, we couldn't get the authorities involved.

Rowan had wiped down Thalia's body with rosemary, sage, and lavender to help cleanse her body and soul, protect it from evil, and send it off on a good note. Hopefully the cleansing process also made her less of a cynic. An eternity with her attitude would be exhausting.

Morgana leaned down and dripped moon water onto Thalia's forehead. "May the sacred moon water purify her soul and guide her in her transition to the spirit realm. Tonight, we honor Thalia Moonstone. She was a caring and empathetic individual. She loved deeply and without judgment. She was an excellent healer and great student. She will be truly missed."

I choked back a snort. Thalia may have loved without judgment, but Morgana sure didn't.

Morgana raised both hands into the air. "Let us connect as one, solidify our circle, and send off Thalia properly!"

We all joined hands and began our incantation.

"By the light of the moon and the warmth of the flame,

We send you onward, free of pain.

Through the veil, where spirits dwell,

May you find peace, and fare thee well.

So mote it be."

The flame flickered out on its own, sending a trail of smoke into the air to eventually fade away. Thalia was gone. I did have a few fond memories of her and I'd still miss her.

"Rowan, Aeron, and Cassia will stay behind," Morgana commanded after closing the circle. "The rest of us will head back to my house to prepare for our Circle of Remembering."

She guided the chosen few of our coven back toward Thalia's house and out to the driveway. Rowan, Aeron, and Cassia were left with the daunting task of burying our departed coven member. Back at Morgana's we would gather, cook and eat food, and reminisce about the stories of our fallen sister.

I slid into the passenger seat of Morgana's car and realized no one else occupied the back seat. Swallowing hard, I knew the ride alone with her would be tense.

Morgana shoved the keys into the ignition, but paused as she turned to me. "I hope you're happy."

“About what?”

“Cavorting with that fae is probably what brought this darkness to our town.” The engine roared to life and Morgana revved it several times in her anger.

“What?” I stared at her in disbelief. “This is not her fault. That mysterious darkness was outside my cabin before Lunara even showed up at my door.”

“I’m sure the darkness followed her here.” Morgana pulled out of the driveway and turned toward her house just up the street. “You can’t trust the fae.”

Morgana was way off base, even if I could shake the feeling that Lunara was keeping something from me. We hadn’t known each other long, but she’d been open and honest up until the tunnel.

What had changed?

“Nothing to say to that?” Morgana asked.

I rolled my eyes, refusing to look at her. “Not that you’ll want to hear.” I squeezed my eyes shut against the onslaught of grief. “I think it’s best if we keep our thoughts directed at sending Nova and Thalia off with our head in a better space.”

Morgana’s expression softened. “Blessed be.”

Everyone processed loss differently, but Morgana was our high priestess. How did she not feel like she’d been hit in the gut twice with all of this? She should be just as teary eyed as me. Probably more. The optimist in me wanted to believe that she planned to have a breakdown later about it and was barely holding on by a thread? But who could tell?

After she parked behind Isla in the driveway, we sat in silence for a moment. When she shut the engine off, I went to reach for the handle but Morgana called my name, pausing my exit.

“You know I only have your best interests in mind.” She placed her hand on my shoulder. “I worry about you.” Suddenly, her hand was ripped away as if she'd been bitten by a snake. “I can still feel her on you.”

Using Lunara's words from earlier, I nonchalantly shrugged. “It'll fade.” I exited the car and bolted into the house trying to avoid anything else she wanted to talk to me about. If it had to do with Lunara, I was leaving. I couldn't take anymore of her incessant lectures.

Morgana brushed past me and nodded toward the second floor. “There's something I want to show you.”

Stopping at the bottom of the stairs, I white knuckled the railing. “What?”

She turned around halfway up the steps. “I found some old photos of your mother I thought you'd like to have.”

My heart lurched in my chest. I missed my mom so much and I didn't have many pictures left of her after the house fire.

How much more heartache was I going to endure tonight?

Chapter

Twenty

"In the stillness of the moon's light, truth dances in shadows."

Lunara

I 'd made it halfway up the street when I realized how ridiculous this was. Sure, I was angry that Elysia excluded me from her pain, but that didn't mean I wanted to search for the Starfire Orb alone. After that mysterious voice's ominous warning, I no longer knew if I wanted to look for it at all.

Hallow Ridge Grove may have been in danger because of some dark entity, but that didn't affect me nearly as much as Elysia's distancing did. If it weren't for my feelings for her, I'm not sure I'd still be searching for that damn artifact, especially if the elders knew my connection to it could put me in danger.

Feeling more selfish than ever, I pushed the safety of Hallow Ridge Grove and all of Faerie from my mind, and turned back toward Morgana's house. Elysia may not have wanted me there, but I had to show her how important she was to me and that our joined magic was about more than just some ritual.

I set out at a brisk pace, completely ignoring my surroundings as I marched toward the outskirts of town. I'd made it at least a half mile when that unsettling chill crept in again, like sharpened icicles raking down my back.

Stopping in the middle of the street, I looked left and right for the menacing force that brought about the bitter cold. There was no sign of any sinister being, but shouts and screams reached my ears from up the street, and I broke out in a run to see what all the commotion was about.

As I rounded the next street corner, I saw a pair of men fighting alongside a head-on collision. One man forced the other into a headlock and began punching him in the ribs while a woman stood on the sidewalk, watching the scene unfold.

A little farther down, a group of well-dressed women used rakes and shovels to bash in the window of a small diner while a pair of waitresses watched in horror from inside.

While I hadn't spotted the dark force that created the melee, I knew the veil grew thinner by the second and if I didn't hurry, the entire town would be in danger. So much for abandoning my search for the orb. With so many lives on the line, I realized I couldn't afford to be selfish.

Still, I needed Elysia by my side. If there was a chance the Starfire Orb might end me, I didn't want my last memory of Elysia to be one of sadness and desertion.

I broke out in a sprint, rushing past all the bedlam as I pushed my body past the point of pain and exhaustion to get back to Morgana's.

"I'm here," I called as I sprinted to the edge of the tree line. "Elysia, I'm here," I called again, looking toward Morgana's but not seeing a single soul in sight. "Elysia?"

A few cars sat in the driveway, Elysia's included, sending me straight to the front door where I tapped on the glass before barging right in as if I owned the place.

“Elysia?” I called again, but the living room was empty. In fact, as I searched room to room, I found no one on the first floor.

Yet, as I wandered around the main living space, I felt a tug calling me to the second floor of the house. Could Elysia be up there? Could our shared magic be guiding me to her?

I took the stairs two at a time until I reached the second floor landing and called her name again. “Elysia, I’m here. Where are you?”

Room after room, I searched, opening doors I hadn’t dared to open before. As I reached the room that Elysia and I shared, I stared at the bed and remembered our first night together. The ache in my chest deepened and I returned to calling her name as that pull kept urging me to search higher.

After I opened another door, I found a smaller, winding staircase and followed it to an attic space filled with storage boxes, old furniture, and piles of clothes. The middle of the floor was riddled with papers while a box sat to the side with the lid askew. I was just about to head back downstairs when one of the papers caught my eye.

As I knelt down on the weathered floorboards, I stared at the document in question.

Bill of Sale

The Crystal Lantern

I scratched my head, blinking through my confusion as I spotted Morgana’s name at the bottom of the document.

“What the fuck?” That didn’t make any sense. Was Morgana somehow tied to everything that was happening in Hallow Ridge Grove?

Some unknown intuition urged me to search inside the box for answers.

After I tossed the lid aside, I pulled out a few documents that seemed rather meaningless to me: a survey of the land Morgana's home sat on, the title to Morgana's car, a family tree with a couple of names scribbled out.

That last document had me scratching my head further. Why would Morgana scratch out members of her own family tree? That was priceless information. I'd longed to have my own family tree and to know my ancestors and where they'd come from. Could my human father still be alive?

As I set her family history aside, I delved back into the box and retrieved a wrinkled birth certificate that stole the breath from my lungs.

Certificate of Birth

Date of Birth: July 7th, 2002

Name: Lunara Astor

Sex: Female

Mother's Maiden Name: Nicole Astor

Father:

Even in fae, I hadn't met another Lunara in my life. But my last name wasn't Astor, however the child on this certificate was born the same day as me. I didn't know who my parents were. My adopted parents in Faerie had never mentioned them.

My fae-senses tingled as I folded up the document and stuffed it in my pocket then

continued to dig through the box.

The rest of the documents seemed rather innocuous, but I couldn't shake the feeling that I was missing something. That tug kept me in the attic, questioning everything I knew about my world, about myself.

There had to be something else here, something that explained who this other Lunara was, or—if she was me—how my name changed. But most of all, why did Morgana have my birth certificate, if it was, in fact, mine?

Feeling anxious and sick to my stomach, I headed to a stack of boxes in the corner of the room and hoisted the one off the top as a chilling energy zipped up my left leg.

As my eyes traveled toward the floor, I spotted a glow that emanated from beneath the floorboards. It was just like that jolt of energy I felt when Elysia and I discovered the trapdoor, but there were no sigils or runes glowing within the planks or bits of magic floating in the air. That magical tug was there, though, and drew me to the floor.

With my hands hovering left and right, I searched for the source and spotted something shimmering beneath one of the planks. Whatever was nestled here seemed to create the biggest pull. I got to work tugging at the board, trying to wrench it from the joists it was nailed into.

While it had a bit of give, it just wouldn't break free. But I wasn't about to back down.

I jumped from the floor, now in search of anything that could pry the board up enough for me to see what hid below. I scoured every inch of the attic, but there wasn't a single tool in sight.

Why should I let that stop me? I was half fae, damn it. My earth magic should be of some use in this situation.

Returning to the floorboard, I laid my palms over a few of the nails that held the board in place. While the board shook and moaned, the nails seemed lodged in their position, as if some ward had been placed over them.

While I closed my eyes and pushed all of my magic into those nails, that birth certificate kept drifting to the forefront of my mind. I brushed the thought away and focused on the task at hand. What was Morgana hiding underneath the floor anyway. And why?

Whatever it was, I was going to find a way to draw it out of its hiding place.

With every ounce of my magic focused on those nails, I felt a hint of Elysia's magic resonating beneath the surface and my heart ached all over again. But even as I longed to make things right with her, this mystery kept me frozen in place, determined to discover Morgana's secrets.

A thud vibrated from downstairs and my body sprang into high alert. Someone was in the house.

I was running out of time, and energy. Still, I put everything I had into wrenching that board free and finally felt one of the nails rise up from the wood.

As if I'd finally broken through whatever spell had protected those nails, one after another, they sprang free from the board until not a single one remained.

With the board free, I lifted it away while peering over my shoulder, setting it aside as quietly as possible. I was determined not to rouse the suspicions of whoever was home. When I turned my gaze back on the contents of that hiding place, my jaw hit

the floor as I stared at the bright, iridescent orb I'd spent so much of my life searching for.

I reached toward the artifact, intending to retrieve it, but remembered the ominous voice's words:

The Orb will not be swayed by your human desires, nor will it bend to your fae blood's whims. Should you reach for it, there will be a reckoning. The price may not come at once, but when it does, it will be a debt of more than just blood.

I'd found the orb, but now what? And why had Morgana sent us on a wild goose chase when she'd had it in her possession all along? Maybe she didn't know, but the contents of that box made me believe otherwise.

I stared at the Starfire Orb and considered my options: remove it from its hiding place and confront Morgana, but risk my own safety; leave it where it laid and seek Elysia's advice; or something I wasn't quite ready to consider—leave the orb and Elysia behind while they were left to fend for their own safety.

I had to make a decision, and fast, before I was discovered.

“What do you think you're doing?”

Chapter

Twenty-One

"The veil between realms is thin, but so is the line between fate and choice."

Elysia

"I could ask you the same thing." Lunara slowly rose from the attic floor, while a purplish hue glowed from a hole by her feet.

"You have some nerve coming into my house and rummaging through my things when I'm not home." Morgana took a step closer to Lunara. "My property is none of your concern." Her gaze frantically shifted between Lunara and the glowing compartment several times. Her hand shook as she pointed at Lunara. "Get out!"

"Not before you explain all of this—" Her arm swept around the room, drawing my attention to a mess of papers on the floor, "—to Elysia and me." Lunara crossed her arms and leveled her gaze at Morgana. "Now!"

I hesitantly took a step forward. "Lunara, don't do this." Knowing how much Morgana hated Lunara, I feared Morgana may plan to attack Lunara and I didn't want her to get hurt in the process. She meant too much to me.

Lunara choked down a sob. "Are you on her side now?"

"No!" Rushing over, I stood next to Lunara, unsure about so many things including

what Morgana was capable of after seeing such a drastic change in her. “Don’t hurt her.”

“So much for getting rid of this half-breed.” Morgana stifled a sigh and pinched the bridge of her nose. “This complicates things, Elysia.” She closed the distance so that I was equally as close to Lunara as I was to her. “It’s time to choose. Your coven or her.” I hated the way Morgana’s lip curled in disdain as she addressed Lunara.

Gasping, I stumbled back a step. “Why are you doing this? After all the years I spent idolizing you. Look what you’ve become.”

Morgana chortled. “This is who I’ve always been.” Morgana nodded toward the glow. “Now, pick it up, Lunara. Accept your fate.”

“Her fate?” I leaned over to get a good look at what the space beneath the floorboards contained. “Is—is that the orb? The Starfire Orb?”

Lunara nodded and bit her bottom lip, her face squished up as if she were in pain.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. Lunara’s pained expression had me tied up in knots.

Lunara glanced toward the orb before pointing her silver eyes directly at mine. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

She wrapped her arms around me, but the twinge of anger I felt that she’d been keeping something hidden had me wriggling out of her grasp. First Morgana, and now her? “What is it?”

When Lunara didn’t immediately respond, I turned to Morgana and noticed an evil smirk spreading across her face.

“Someone better start talking, right now.”

Morgana kept her sights heavily on Lunara while Lunara turned away from me to study the orb.

“When I was trapped by myself in the tunnel—” Lunara’s words were cut short by her deep inhalation. After she blew it out, she continued. “I heard a voice.”

“A voice?” My brow furrowed as I mentally questioned why she hadn’t said anything. “What did it say?”

Lunara took another deep breath, her eyes glued to that space beneath the floor. “It was all obscurity and riddles, but...” Her hands fisted tightly, her knuckles growing whiter as the seconds passed. “The voice said that the orb will require a payment of more than just blood.”

“You mean...” I glanced at Morgana, squinting my eyes as she looked on with a smile of sheer satisfaction. “Can that thing kill her?” I barked my question at Morgana, realizing that she was more sinister than I could have ever imagined.

“It’s okay, Elysia.” Lunara started to bend toward the floor, but I quickly shoved her aside.

“What are you doing?” As I knelt over the hole, I said, “I’ll pick it up.”

“You will not.” When I turned to scowl at Morgana, I noticed how all the color had drained from her face.

With a hand steadier than I expected, I reached toward the orb.

“No!” Morgana shouted, lunging forward a step, but then stopping. “Don’t—don’t do

this.”

“What happens when one of us touches it?” I maneuvered around to stand on the other side of the hole. “Would I die, too?”

“This isn’t your destiny, Elysia.” Morgana fidgeted with her hands, then balled them into fists and dropped them at her side. “This is none of your concern.”

“It’s not?” I leaned over, hand stretched toward the orb just to see what she’d do.

“Please.” Morgana unballled her fists and shook them out. “You don’t want to do that.”

“Don’t I?” I asked my high priestess. “Isn’t this supposed to be the thing that saves both Hallow Ridge Grove and Faerie?”

“It is, but there is a cost.”

“Death?” I crouched down and observed the orb. It pulsed with magic, beckoning me to pick it up.

“That orb is more powerful than anyone can fathom, but no, it would not kill you .” Morgana folded her hands in front of her and appeared to restrain herself. She exuded a calmness I knew she didn’t feel.

“And her?” I canted my head toward Lunara. “Would it kill Lunara?”

Lunara cleared her throat. “I can’t turn back now, Elysia. My will is not my own.”

My eyes widened. “What are you even saying?”

“In the tunnel, when I fell through that wall...” Lunara never once pulled her gaze from the hole in the floor, while all I wanted was for her to look me in the eye. “A woman’s voice told me I can’t turn back now. It has to be me.” It was then her eyes met mine, if only for a fraction of a second.

I reached over and grabbed her hand. “Why didn’t you tell me? Why did you go looking for the orb without me?”

“I merely happened upon the orb.” I could see the pain she felt in the wrinkles that framed her eyes. “I came here for you.”

“But you don’t have to do this. We can find another way.”

Morgana cleared her throat. “Unlike you, Elysia, she knows her fate.”

“It’s okay,” she whispered, taking my hand in hers. “I’m willing to pay the price.” She squeezed my hand tight then let it go. “To save you.”

With a sneer, Morgana rolled her eyes.

“What is your problem?” I asked Morgana. “Lunara has done nothing but try to help our coven and our world.”

“She’s fae.” She waved her hands around, encompassing all of Lunara. “Don’t you get it? They infiltrated our town centuries ago. Their magic has corrupted the very ground we walk on and I’ve done what I could to purge Hallow Ridge Grove of their magic to reclaim our land.”

“The fae aren’t corrupt. It’s only your skewed perception of their kind.” I’m not sure what happened to Morgana in her past, but it didn’t warrant hurting another individual, fae, witch, or otherwise. “Besides, Lunara is only part-fae.”

“That’s the real kicker in all of this.”

Even with her head bowed, I could feel the pain that rolled off of Lunara in waves.

“Tell me something, Morgana. Who is Lunara Astor?”

Morgana scoffed. “I don’t think you want the answer to that.” She threw her hands in the air and turned to walk away. “I’m done with this conversation.”

“Stop,” I said sternly, rising to my full height and squaring my shoulders. “You don’t get to declare when this conversation ends.”

Curiosity peaked, I wondered what else Lunara may have found while snooping in the attic. Astor was the name on the document we’d found for the Crystal Lantern. Did this Lunara Astor have some connection to this town?

Holding out a hand, Morgana drew on her magic, creating a sphere of light. “Don’t test me. You know who the stronger witch is here.”

“Try me.” Smirking, I recalled the power Lunara and I had created in the tunnel. Together, we were stronger, and Morgana had no idea what she was up against. “Now, answer Lunara’s question.”

“Well, aren’t you just a cocky little thing, now.” Morgana inched closer. “You think because you’ve sullied your magic with that of a half-breed you can overpower me?” A malevolent laugh rose up from her chest, her smile making my blood run cold. “Your little friend here went digging through things that weren’t hers and found her very own birth certificate.” Her canines shone as her sinister smile seemed to spread further.

“My name is Lunara Starfall.” Eyes narrowed, Lunara stared at Morgana. “I’m the daughter of Maxwell Starfall of the Lunethen Court.”

“How dare you speak his name in my presence.” Morgana glanced at the box in the middle of the floor then cackled. “He was a filthy faerie who took advantage of a young, naive woman. And because of him, I lost my sister.”

“Your sister?” I was growing more confused by the second. How did Morgana’s sister fit into all of this?

“Yes.” For the first time, Morgana’s sneer turned to a pained expression. “My sister Nicole was Lunara’s mother, but because Lunara was half-fae, my sister died in childbirth.”

“No.” Lunara fell backwards, landing on her rear as she bumped into an antique dresser behind her. “I could never be related to you.”

My ears could not be hearing this correctly. “But Lunara isn’t part witch. She’s fae and human.”

“She is. My sister was born a regular old run of the mill human. No powers. Not even an inclination for divination.” Morgana clucked her tongue. “It was a shame, really. If she’d only realized Maxwell’s seed would end her...”

“But your last name isn’t Astor.” Wouldn’t she have told me that she was an Astor? I guess Morgana had been hiding more than I could have ever imagined.

“No!” A sob tore from Lunara. “I don’t believe you, Morgana. That birth certificate has to be a fake.”

I rushed to Lunara’s side and dropped down beside her. “It doesn’t matter what she says. You are you and that’s all that matters.”

“That’s touching, really, but I need her to pick up the orb. Samhain is fast

approaching and without her sealing her fate, we're all going to be in a world of trouble." Morgana's boots thunked against the floor as she ever-so-slowly made her way over to the opening in the floor.

The orb's purple glow cast Morgana in a villainous light. "Come, child." She crooked a finger at Lunara.

I kissed Lunara's cheek, then whispered, "Maybe this is just another one of her lies."

Lunara sighed and whispered back, "What if it's not?"

"Then I'll be by your side. We'll see what happens together." I helped Lunara to stand. Her whole body shook as I supported her.

Morgana's smug smile was just another knife in my back.

"I hope you're happy," I spit out. "If she dies, so help me gods..."

"Just do it." Morgana huffed. "Pick it up before the darkness destroys us all."

A chill raced down my spine. "Do you feel that?" I ran my palms over my arms, trying to ward off the cold.

Lunara nodded. "It's close."

"Too close," Morgana said. "I can feel the dark energy growing stronger with each minute that ticks by. It will be at its strongest at midnight when the veil is thinnest."

"But today is only the thirtieth." The date on my phone had flashed across my screen when I went to unlock it earlier. I knew it wasn't the thirty-first yet.

Morgana's lips painted into a wicked sneer of a smile. "But as we approach midnight, the magic it encompasses will be at its peak. It's not midnight on Samhain that matters to the darkness, it's midnight tonight."

"Shit." Throwing my arms around Lunara, I hugged her tight, trying to imprint her onto my soul. To anchor her to this world in hopes of not losing her to the craziness that fate had designed. "I'm here for you."

Lunara returned my embrace, but said nothing.

"I love you," I whispered. And I meant it. I'd only known her mere days, but she'd managed to sneak past my defenses and take up residence in my heart. She was a permanent fixture. We were bonded, connected in more ways than just love for each other. It went deeper than I could have ever imagined. Deeper than anything I'd felt before.

Lunara gasped and buried her face into the crook of my shoulder, clutching my torso tight. Then she raised her lips to my ear. "Sweet Elysia. I love you, too."

Reluctantly, I released her, tears welling in my eyes. If this was her final moment, at least she knew how I felt about her. I'd held nothing back.

With her knees straddling the opening, Lunara's hands visibly shook.

I knelt down next to her and grabbed her wrist, steadying her. "You got this."

Her bottom lip quivered, and a few tears spilled out as she reached down to pick up the Starfire Orb, but before she could fully get her hands around it, my own hand shot out and grabbed the opposite side.

"Elysia!" Lunara shouted, eyes wide, but it was too late.

We were both touching the orb.

Chapter

Twenty-Two

"Power lies not in the spell, but in the hand that casts it."

Lunara

My hands vibrated, a cool sensation traveling up my arms as I held onto the orb and listened to its magical, melodic hum singing in my mind. It was as if all the magic of Faerie resided in this one small object.

"What are you doing?" Morgana shrieked, rushing toward us.

Without thinking I cast out one hand, relying purely on instinct to protect Elysia and me. Orangish magic flowed from my palms, a sliver of sunshine that must have originated from the orb circling the aura as it thrust out, narrowly missing Morgana when she dove at us.

Instinctively, I thrust my body on top of Elysia and the orb, keeping one hand nestled on the artifact's cool surface.

One of Elysia's palms remained pressed against the orb even as I knocked her to the floor. It was as if we were no longer able to draw our hands away, like we were now one with the life-force that flowed from within.

For the briefest moment, Elysia's gaze held mine before she shouted, "Look out,"

thrusting out her own hand as Morgana recovered from her fall and came at us again.

Power raced from me, through the orb, into Elysia. I could sense that movement as if we were suddenly and completely one.

With Elysia's arm outstretched, a force like no other blossomed from her hand, growing larger by the second until its brilliant light shone fully and surged toward our attacker.

As Morgana's eyes widened and her brow inched higher, the magic sought her out until it crashed into her chest, sending her backward into one of the many stacks of boxes. The stack suddenly crumpled until Morgana was no more than a lifeless heap on the floor.

"Is she dead?" Elysia asked, her tensed posture slightly mirroring my own.

As I slowly climbed off Elysia, I kept my sights trained on Morgana, lest she thought of attacking once more. Her shallow breaths told me that she wasn't dead, but she was definitely unconscious. "She's still breathing."

Elysia sighed, drawing my attention to the hole in the floor where our hands still clung to the orb. "What do we do now?"

We both scrutinized the artifact as its energy continued to swell within us.

I knew so little of The Starfire Orb. Where had it originated from? How did it work? And what would happen when I returned it to Faerie?

Directing my gaze to Elysia's widened eyes, I spoke without words, instructing her to move with me as we slowly, carefully lifted the orb from its resting place.

A subtle rustling put my senses on high alert and I turned to find some of the boxes Morgana had landed on giving under her weight. While Morgana appeared to still be unconscious, I didn't dare turn my back to her. There was no telling what she would try when she came to.

With my peripheral constantly on Morgana, I studied the orb, placing my free hand back on its energy laden surface. "You can let go now."

"But, what if?—"

"It's okay, Elysia. I know what I have to do." I nodded as I eased the orb away from her. "This is my responsibility. It's what I was sent here for."

"But, we're in this together, Lunara." When the orb slipped from her fingers, she moved closer, trying to retain her connection with the artifact.

A scream echoed from outside reminding me time was of the essence. "This is my problem, Elysia. My burden." I cradled the glowing ball against my chest, slowly standing from the floor. "The elders are expecting me to return it to Faerie before Samhain unleashes its fury on Hallow Ridge Grove and all of the Faerie realm."

Elysia followed, jumping from the floor and moving closer as she rested her hands on my shoulders then slowly eased them to my neck while her thumbs slid up and down my pulse point. "We're in this together, Lunara." She pressed her forehead against mine, magnifying the tears that lined her lower lashes. "We're bonded. You can't cast me aside, now."

My eyes fluttered closed, unable to bear the sight of those unshed tears. "We're running out of time, Elysia. I have to return this to my homeland before it's too late."

"Let me go with you." She angled my neck higher, easing her forehead from mine as

I opened my eyes to see those tears now slipping down her cheeks. “I love you, Lunara. Please .”

“It’s not safe for you there.” I retreated a step, feeling her hands fall away as I put distance between us while keeping The Starfire Orb close. “I don’t know what the elders would do if I showed up with you by my side. They already harbor so much hatred for the human realm after Morrigan stole the orb.”

It wasn’t that I wanted to return to Faerie without her, but I wouldn’t let her be harmed by the most powerful of the Fae when I returned the orb to our realm. I couldn’t let them hurt her, or worse. I loved her too much to let my kind, however little of them dwelled within me, be her demise.

“You’ll protect me, Lunara. I know you will.” While she didn’t reach for me this time, her eyes dug into my soul and created an ache so deep, I didn’t think it would ever leave me. “We’re stronger together. You know we are.”

“Don’t you see. Everything I’m doing is to protect you.” I pulled my gaze from hers as that ache I felt grew even stronger until I could barely catch my own breath. “If I don’t return this to the elders, they will come for me and they will surely end you. They’ll see you as a distraction and maybe even a threat to our world.”

“But you’re human, too. You have a place here, with me.”

I shook my head, hating that I was hurting her, and in turn, breaking myself. “We can’t be together until Morrigan’s curse is broken, until I’ve set things right in your realm and mine.” I draped my coat around the orb, keeping it protected as I turned away from Elysia. Before I walked out of the room, I whispered a broken, “I’m sorry,” then headed downstairs.

“Lunara, wait.” Elysia’s footsteps rushed after me as I hurried down the stairs.

Once I reached the first floor, I did my best to ignore the remaining members of the Moonshadow Coven as they stared vigilantly while I raced past.

I'd barely opened the front door when Elysia shouted, "Stop!" then used her magic to slam the door in my face. "I won't let you leave."

"You'll be the downfall of Hallow Ridge Grove if you force me to stay." My calculated words were crisp and even as if this entire situation wasn't breaking me in two. I knew the only way Elysia would let me leave was if she felt the weight of what my staying would mean to her town.

Cassia dropped what she was doing, hurrying to Elysia's side. "What's going on?"

"I'm taking The Starfire Orb back to Faerie." What else did I need to say?

The coven knew the importance of that artifact and they had, no doubt, witnessed the chaos that was erupting all over town. That wild melee was growing closer and closer to Morgana's home by the second. My only hope was that one of the coven members could talk some sense into Elysia before it was too late.

"You found it?" Rowan asked, carrying a handful of crystals as she moved closer.

"It's been right under our noses this whole time." My upper lip trembled as thoughts of Morgana's deception raced through my mind.

"What do you mean?" It was Cassia who needed answers this time.

A clock hung just over her shoulder as the seconds ticked by, ever closer to midnight.

"Elysia can explain." I sent a pleading stare in her direction, hoping she'd finally let me go. "I have to return the orb to Faerie so that the elders can put a stop to

Morrigan's curse before it can no longer be undone."

Elysia's arm stayed outstretched, the full extent of her magic keeping the front door closed while I beseeched her with my stare. We were running out of time.

When she wouldn't yield to my request, my shoulders fell, wondering what it was going to take. I didn't know how else to reason with her that this was all for the best. "Please, Elysia."

Something in her gaze shifted as her lips spread in a thin line and her eyes narrowed. "Fine." Her arm fell to her side before she spat an angry, "Go."

I mouthed I love you then rushed out of the house, darting through the night with only the stars to guide me. On foot, it would take some time to return to the portal that brought me to Hallow Ridge Grove, but I had no other choice. I wouldn't ask Elysia to drive me and risk having to fight her to leave all over again and I knew damn well that none of the other coven members cared for me enough to give me a ride.

I was on my own now, faced with the horrified screams and wild shouts that signaled Morrigan's curse was closing in.

An excruciating chill swept by and I looked up in time to see one of the shadow figures flying overhead, casting turmoil wherever he could.

Pulling the hood of my coat over my hair, I lowered my head and took off toward Elysia's cabin and the portal that would take me back to a land where all of this could end.

"Foolish half-blood," shrieked in my ear as I pushed myself to my limit. The shadow taunted me as I continued. "Do you actually think you can stop this?"

The darkness swirled around me with its inky blackness shrouding the stars overhead as those taunts continued. “Give us the orb. Only we can save you now.”

“Never.” I darted over to a tree and ducked beneath its branches, trying to evade the shadow, but it moved effortlessly, continuing to circle around me.

As I swept my arm at the figure, another emerged, joining the first as he hissed, “Yes, child. Let go of the orb and take what is owed you from these foolish mortals.”

I dodged left and right, trying to cast their goading aside, but it was no use. They stayed right on top of me, never looking toward any of the humans that wandered blindly into the mayhem.

When a third shadow descended, I did the one thing I’d ventured never to do. Extending my hand, I forced my earth magic out of me, sending it toward each of the figures and watching them disappear from view while a pair of humans looked on.

“Did you see that?” One asked the other, but I didn’t have time to care.

The figures were growing in number and the madness would soon be thrust on the entirety of the town.

While cries of anguish and shouts of panic emanated from all around me, I had to get back to Faerie, back to the elders before Elysia or any more of her coven were hurt.

The orb pulsed beneath my jacket as if it could sense home was nearby just as I spotted the familiar entrance. Its see-through surface rippled like water reflecting the shadows close behind me. I slipped through as more screams split the night.

I just hoped I wasn’t too late.

Chapter

Twenty-Three

"What is feared is often misunderstood, and what is misunderstood holds great power."

Elysia

"What in the world is going on?" Cassia asked, one eyebrow arched precariously high. "And did she just whisper I love you?"

My face warmed and I was pretty sure my whole body had turned a blushing red. "I don't know what you're talking about." But then the weight of Lunara's decision pushed me down. I crumpled to the floor in a pool of heartbreak and grief. I'd lost so much today.

"Elysia!" The crystals in Rowan's palms clattered to the hardwood floor as she rushed to my side. "What just happened?"

"She's gone," I whispered.

Everyone jumped as a high-pitch scream pierced the night from somewhere down the street and the windows darkened as if the streetlamps had gone out. I wasn't sure if it was a power outage or if the shadow figure was looming outside, blocking our view.

I was in no hurry to find out either. Staying inside seemed like the best chance for

survival.

Cassia shuffled over to where Rowan and I sat on the floor. “What did Lunara mean by Morrigan’s curse?”

My bottom lip quivered. “The orb—the orb was never meant to be here.” My body continued to shake with my uncontrollable emotions as I conveyed all I’d learned about that artifact. “It has to go back to Faerie before it’s too late.” My hands, clasped together, wrenched tighter as I longed to see Lunara just one more time. “A witch centuries ago stole it from them, and in turn, they cursed our town.” I lifted my gaze toward the windows. “Chaos reigns outside. That’s what the screams are. The curse is taking root and affecting both witches and humans.”

Rowan glanced at the door and shivered. “Is this unyielding cold because of the curse?”

“It’s the shadow figures outside. I’ve felt them following me and Lunara.” I swallowed hard. “Gods, I hope she’s okay.”

“Wait, where’s Morgana?” Cassia’s gaze wandered around the room, glancing at the stairs and kitchen doorway. “Wasn’t she just here?”

I choked down a sob for the loss of the woman who was like a mother to me. She was still alive, but she wasn’t who she claimed to be all these years. “She’s up in the attic.”

“Is she coming down soon?” Cassia asked. “She said she was going to make a feast for our Circle of Remembering.”

“I don’t think she’ll be cooking anytime soon. She—she.” On shaky legs, I stood up and made my way to the couch, settling on its once comforting cushions. “You’re all

going to hate me.”

“Why would you even think that?” Cassia smiled as she sat down next to me on the couch.

Rowan nodded her agreement. “We’re family, Elysia.”

I sighed, feeling my shoulders sag with the weight of the last two days. “Morgana’s unconscious.”

“What?” Rowan fumbled backwards, bumping into the coffee table as she backed away, putting not only distance between us, but what felt like a chasm as her eyes spoke volumes.

“Morgana tried to attack Lunara and me.” Fidgeting with my hands, I kept my gaze on my lap, afraid of their reaction. Would they even believe me?

Cassia grabbed my hand. “She has been acting out of sorts lately. But, why did she attack you?”

“Gods...” I dropped my head back and looked up at the ceiling trying to keep the tears from falling. “We found the orb upstairs and Morgana insisted it was Lunara’s fate to touch it, but Lunara knew if she did, it would mean certain death.”

“You’re kidding!” Rowan plopped down on the other side of me. “If she’s still up there... is she...is she dead?” She stood back up abruptly. “I should go check on her.”

“She’s not dead, Rowan.” I twisted my hands in my lap. “She’s just unconscious.” I shook my head. “We dealt her a heavy blow when she came after us and she ended up in a heap on a pile of her boxes upstairs.” I could no longer stomach the sight of all of Morgana’s things around me. “I—I can’t stay here.”

“What do you mean unconscious?” Rowan’s eyes narrowed. “I’m going upstairs to check on her.”

“I need to find Lunara and make sure she’s okay.” As I rose from the couch, the door swung open, and Aeron walked in. If I didn’t get out of here soon, I was going to be way outnumbered, and Morgana would wake up in time to spin her tales once again.

Aeron sat a grocery bag on the floor. “What’s going on? Why do you all look like someone ran over your cat?”

Rowan pointed a finger in my direction. “Elysia tried to kill Morgana.”

“I did not try to kill her!” I yelled. “She attacked me. I was defending myself...and Lunara.” My heart hurt just saying her name.

Cassia sighed. “I know there’s two sides to every story, but Lunara is part fae and doesn’t deserve to be protected. She’s the enemy.”

“She’s not our enemy.” I stomped my foot, furious that they weren’t listening to me. “Lunara’s done nothing but try to help us.” I threw my hands in the air.

The windows began to rattle, threatening to shatter. Everyone in the living room crouched to the ground and covered their heads. Sirens blared in the distance from both police and EMS. Things were getting worse by the minute. Had Lunara made it to the portal to return the orb to her Elders?

Aeron quickly shut the front door and backed away. “If she’s not our enemy, then why is there still a shit show outside.”

“Yeah.” Rowan slowly gained her footing but flinched when the wind howled outside. “If she’s not our enemy, where is she now? Why did she leave in such a

hurry?" Rowan marched closer, staring down her nose at me. "She's gone, with the orb, and we're all fucked."

"Don't you hear the havoc outside." I pointed at the madness that had grown so loud it sounded as though the windows were wide open. "She had to maneuver through that shit storm to make it back to Faerie." I was done.

No matter what I said, they weren't going to believe what I said. Morgana had tainted their opinions and they were dead set on thinking Lunara had royally fucked us over. But I knew better.

The stairs creaked and we all turned to find Morgana clutching the railing, eyes bleary as they zeroed in on me. "Rowan is right." I wasn't sure if she'd aged in the last thirty minutes or if I'd been too blind to see how alarmingly gruesome she appeared, but my blood ran cold as her icy stare bore into me. "You let her leave with the orb. You let her take the one thing that could have protected this town." Just as I'd predicted, she was spinning her tales again. "How are we expected to fight off the darkness now?"

"Don't listen to her!" I locked eyes with each and every coven sister in the room. "She's lying to you. She's trying to turn you against me because I have faith in Lunara." I narrowed my gaze. "You'll see. Lunara will put an end to this and save us all." My heart hammered in my chest. Lunara and I were bonded. I'd have known if she was going to betray me, wouldn't I?

Cassia glared in my direction. "You're lucky Morgana's alive."

An explosion outside rocked the foundation of the house. My screams blended in with the others in the room as picture frames and glassware rattled, some crashing to the floor.

Something wasn't right.

Morgana descended the stairs slowly, one shaky step at a time. "You've doomed us all, foolish child. If you'd have listened?—"

Another smaller explosion vibrated the walls.

"I'm going to lose everything, thanks to you." Morgana sat down and settled on the last step with a wince.

Rowan padded over to the window and pulled back the curtain. "There's a car on fire up the street." She threw the curtain closed and ducked down. "Whoa."

"What's wrong?" Aeron asked.

Rowan's face paled. "There are several black, cloudy shapes flying around outside. What the actual fuck?" She brought a trembling hand up to tuck her hair behind her ear. "I—I think we should go to the basement."

"Lunara needs help. She must have had trouble getting to the portal." I grabbed my jacket and keys and headed toward the door. The judgmental stares and accusations were getting old. I needed to prove to them that I'd done the right thing in trusting a fae.

Aeron blocked my path, hands up. "Are you crazy? You're not going anywhere."

"She's right." Morgana rose, one palm held out with her magic coalescing within it. The power wasn't as bright as normal, signaling her weakened powers from the attack. Still, I wasn't taking any chances.

"You can't keep me here." The fae magic within me swarmed to the surface, mixing

with my own. My skin flushed with its intentions and I knew if one of my sisters assaulted me, it would retaliate, but I didn't want to harm them. I just needed to escape and find Lunara. I could feel the connection between us grow thinner and thinner the further away she got.

Would it snap? Could our bond be broken?

I wasn't sure I was ready to lose her so soon.

Morgana narrowed her eyes, surveying every inch of my bare skin. "She's tainted you, hasn't she?"

Cassia and Rowan moved in closer, surrounding me. Morgana's tactics had worked. She'd brainwashed the rest of the coven into thinking Lunara was the enemy—that all the fae were.

"She's made me whole!" I refused to use magic against any of my sisters, but I wasn't going to be a prisoner in this house. Glancing behind me, I shot Cassia and Rowan one last sad smile before I pushed Aeron out of the way and reached for the door handle.

I screamed as silver magic exploded against the door, barely missing me. Morgana's aim must have been off and for that I was grateful. Yanking the door open, I ran into the night.

Several people lay in the street unconscious, black shapes hovering over them as slivers of silver mist swirled up from their bodies.

Glowing red eyes tracked my movements as I ran for my car and fumbled with the keys. The shadow creature broke away from the others torturing a human and made a beeline for me.

“No!” I screamed as I found the unlock button on my key fob and dove inside. Quickly, I locked my doors then started the car, speeding away from the curb to tear down the street. Driving a straight line wasn’t easy with debris, bodies, and trash littering the roadway; not to mention the hellacious wind that whipped the car from side-to-side as I drove away from Morgana’s home.

Ash fell from the sky as I made my way to my cabin, cluttering my view through the windshield, but all I could picture was Lunara mouthing I love you as she left.

I skidded to a halt outside my home and jumped out, racing into the woods.

“Lunara! I’m here. Where are you?” The portal had to be out here somewhere. I tried to get a grip on the new magic within me to help me locate the entrance to Faerie, but it contained a defiant streak and refused to help.

Howling broke out in the distance, echoing through the night. I hadn’t spotted any shadow figures yet, but that didn’t mean they hadn’t followed me.

Suddenly, my skin tingled as I passed through something. The air rippled around me. Backing up, I noticed a slight shimmer in the air. “Lunara?” No one answered me, but as I reached out my hand, I could feel the otherworldly magic creating a veil to the other realm.

I’d found it, but no matter how many times I walked into it, around it, or alongside it, I didn’t pass into a new world. I simply skimmed by the magic hanging there.

Lunara was nowhere to be found. Had she made it through? Had she even made it to the portal in the first place? The only answer I could stomach for our fading connection was that, yes, she’d made it to the other side.

With our connection withering, I slumped against a tree and slid down to sit on the

forest floor, staring at the last link that remained of her.

She'd left. She'd deserted my world and escaped with the orb and my heart in tow. If I was lucky, when the shadow creature found me, he'd make it a quick death.

Suddenly, the portal began to glow and ripple. Scurrying behind the tree I'd been sitting under, I hid as a silvery glowing figure emerged, too bright to make anything out.

Chapter

Twenty-Four

"Even the smallest spark can set the darkest night ablaze."

Lunara

"Elysia?" I looked all around the portal, sensing her in the vicinity. "I can feel you nearby."

"Lunara?" She jumped out from behind a nearby maple tree and ran into my open arms, tackling me to the ground. "You came back!"

"Oof!" I wheezed out a laugh while the portal's last bits of light began to fade. "Of course I came back. I couldn't leave the other half of my heart a world away."

Her lips collided with mine, pure joy radiating throughout my whole body.

When she slowly eased away, a small smile crept up my face. "If this is the welcome I get every time I go to Faerie, I might have to escape more often."

Elysia rolled off me, eyes wide. "Don't you dare."

We both rose and brushed off the leaves while bits of dirt still clung to our clothes.

Elysia warily looked around, running her hands up and down her arms. "Did—didn't

you break the curse?”

“The Elders did, but we have to—” My words drifted away as Elysia reached for my face.

Extending a tentative hand toward me, she plucked something from my hair. “You have a twig.” She held it out between us before tossing it over our shoulder.

I stared into her eyes, feeling as though we’d been apart for centuries when it had been mere minutes.

“I’m sorry.” Elysia’s cheeks flushed as she smiled. “You were saying.”

I was so enamored by her that I almost forgot the shards of crystals tucked in my coat pocket. “In order to break the curse, we have to work together.”

“You mean, it’s not over?” Color seeped from her face.

“Calm down.” I placed my hands on her cheeks, pressing my forehead against hers. “We just have to plant these crystals in the earth beneath the portal so that the human realm is safe.”

A soft laugh escaped with her next exhalation as her shoulders slowly relaxed. “Okay.”

Once I knelt down at the portal’s opening, I looked up at Elysia, still standing over me as she slowly blinked in wonder.

“You okay?” I asked, laying the crystals on the dirt before I reached for her.

Her mouth fell open, but it took her a moment before she finally spoke. “I didn’t think you were coming back. I mean, I knew you’d come back, but I was terrified

that?—”

I took her hands in mine, gently running my thumbs along her knuckles. “I’m here.” Once she knelt beside me, I said, “And, I’m not going anywhere.”

She seemed to breathe a sigh of relief before picking up one of the crystals and clutching it in her fist. “So, if the orb didn’t break the curse, how can we be sure these crystals will?”

I dug into the dirt, creating a hole large enough to place the crystals. “Once these are buried beneath the surface, the shadows will be called to the in-between and then the portal will seal, keeping something like this from ever happening again.”

Elysia grabbed my hand, stopping me from placing the first crystal among the earth. “Seal the portal? That means...” Her mouth hung open as she studied my face. “If it’s sealed, you can’t go back.”

I nodded, reaching for another crystal then gently nestled it in its new resting place. “There’s no need for me to go back there.” Without looking her way, I grabbed another crystal, positioning it with the others. “Not anymore.”

“But it’s your home.” She held the last crystal in her palm.

I shook my head, gently reaching for the last crystal. “Not anymore.” As I placed one hand beneath hers, she opened her palm, and stared at the last item that would seal me in this world. “My home is here, now, Elysia.” With one hand, I retrieved the crystal while I swiped away a tear that threatened to fall down her face. “With you.” When more tears fell, I spluttered a pathetic, “Unless it’s too much too fast and then we can for —”

Elysia crashed into me again, knocking me against the dirt as she covered my mouth with hers, kissing me as if she feared it was our last.

When my cheeks grew damp, I gently eased her back and found her cheeks soaked with tears. “Hey, what’s all this?”

“You’d leave everything you know for me?” She swiped a clumsy hand at her tears.

I tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and smiled. “Of course.” My thumb caressed the shell of her ear. “You’re my family now.” When Elysia’s face seemed to sour, I added a wary, “Unless you’re worried your coven will never accept me.”

Elysia climbed off of me and knelt beside the hole in the ground, staring at the waiting crystals. “They’re not my coven anymore.”

“What do you mean?” I knew Morgana had betrayed her, but the other women were like her sisters. Surely she didn’t plan to give all of them up for me.

“When I told them what Morgana did, they didn’t believe me.” She stood from the ground and began pacing to and fro. “They listened to Morgana’s lies and I just couldn’t...” Her pacing stopped long enough to glance my way. “I couldn’t take their judgments over Morgana’s bullshit.”

As her tears began to flow again, I jumped from the ground. “Hey. It’s okay.” I pulled her close, stroking her back as I said, “We’re together and that’s what really matters.”

Stepping from my grasp, her eyes met mine and she gave a half-hearted smile. “You’re right.” She reached for my hand, lacing her fingers with mine. “All that matters is that we’re together.”

I squeezed our joined hands then knelt back to the ground, laying the final crystal with the others before shoveling the dirt over them with my hands. “It shouldn’t be long now.” Even as I said the words, I could feel the darkness lift.

The screams and shouts that came from all around suddenly quieted and the cold air

turned warmer, calming its wild winds until it was little more than a rustle among the leaves.

I was just about to stand when the heap of dirt I'd poured over the crystals suddenly marbleized, encasing the crystals for all eternity.

Elysia stood beside me, glancing around the tree line. "I guess it's over now."

"I guess so." I wrapped my arm around her waist and led her toward her cabin. "You feel like celebrating?" I wagged my brows at her and gave a mischievous grin, feeling lighter than I had since I arrived in the human realm.

"You're incorrigible." After swatting my chest, she took off at a run. "Last one to the cabin is a rotten egg."

"Seriously?" I chased after her, laughing all the way until I caught up to Elysia at her front door.

Her keys scratched around the tumbler until they finally sank into the grooves. Once the deadbolt was tucked inside the door, Elysia pushed the door open and hurried inside.

I followed along behind her, tossing the door closed behind us before I descended on her like a starving lion pouncing on its next meal. "Why'd it take me so long to find you?" I pinned her against the door, running my fingers through her soft, brown hair.

"I don't know." Her hands flitted up my sides, tickling my ribcage as they ascended. "But I say we make up for lost time."

My mouth collided with hers while my hands took on a life of their own, pawing at her clothing and gripping her flesh. I was just about to pull her shirt over her head when a knock sounded on the door behind her. "Expecting someone?"

Her head shook before she peeled her back from the door and peered through the curtains to see who waited outside.

“Elysia! It’s Rowan and Cassia. We need to talk.”

I ran my hands over my clothes, trying to put everything back in place while Elysia’s hand rested on the doorknob.

“They’ve got the worst timing.” She took a deep breath then eased the door open, poking her head out just enough to ask, “What do you want?”

“Can we please come inside?” Cassia’s voice was still ripe with worry.

“Why? So you can tell me how foolish I’ve been for trusting Lunara?”

My brows inched up my forehead, gob smacked by Elysia’s newfound boldness.

“We’re sorry, Elysia.” It was Rowan who spoke this time. “After you left, Morgana went all crazy, screaming and throwing things and revealing a side of her we didn’t recognize. And then, in an instant, she just stopped.”

“Please, Elysia. Can we talk about this inside?” Cassia’s pleading made me smile, if only infinitesimally.

Elysia stepped back, letting the door swing open before she waved the women inside.

I retreated, doing my best to be invisible, but when Rowan caught sight of me, she froze. “I didn’t realize you were back.”

“I’m sure you wish I weren’t.” Even in all of my resentment, I didn’t want to cause more friction for Elysia. “I’ll just let you ladies chat.”

“No, wait,” Rowan called. “We owe you an apology.”

I turned around in time to see Elysia standing with hands on hips as she said, “I’ll say.”

Cassia stepped in front of Rowan, shielding her from Elysia’s wrath. “Look, we deserve your anger and a lot more, but?—”

“But you finally realized that Morgana had fooled you all into believing Lunara was dangerous when in reality, she saved us?” Elysia removed her hands from her hips then crossed her arms over her chest while she stared down her nose at her friends.

“You’re right.” Rowan stepped forward, inching closer to Elysia. “You’ve been right about Lunara all along, but it took the curse being broken for us to realize that Morgana was nothing more than some vile monster.”

“Glad you came to your senses,” Elysia said, and while she seemed happy with Rowan and Cassia’s confession, I needed more answers.

“Not so fast.” I made my way back to Elysia, standing at her side. “I’d like to know what brought about this sudden change of heart?”

Elysia angled her head, examining me, but not saying anything to the contrary.

“Maybe we should sit down.” Cassia’s suggestion was quickly followed by her and Rowan heading to the couch.

Elysia waited for me to object, but I held out my arm, signaling for her to join them in her small living space.

I took a seat beside her and waited with bated breath, leaning back in my chair and crossing my legs with just enough confidence to cause Rowan and Cassia to sit a little

straighter.

It was Rowan who spoke first. “After you left, Morgana started screaming about how you’d ruined everything, giving Lunara the orb.” Her hands stayed clenched tightly in her lap while tension pulled at the edges of her face. “She started ranting about everything she’d worked for and how she was only trying to protect her family’s legacy.”

“It wasn’t until the curse was lifted that we all started to realize Morgana didn’t have the best of intentions,” Cassia interjected.

Rowan’s head fell a moment, but when she looked at Elysia again, there were tears in her eyes. “Morgana started speaking incantations and her magic seemed to grow with every passing second while she continued to curse your name.” She paused just long enough to run her hands back and forth across her thighs. “The whole house shook as her incantation came out faster and faster until everything just stopped.”

It was Cassia’s head that hung this time, her eyes trained on the floor in front of her.

“What do you mean, it just stopped?” While Elysia inched to the edge of her seat, I laid my hand on her thigh, trying to ease the tension that we both now felt thanks to our connection.

“Exactly that. All of the craziness outside, the rumbling of the house, Morgana’s incantations—it all just halted.” Rowan shivered then continued. “I thought Morgana had succeeded in cursing you until I saw her crumpled on the floor, crying.”

“What?” Elysia had inched so far off her chair that she nearly collapsed to the floor.

“Apparently, when the curse was broken, her—” She swallowed hard “—magic went with it.” As a pained expression grew on Rowan’s face, Cassia took over.

“When Morrigan stole the Starfire Orb, she tied her magic, and that of her ancestors to the artifact, forging powers stronger than any witch had ever achieved.” Cassia glanced at Rowan then looked at me. “You were supposed to solidify the curse so that Morgana would be all-powerful forever.”

“I guess that’s why she wanted me to stay out of it.” Elysia stood from the couch and walked across the room, staring out of her front window.

“Morgana’s powers are gone now, Elysia.” Rowan rose from the couch, testing her own legs before she sat back down again. “You and Lunara are safe now.”

Elysia spun around, her eyes wider than I’d ever seen them. “What about the Moonshadow Coven?”

Cassia shrugged. “All of the members are in agreement that our coven should continue without Morgana.”

“But who will be high priestess?” This appeared to be uncharted territory for all of the coven members, but Elysia seemed the most affected.

“We were hoping, since Morgana is gone, that you’d come back and lead us.” Rowan stood and joined Elysia at the window. “You are our wisest member.”

“High priestess?” The words were barely a whisper, but I knew that Elysia would have to think it over wholeheartedly before she decided. “I’m not sure.”

Cassia left the couch, joining Rowan and Elysia at the window. “Take some time to think it over.” She reached for Elysia’s hand and gave it a quick squeeze. “We’ll be waiting to hear what you decide.”

With that, Cassia and Rowan walked out leaving Elysia and I alone.

Elysia stayed by the window, watching until Cassia and Rowan left her driveway.

I finally walked over, wrapping my arms around her and resting my chin on her shoulder. “Sounds like you still have your coven, if you want it.” I kept my arms around her as she turned to face me.

“What I want...” She glided her hands up my sternum, ascending until she tapped the tip of my nose. “Is to do more of that magic melding you’re so good at.”

“Magic melding, huh?” I raised my arm, staring at my wrist as I said, “I’ll have to see if I have the time.”

Taking my hand, Elysia pulled me close and whispered against my lips. “It’ll be worth it.” Without another word, she took my hand and led me to her bedroom.