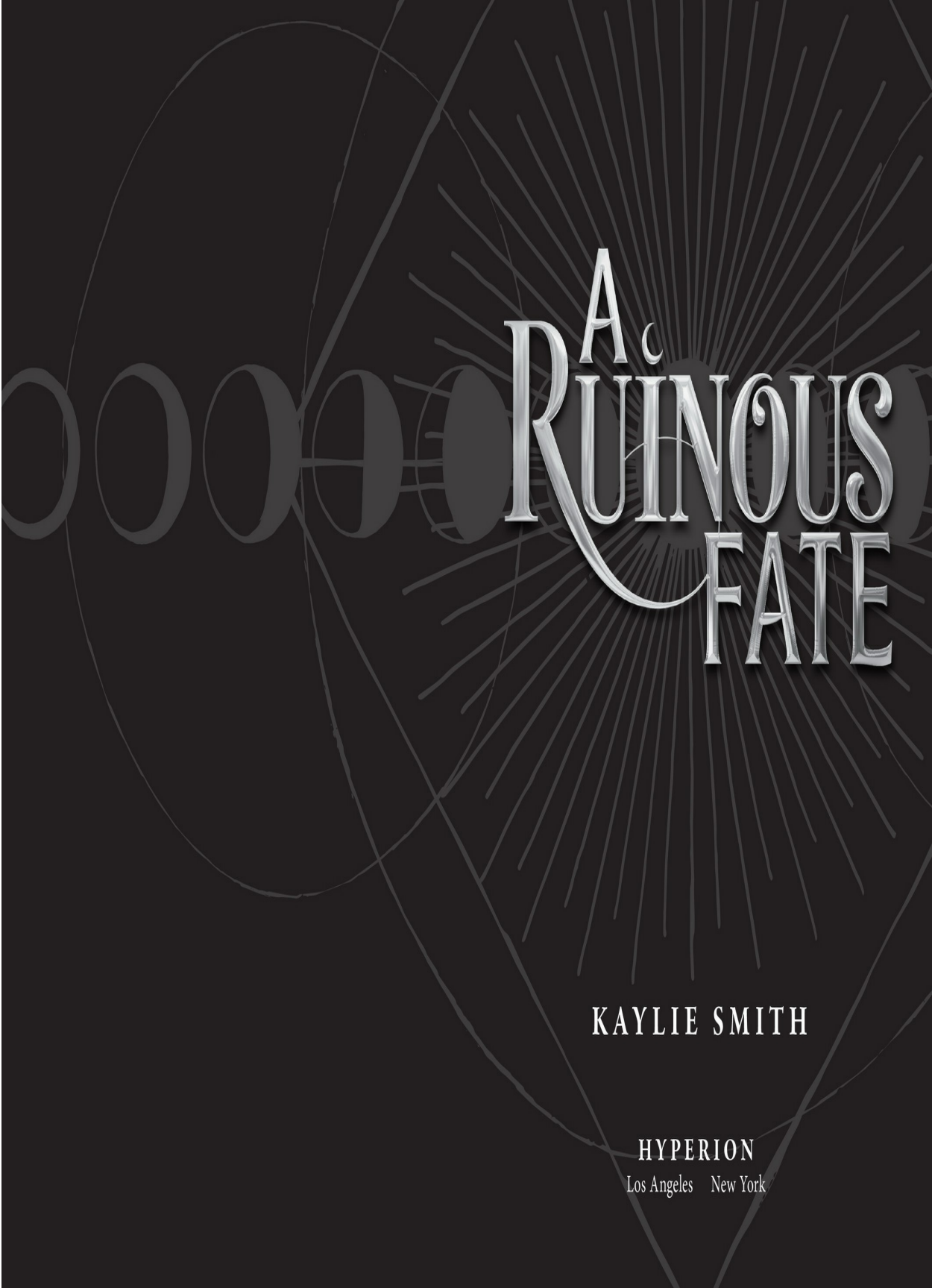




A
RUINOUS
FATE

KAYLIE SMITH



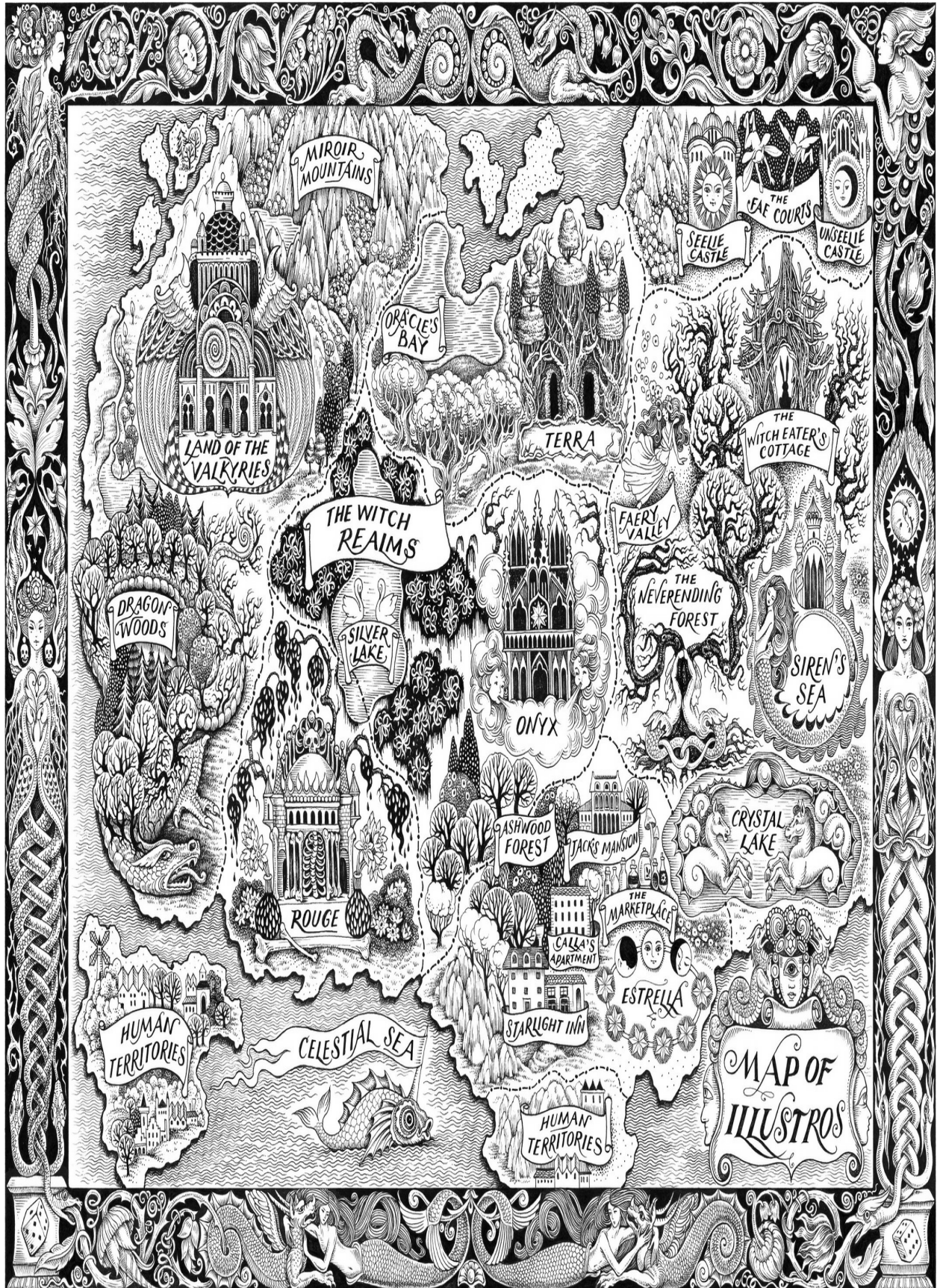
The background of the book cover is dark gray. It features a series of thin, light gray lines that form a complex geometric pattern. On the left side, there are several overlapping circles of varying sizes. On the right side, there is a sunburst or starburst pattern with many thin lines radiating outwards from a central point. The title 'A RUINOUS FATE' is centered in the upper half of the cover, rendered in a large, white, serif font with a 3D effect.

A RUINOUS FATE

KAYLIE SMITH

HYPERION

Los Angeles New York



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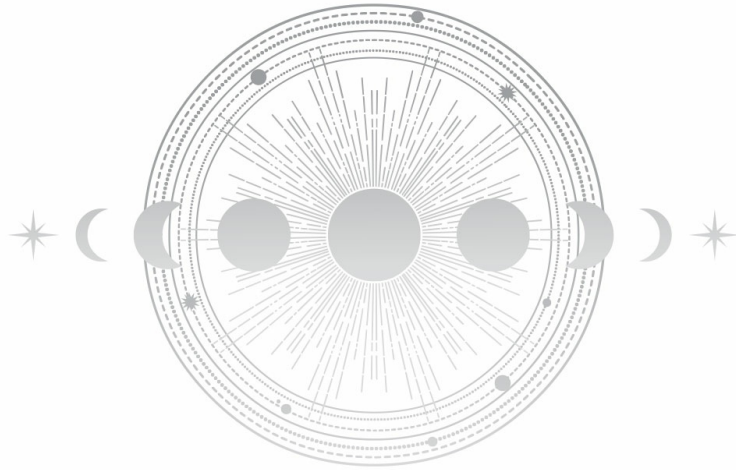
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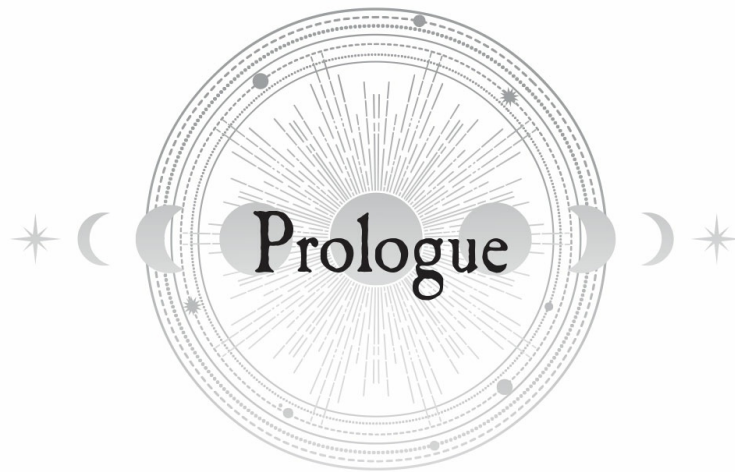
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Epilogue

Acknowledgments

About the Author

For my Meme and Baa—for giving me the gift of reading and magic



The midnight constellations grinned down on the forest with polished teeth. The Fates were in good spirits tonight.

The girl's captor, however, was not.

She leaned back from the cottage's open window and watched from the corner of the cluttered room as her liege frantically wove threads across the entire expanse of the ancient map hanging on the wall. The usual dark, inky color of the thread used to track the Fates and their bargains was gone. Instead, tonight the thread was the color of blood.

The energy in the room was odd in a way that was abnormal even for this cottage, and she moved toward the large dining table in curiosity, peering at the delicate parchment that her captor had ripped open only moments before. The letter had suddenly appeared on the table, unannounced—as things often were within the demonic forest—and sealed with gilded wax. Whatever the note contained shifted the mood in the air around them.

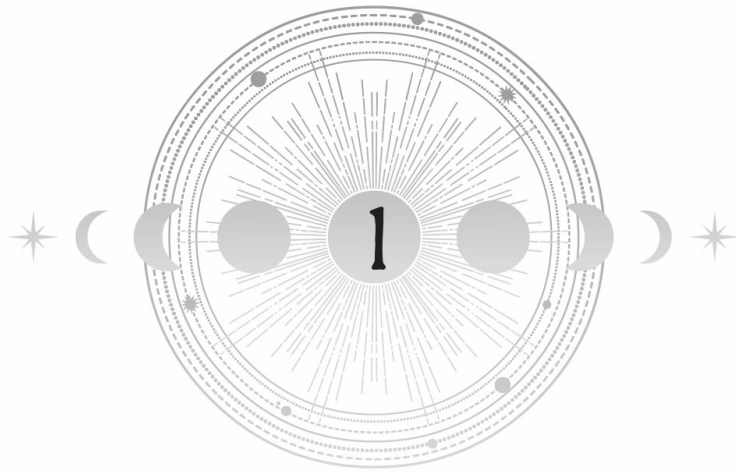
She looked down at the messy black ink scrawled over the page. As she reached out to run her fingertips over the paper, her blood began to pulse through the midnight veins that spiderwebbed beneath her translucent skin as it sensed the heavy magic that lingered in the text. She squinted to try and decipher the words and quickly realized it was not a letter at all—it was a contract.

Across the room, her captor continued working the thread with their long

gray fingers. It was as if they were trying to outrun a ticking clock she could not see. Over and over, they ran the thread across the map with increasing fervor. From the far corner of Estrella to deep within the Northern Fae Courts, the bloodred thread rapidly pursued across all of Illustros, turning the once-clear map into a jumble of crisscrossing lines. Until finally, everything went still. Not even the monstrous forest around them dared to breathe or shed a leaf.

Her liege turned away from their weaving as movement from the table caught their eye, and it took only a moment for her to realize what had captured their attention. The contract.

There at the bottom, where it had been blank only moments before, four names were now signed in blood.



Calliope Rosewood was looking fate dead in the eye.

Her opponent unfurled a devilish grin as he sifted through the black deck of cards he had been shuffling for the past few minutes. “Your move, Calla.”

At the sound of her name, Calla finally tore her gaze away from the red Witch’s Die the other witch had just spilled into the center of the table—careful not to let the magic cube touch his bare skin—and looked down at the last bit of money in front of her. It was just enough to ante up this one last round.

She took a deep breath as she brushed the pad of her thumb over the last of her gilded spéctrals and thought about her next decision. If she lost and had to take the die, she would be exactly two rolls away from being cursed—well, from being *more* cursed. On the other hand, if she folded now, not only would she still have to take the die, she would also lose all the money she already bet. Which was not really an option considering she and the girls were only three days away from being evicted. Again.

Calla twisted her mouth in disdain as she scooped up her remaining gold coins and tossed them into the pile with the rest of the wagers. They landed on top with a metallic *clink*. There was no going back.

Her opponent’s grin widened.

Calla watched carefully as his hands shuffled the deck several more times, his nimble fingers bridging the cards with a noisy *whoosh* before he

reached out to place the stack in front of her.

“Cut it.”

She didn’t break the other witch’s stare as she randomly picked a place on the stack to separate in half and place to the side. He scooped up both halves and added them back together before finally dealing out the cards with quick, precise flicks.

The room grew deadly silent, and as Calla fanned her cards in front of her, she reached out with a quick sweep of her magic to assess the others. Which was, of course, cheating. She didn’t care.

Based on how fast his blood was rushing through his veins, Boone, the hulking drunk to her right, was stressed. The giant was one of the regular gamblers at the Starlight Inn, and even without using her magic, the nervous look he was unsuccessfully trying to hide told her that he’d definitely been bluffing his way through this round. The hint of a smile from behind her other opponent’s cards, however, told her that *he* thought he would be having much better luck.

How adorable, Calla thought as she casually tucked a strand of her dark brown hair behind her left ear.

Calla had two aces, and while that wasn’t exactly a guaranteed win, it certainly meant that she had the upper hand. As she glanced through her long lashes at the Onyx witch sitting across the table, the look of disdain she usually wore whenever she was in his presence melted away into the poker face she had been perfecting.

Ezra Black didn’t know it yet, but this game was hers.

Over the last few months, she had spent many of her nights here—in this exact room of the inn’s basement, with these exact people, playing this exact game. Tonight, however, was different. The stakes higher. Deadlier. For once, it wasn’t the all-too-familiar scent of dark magic wafting down from the upper floors that had her stomach twisting in knots.

Calla looked back down at the brand-new cards in her hand, their glossy black surfaces standing out sorely against the muted background of the basement. She was trying to ignore how her heartbeat thudded in her throat as she waited for the other players to decide how many cards they wanted to exchange. She had never wanted to win a hand of cards more. Especially against *him*. Especially after their last encounter.

Her grip on the slippery cards momentarily tightened at the thought of their last drunken night together, and if it wasn’t for her immaculate ability to

court patience, Calla knew she might just whip the cards at the other witch's head like throwing stars. Last night, she had not expected to find a neatly folded note tucked under her windowsill, signed with Ezra's scrawling signature, and she *definitely* hadn't expected it to be an invitation to a game of cards. Calla knew she should not have let Ezra goad her into gambling with him again, but there was something inside her that could never quite resist the opportunity to knock the smug bastard down a peg or two.

She stole another glance at the center of the wooden card table, almost flinching as her eyes went straight to the bloodred Witch's Die that glistened there. Even the dull light of the basement could not tarnish the die's effect, the side of the cube with six black dots practically glittering as it faced her. Taunted her.

Calla hated the number six even more than she hated the Onyx witch sitting across from her.

Ramor, an older, blond troll with horrible posture who liked to boss around Boone as if the giant were some sort of henchman, grunted from Calla's left. She darted her eyes back to the cards in play, realizing it was finally her turn. She considered her hand for one last moment, her blood humming as her magic sensed Ramor suddenly flush with anger. Boone looked more defeated after exchanging a few of his cards back to the dealer.

"How many do you want, Calla?" Ezra challenged.

She blinked at him. His gaze didn't waiver.

All she needed was to outplay Ezra. Ezra, who knew exactly what her Rouge magic was capable of, who was currently making an effort to steady his breathing so she couldn't read his blood pressure. Too bad for him she could always read his face.

Calla stared knowingly across the tottering table, narrowing her eyes at the Onyx witch as she ignored the heavy weight of the die in her peripherals. The second his jaw clenched—imperceptible to anyone who may not have known his face as well as she did—she flashed him the haughtiest smile she could manage.

"None. I'm all in."

Ramor made a shocked, indignant sound beside her.

"All right." Ezra narrowed his gaze. "Then call."

Ramor and Boone revealed their hands, but neither Calla nor Ezra paid them any mind. When Calla threw down her two aces, the slap of the thick cards on the grainy wood sounded like a clap of thunder echoing through the

room.

“*Bourrée*, Black.”

An exhale rushed out of Ezra’s mouth at Calla’s declaration of victory. Ramor and Boone groaned miserably at losing the pot, their *spéctrals* now Calla’s. Ezra’s face seemed to drain of blood as his hand immediately, almost involuntarily, whipped out to stiffly grab the Witch’s Die. As she watched the die settle into his palm with a brief crimson glow, she almost had a flicker of regret, but she quickly stamped it down. *She* was not one roll closer to starting a few centuries’ worth of servitude tonight, and that was all that mattered.

Calla leaned over the table; the coins jingled against one another as she hurried to gather them into the small velvet satchel that was strapped across her chest. Ezra stood up with lightning speed, throwing his chair back into the damp brick wall behind him with an earsplitting screech. He tightened his fist—balled around the die—with unconcealed fury, his knuckles white with strain. She didn’t hesitate as she swept the last of the *spéctrals* into her bag, not daring to look at his face, and as soon as the last coin fell into the satchel with a *plink*, she turned for the open door.

If it had momentarily escaped Calla that Ezra was an Onyx witch, the unnaturally fast flick of his magic that swept a gust of wind across the room to slam the door to her escape did well to remind her of exactly what he was capable of: indomitable control of most of the elements. She almost faltered a step as she began inching away from the table and toward the door, twisting her face over her shoulder to bare her teeth at him.

“You can’t do this,” she asserted. “I won!”

“You *cheated*, you mean,” he snapped back.

“If anyone here was capable of cheating,” she accused, “don’t you think it would be the one who dealt the cards?”

Ezra’s coal eyes seemed to darken as he stalked toward her, giving Calla the feeling that her accusation wasn’t such a shot in the dark.

“You forget how well I know you, Calla,” he said, giving her a sinister smirk. “Your pretty little poker face may fool everyone else, but it isn’t fooling me. You’ve been cheating all night.”

She gave him a mocking smile in return. “It’s nice to know you still find me pretty.”

The words were like acid in her mouth, but she shoved down the memories of feelings they conjured and focused on getting closer to the exit.

“When have I ever suggested you weren’t?” He lifted a brow.

“Oh, my mistake,” she said sarcastically. “You just implied that I wasn’t *good enough* for you.”

“I told you from the beginning I wasn’t here to play nice. Did you think you were an exception to that?”

It took all her effort not to flinch at his words. “How clever of you to hide your intentions in plain sight. And to think I once assumed you were all beauty and no brains.”

He glowered. “Enough. You cheated, and you’re not leaving until you take this die from me.”

“You may want to work on your sportsmanship, Black.” She spoke with an air of nonchalance that was entirely bravado. “Accusing people of cheating just because you lost isn’t a very good look on you—”

“Are you going to pretend,” he said, edging closer to her, “that I wasn’t the one who sharpened your gambling skills? Or that we haven’t spent the last few months pulling this exact con on a hundred other fools?”

She held her breath as he came closer still.

“Or that I can’t sense when you use your magic just as well as you can sense mine?” he murmured.

Another step closer and Calla’s entire body could feel the familiar warmth of his magic as he paused only two feet away. She braced herself to run.

“Did you just call yourself a fool?” Calla quipped.

His forehead furrowed for a second before giving her a hard, annoyed look. She needed to get out of here *now*.

Ezra went to speak again, and Calla used the opportunity to throw out a blast of power, seizing every ounce of blood in his body with her Rouge magic and throwing him back into the card table. She quickly turned toward the exit as the center of the wood splintered with a *crack* from the sheer force.

Maybe that amount of force wasn’t completely necessary, she thought for a fleeting moment before shaking it away. *No. Damn him.*

The few seconds she had bought herself were useless; a callused hand gripped her wrist. The charged vibration that traveled up her arm from the skin-on-skin contact made her gasp.

“Pretty boy said you cheated.” Boone’s awful breath heated Calla’s face as he towered above her. Ramor moved in quickly from behind to trap her between them.

So preoccupied with Ezra, she had completely forgotten about the others, an oversight she wanted to kick herself for.

“Let me go,” she hissed at Boone, yanking at his grip.

She could already see the bruises that were going to form on her fair skin where his giant fingers were circling her wrist. His abnormal strength was making it incredibly hard for her to fight against him.

“Not until you give us back our money,” Ramor said, a sharp poke in her lower back almost making her gasp. She tried to wiggle away from the tip of his blade, but the giant’s grip was much too strong, holding her firmly in place. The knife at her back dug in a little more, the troll clearly growing impatient.

Calla was starting to sweat as she tried to determine what to do. She knew she didn’t have much time as she glanced back to where Ezra was grunting atop the splintered table on the ground. She could hear his hiss of frustration as he tried to stand.

He looked supremely pissed. *Damn it.*

That’s when she felt it, a bit delayed from being dormant for so long, but the call from deep inside her was always unmistakable. Her Siphon.

The hunger of that call felt so jarring—she had never gotten used to the way the unnatural warmth spread through her body every time her skin made contact with someone else’s. As if she had a sudden rush of fever, her entire body from her scalp to her toes flushed, and she could feel how the darkness within her ached to drain the life out of the giant through her touch, her blood pressure spiking at the prospect.

She slammed down on the urge to siphon and summoned her Rouge magic instead. It didn’t matter how much trouble she had gotten herself in—she would not give in to that darkness.

Calla reached out with her Rouge magic and started popping the blood vessels in the hand Boone was using to hold her. The giant let out a yelp as his grip loosened, and she quickly sidestepped from between him and Ramor, the latter’s knife slicing through the back of her shirt and scraping at her skin as she moved. Before Ramor could follow her, she flicked a hand toward Boone’s head, making all the blood rush elsewhere, causing him to faint and flatten Ramor to the dirty ground with him.

In the time it had taken her to bring down the giant, Ezra was back on his feet, brushing away chips of wood and dust from his clothes.

Cursing, she spun and lunged for the door, grabbing the knob and

twisting frantically as Ezra bolted toward her. She stumbled up the basement steps with a speed that surprised her. Ezra easily leaped over the two struggling bodies on the ground, and before she could open the door to the stairwell, she felt his wind whip through the air. She slipped on the steps and crashed forward, gripping the stone as hard as she could before she tumbled all the way down. She grunted as she rolled to her back and lifted a hand. The wind ceased its spiral around her body as she tightened every blood vessel beneath Ezra's skin, making his eyes bulge with strain as his magic dissipated in the air between them.

Calla knew she should be careful about using every ounce of Rouge magic she had on reserve, but she needed to be able to hold Ezra in place long enough to haul herself up the rest of the steps. Ezra's strength was much more substantial than her own, given her half-witch status. She pushed her aching body up from the stairs as fast as she could manage, keeping her hold on the Onyx witch in place as she took the steps two at a time. When she finally made it to the top, she could feel her body begin to sag from the effort, and she let go.

As she burst out of the stairwell and into the main floor's lobby, the first thing Calla noted was that the scent of dark magic was so much worse on this level of the inn. She had to resist the urge to gag at the charred smell that permeated the old building. She wove her way through the bustling crowd, closer and closer to her escape. Just a few more steps and—

"You're not going anywhere," Ezra snarled, yanking her into him by the tail of her shirt.

As her back snapped against his torso, Calla could feel the hard muscles of his chest and abdomen through his thick black sweater. Nothing unusual, considering most Onyx witches were known for their strength and combat skills in addition to their elemental magic, but Calla couldn't help the small shiver running through her veins as she leaned back against *this* Onyx witch.

Stop that, the little voice in her mind admonished her.

She was furious at the traitorous thoughts—thoughts that were reminding her of exactly what the muscles beneath his sweater looked like. Images of the few times she had gotten a glance of the lean planes of his stomach flashed through her mind, thoughts of how she had once imagined herself running her hands over them and up into his long, disheveled midnight hair. .

..

She gritted her teeth and elbowed him in the stomach as hard as she

could. She spun around to face him as he let out an angry grunt and his grip slackened.

“It’s no one’s fault but your own that you have to make a Roll of Fate. *You* were the one who brought the Witch’s Die.” She let the frustration at her momentary lapse in thoughts color the heat in her voice as she seethed at him.

“And *you* were the one who cheated,” he accused angrily, drawing the attention of a few people nearby.

“I wasn’t here to play nice—did you think you were an exception to that?” Calla parroted in a mocking tone.

“Is there a problem?” a smooth, masculine voice asked from behind Ezra.

The newcomer was an inch or two taller than Ezra, who was already over half a foot taller than Calla’s five feet and five inches. The stranger had short, striking cobalt hair and bright silver eyes. Calla’s Rouge magic immediately reached out to assess the possible new threat and as soon as it identified his power, she couldn’t help but grit her teeth.

Another Onyx witch.

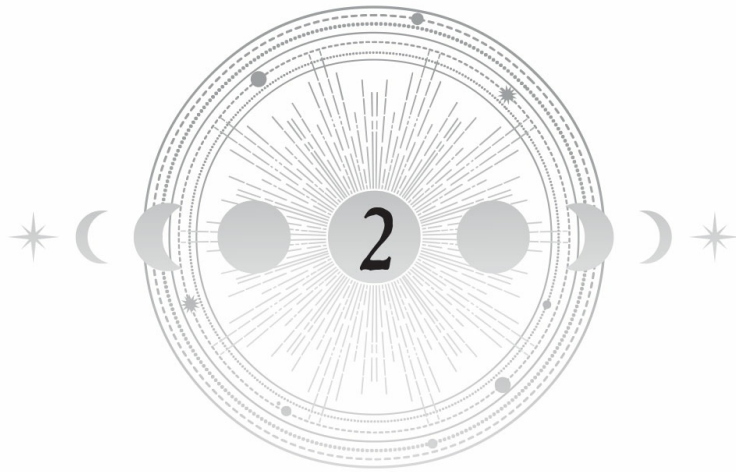
Figures.

Ezra directed his dark gaze to the taller witch for a brief second, and it was all Calla needed to slip away and dart for the front door. The few annoyed exclamations from the patrons she pushed through were completely ignored as she made her way out as fast as she could, her adrenaline spiking as she burst wildly onto the dark cobblestone street. When she didn’t sense Ezra following, she sighed in relief, hoping his friend managed to distract him as long as possible. The sharp winter air pierced her skin, and she shuddered as she realized she had left her cloak back in the basement. Letting out an irritated sigh, she rubbed her hands down her arms for warmth, the thought of having to buy another cloak frustrating.

Well, at least I got the money, she assured herself, patting the satchel at her hip to make certain it was still on her. With the amount she had won tonight, she could buy a new cloak *and* pay her rent for the next few months. She and the girls could also stop using Delphine’s influence to shoplift apples every morning for breakfast.

At least for a little while.

She took a deep breath as she hooked a left down another street and started a brisk pace up the road, Estrella’s famous blue and purple stars winking above her.



After a few minutes of stalking through the streets, Calla could start to make out the line of the Ashwoods appearing in the distance, the wind carrying the familiar scent of pine. She shivered again. All she had to do was make it five blocks to her tiny apartment. Maybe she could finally take Delphine up on her offer to make Ezra go away for good—

She lurched forward suddenly, gripping her neck as the oxygen was violently ripped from her lungs. She clawed at her throat and whipped around to find Ezra stalking toward her, his dark hair and clothing silhouetted against the milky moonlight streaming behind him. His hands were too casually shoved into the front pockets of his trousers as he strode closer, and she hated how effortless he looked as he used his wind magic to pull the air from her throat. That he could easily suffocate her without breaking a sweat . . .

She hated him, she decided. Hated how he was a constant reminder that she was not as strong as she wanted to be. No matter how well he had taught her to gamble or take risks, *he* would always have the upper hand against her.

He is evermore on my shit list, she thought. If I ever get my hands on him again—

All thoughts vanished as the pressure in her chest approached a crescendo, and she sunk to her knees in pain. The Onyx bastard stopped right in front of her, crouching down until he was at her eye level, his mouth a grim line on his angular face and his coal eyes flamed with anger.

“You are going to take this from me,” he told her, his voice low and deliberate as he thrust his fist out and revealed the cursed die in his palm.

She shook her head wildly, unsuccessfully trying to push his hand away.

“You will take it willingly, or I will let you suffocate right here in the street.”

She glared and focused on summoning her magic to strike him. She managed a single shot of power into his core, using the last drop of her Rouge magic to tighten his veins and make him release his hold. It was barely long enough for her to gulp down a few breaths, however, before he easily regained his control. It was futile for her to make another attempt when all she could think about was the fire in her throat and the black spots creeping into the edges of her vision.

Calla desperately weighed her options.

She had only made three out of her six Rolls of Fate so far. Most witches had already used up all their rolls by the time they were her age, young and careless. Many witches thought nothing of being indebted to their coven’s queen—but Calla knew better. She had to admit, though, sacrificing her fourth Roll of Fate, here and now, instead of letting Ezra have the satisfaction of watching her struggle any longer, was starting to seem like the better of the two evils.

She glared at the Onyx witch.

“So? What’s your choice?” he prompted.

It took every ounce of control she had to jerk a single nod at him, and he released his magic. She tried to glare up at him as she gasped and coughed, swallowing as much air into her lungs as she could. Ezra thrust the die at her again.

Ignoring his persistence, she hauled herself to her feet, wobbling slightly from her light-headedness. He gracefully stood with her and waited for her breathing to slow, watching her meet his gaze. His black irises were swirling with an emotion she couldn’t quite decipher, and she quickly glanced away—back down to the red die in his hand.

She could still hardly believe Ezra had bet the die in their game. Calla would have never gambled with something so serious, so *foolish*. When he had run out of spéctrals for the ante, he had carefully dumped the bloodred cube from a small leather pouch and into the center of the table before winking at Calla like the arrogant bastard he was.

Fool, she chastised herself inwardly. *I should’ve known better.*

Calla reached out slowly to grab the die from his palm. She felt her breathing hitch ever so slightly as the power from the die pulsed in the air, warming her fingertips as they hovered over it. She gulped as her eyes roamed past his wrist to the set of dots that looked like a constellation in the skin of his forearm. Deciphering the dots that matched the value of the rolls they aligned with was second nature to her.

Five, three, two, one, two.

It was no wonder he was so powerful. He was the only witch she had ever met who had an Initial Roll above four—besides herself, of course. But if her Initial Roll was supposed to grant her some sort of all-powerful advantage, the Fates were having another laugh at her expense.

Calla took a deep breath and finally plucked the small cube from his palm, a sick feeling of dread sinking like a stone to the bottom of her stomach. The die hummed in her hand, and the burn of the magic sizzled through her core as the die's fate transferred from Ezra to her. The sensation of the die's magic settling into her bones was so different than the one that spread through her when she felt her Siphon call. If the die's magic felt like a spark running along a fuse through her veins, the magic she felt when someone else's skin touched hers was like the heat from the explosion. She knew answering the call would put out the flames, would douse her boiling blood, but she also knew that at least it was only her that might combust if she resisted. If she didn't, she'd be throwing someone else into the fire instead.

She closed her fist around the die in defeat. Ezra didn't grin like she thought he might in this moment. In fact, he didn't look satisfied at all, despite getting his way. Rather, the look he had on his face was so carefully blank that Calla *knew* he was hiding something. All he managed to say to her was "It's done."

She watched him, cautious, as he turned away from her.

"Why?" she blurted desperately, cursing herself for giving away any hint that he had affected her.

He turned back to say something, but she didn't give him the chance to speak as she went on, "Why would you bet a Witch's Die? Why would you play another round if you had nothing else? Are you that cocky? Or do you just hate me that much?"

He stared at her for what felt like an eternity before he finally spoke again.

“I do what I am paid to.”

Calla drew back.

“You are not nearly as sneaky as you think you are, Calla,” he continued. “I’ve been following you for the last few months without you suspecting anything. Did you think meeting another witch in Estrella was an accident? A coincidence?”

Calla’s hands shook, her nerves shot. “You—”

“All these months you’ve been slowly getting attached to me,” he said, cutting her off, seeming almost *agitated*, his eyes burning brighter than usual. “Foolish girl. You trust much too easily, Calliope.”

Her face heated, and she backed away from him. Calla did not appreciate continuously being called a *girl*, nor did she appreciate the use of her full name—as if she were a child he was admonishing. Especially considering Ezra was only a year older than she was and, therefore, an infant by immortal standards.

He was right, though—she had been so foolish to get attached. The fact that she had even entertained seeing him tonight after everything . . . Calla’s penchant for hope was always her greatest vice.

“Why did you have to—” he began.

“Stop!” she yelled, not able to listen to any more of this. “Please, just *stop* —”

“Ezra.”

Calla and Ezra both whipped their heads toward the voice.

“We need to go,” the blue-haired Onyx witch from the inn ordered, the absolute authority in his voice leaving no room for argument.

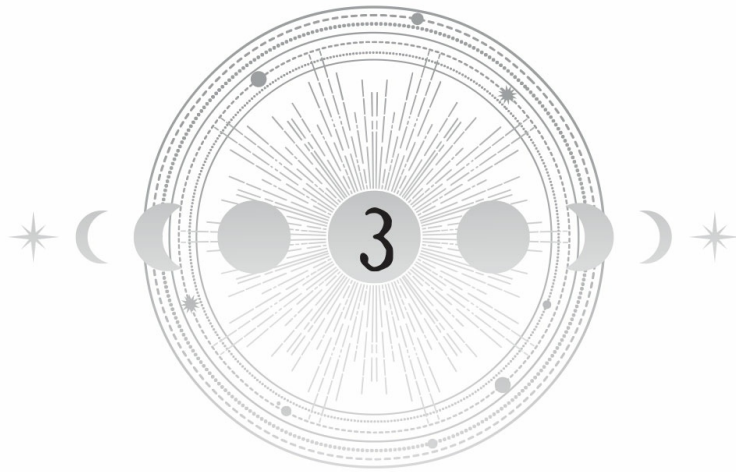
Ezra dipped his chin in acknowledgment before turning back toward Calla.

“Have fun with your roll,” he said flatly. “And, Calla?”

She looked at him evenly, her blood still boiling from his words.

“Myrea says hello.”

With those last words, Ezra turned and stalked toward his friend. Calla’s blood ran cold.



Calla braced herself to climb up the rusty ladder that was precariously hung on the side of her old stone apartment building. Its metal rungs were so cold she thought the blood still rushing in her veins might freeze. Her key had been in the inside pocket of her forgotten cloak, so the window it was.

As she stepped onto the ladder, she discovered that climbing the questionable piece of metal was going to be much more difficult with the Witch's Die still firmly clutched in her hand. That, and her muscles felt like gelatin since she had depleted her entire reservoir of Rouge magic. She made it halfway up before her left foot slipped on a rung, and she frantically reached out for balance—causing her fist with the die to momentarily loosen. She cried out with a hiss, quickly tightening her hand closed around the small cube as the die seared itself into the skin of her palm, its magic refusing to allow her to drop it.

When she finally managed to regain her balance and get all the way to the top, she slid open the window and swung herself legs first through the small space. As the ladder creaked beneath her, she prayed to the Gods that the stressed groan of the metal wouldn't be the last sound she heard. She shimmied herself all the way through, her voluptuous figure making it a tight squeeze, before tumbling down onto her bed, which, thankfully, sat right beneath the opening. She listened as the window slowly slid shut with a *click* behind her.

Calla lay there for a moment and mulled over the night's events, her hand still stinging from where the die had burned into her skin. Her labored breathing soon steadied until all she heard was Ezra's last words echoing through her mind.

She wasn't shocked that Myrea knew where she was. Mostly, it was the notion that Myrea had *hired* Ezra to trick her into making another roll that frightened Calla more than anything. She'd let out a small groan and lifted herself into a sitting position on the bed, when the door to the bedroom kicked open.

"Calliope!" Hannah exclaimed as she rushed over. "We thought we heard something—"

"What's wrong with you?" Delphine inserted as she stepped up behind Hannah.

Calla sighed as she scooted herself off the edge of the mattress and made to smooth out her rumpled appearance, knowing her torn shirt would be the first thing Delphine would notice. The girls were perusing her unkempt state, their faces wrinkled with concern. Well, Hannah's was concerned. Delphine's expression seemed to say *What in the Hells?* more than anything else. Confirming Calla's thoughts, the siren gave Hannah a side-eye glance, and Calla watched as the two girls had an unspoken conversation.

A Siphon, a Rouge witch, and a siren. The three of them made quite the ostentatious trio, which was perhaps why they were constantly finding trouble. Or trouble was finding them. Delphine alone was hard to miss. The girl's silver eyes, which perfectly matched the color of her sleek bob, sparkled like Estrella's stars. Her ice-blue skin shimmered slightly in the sun, but that effect wasn't nearly as bright as her smile. She was built lithe and athletic, her muscles prominently toned, a stark contrast to Hannah's softer, petite form and Calla's thick curves.

Delphine finally flicked her eyes back to Calla's face expectantly, interrupting her unabashed perusal.

Time to get this over with.

Calla took a deep breath as she thrust her hand out. Delphine lifted a silver brow in question until Calla finally unfurled her palm to reveal the glistening red die and the slow-healing burn that sat beneath. The siren's face went from its normal ice blue to a sickly shade of periwinkle.

"Oh, *Calla*, how on earth did you end up with that?" Hannah said as she lifted a hand to her mouth. "Did it *spawn* near you?"

Calla shook her head. It had been a long time since she had witnessed any Witch's Dice magically appearing around Illustros. After the birth of a new witch, the Fates would subsequently create six dice that could appear anywhere a witch inhabited. The caveat being: Any witch close enough to the spawn site was magically bound to seek out the die and take it—unless someone else got there first. Since Calla had left the Witch Realms, such an occurrence wasn't something she worried about anymore.

"It was Ezra," Calla admitted, her voice still slightly raspy from him choking her.

"Ezra? What were you doing with *him*?" the siren asked, though Calla detected that there was far more concern than judgment in her tone.

"He left me a note asking to meet him at the inn tonight, and I thought that maybe he wanted to talk, to *apologize*," she said with a groan. "We ended up gambling instead. The only silver lining is at least I won enough money to pay off rent?"

No need to tell them yet that it won't be this place's rent, a small voice in her mind whispered. *That can wait until tomorrow.*

Calla lifted the satchel off her body and tossed it over to Delphine, who easily snatched the heavy bag out of the air. Hannah folded back the cover to peek inside, brushing her flaxen blond hair out of her face to get a better look.

"My Gods, how did you win all of this?" Her violet eyes widened as she peered inside.

"More importantly, how did you end up with *that*?" Delphine pointed to the die, steering the conversation back on track as she often did when Hannah got distracted.

"Ezra bet it as his ante," Calla answered irritably before recounting the events of the night.

"As soon as I dropped an ace, he accused me of cheating and then it all got out of hand so quickly," she finished.

"Were you cheating?" Delphine asked.

"Of course I was cheating! He bet a *Witch's Die*."

Hannah understood; the witch's bright eyes shone with sympathy. Calla's eyes flicked down to Hannah's own arm, trying not to wince at the sight of all six of the girl's rolls. The blond had left her coven as soon as her final roll was completed and never looked back. Not that distance would stop Hannah from doing anything the Rouge Queen ordered her to do now that her rolls were complete, but Calla knew if anyone understood, Hannah did.

Delphine delicately pinched the bridge of her nose. “Well, at least we’ve got rent money for the next”—she glanced back in the bag—“three months?”

Hannah nodded in confirmation before looking back to Calla’s hand.

“Are you going to roll now?”

Calla swallowed. “I suppose I should. The hour is almost up, and it’s already burned me once.”

She gestured for them to sit on the floor, and they huddled there, together in a circle, as Calla shook the die in her fist.

“Anything but a six!” Hannah exclaimed unhelpfully, and Delphine turned to glare at her.

“Why would you jinx it?”

“Jinx what? Fate is fate.” Hannah shrugged.

Calla paused her shaking. “Do you really believe that?”

“Sure.” The blond gave another small shrug. “I think whatever numbers you’re going to roll are already set. It’s just up to you when you roll them.”

Calla didn’t like the thought of that—the thought that your own fate was so uncontrollable. She had always preferred to think that your fate was ultimately in your own hands. That it didn’t matter what was predestined by the Fates because the only thing that could truly determine your destiny was the choices you make for yourself. A fool’s hope perhaps.

She took a deep breath and finally released the die, and this time, with intent behind it, the cube fell from her hand without fuss. The die tapped sharply on the floor, bouncing a few times before rolling noisily to a stop. The bloodred cube started to glow, and all three girls leaned down to see the result.

Six.

Hannah’s and Delphine’s breath caught.

Calla’s left arm began to burn, and she jerked it up in front of her to watch as the fourth set of six black dots slowly appeared on her forearm. The die’s glow dulled right before the entire cube shattered into thin air, its magic spent. She felt numb.

“If I ever see that wretched Onyx witch again, I’m going to rip out his throat,” Delphine growled.

Hannah quietly stared at where the die had just disappeared before reaching out to squeeze Calla’s hand.

“Cal, you don’t know if you’re going to be the sixth. There’s still a possibility—”

Calla jerked her hand out of the witch's grasp, and a hurt expression flitted across the blond's face. Calla's eyes softened a bit, though her words still rang clear: "You and I both know the truth, Han."

Delphine sighed and, reaching out an elegant blue hand, she brushed away a few stray strands of Calla's long waves from her shoulder.

"The only thing that matters is that Myrea still has no idea exactly where you are. All she knows is whatever that bastard from your coven told her about your rolls. You just have to be extra careful now—no more gambling with Witch's Dice."

Calla looked away guiltily. She didn't think she needed to reiterate that Myrea having even an inkling of her rolls was bad enough, and tonight she didn't have the energy to tell them that the Rouge Queen definitely *did* know where she was—and that they would probably have to get ready to move again soon. Or that it was Myrea who was responsible for Ezra giving her that die in the first place. Delphine was already disappointed enough in Calla's romantic delusions, and Calla wasn't ready to admit exactly just how foolish she had been about Ezra. Not yet.

"No more gambling with Witch's Dice," Calla repeated.

Delphine gave a satisfied nod before murmuring, "C'mon, Han."

The two girls left the room so Calla could have some privacy. She numbly stripped off her sweat-soaked clothes and changed for bed.

As she tucked herself in, she wasn't sure how she would ever be able to sleep after the night's events, but Hannah and Delphine's hushed whispering had quickly quieted in the other room. She turned to her side and watched the dancing shadows on the wall made by the candles on the bedside table. In the firelight, she could still make out the scratches and dents in the paint from when Ezra had attempted to teach her how to throw a knife at an apple. Eventually, after enough prodding, Ezra had allowed her to try out the fancy jeweled dagger he always wore at his hip—Heart Reaver, he called it. A disastrous idea on both their parts considering Calla had hit the wall more than the fruit, and the dagger had done much more damage than the dull cutlery the girls kept in their kitchen.

That had been only a month ago.

It seemed like years ago.

When Ezra had asked her to meet him earlier that night, Calla had been secretly ecstatic. Her traitorous heart had fluttered at the prospect of seeing him again, though it had only been two weeks. Two weeks since the night

they had come back to the apartment after winning a game of cards and drunk a bottle of rum. Two weeks that she had been miserably lying around the tiny apartment ignoring Delphine's probing remarks to either *forget him or let me kill him*.

She felt pathetic.

Yet, when Calla found his note wedged beneath her window, it was as if her entire body relaxed; like she had been going through withdrawal without realizing it. For the past three months, she had seen the Onyx witch almost every single day. They had been together so much that Calla's magic had started recognizing his—like it did with Hannah's. The same warm hum spread through Calla's body whenever she felt their familiar presences nearby.

Calla groaned in embarrassment as she turned over to smush her face into her pillow. The thought that she had become so comfortable with his presence that her *magic* had gotten attached made her want to cringe and only added to the embarrassment over his double cross.

She lifted her left arm to her face to glare at the brand-new dots embedded there. Her magic had finally completely healed the burn on her palm, but she swore she could still feel the die scorching into her skin. She remembered how there was once a time in her life she had been so desperate to make a roll. How she couldn't wait until she turned thirteen so she could have her Initial Roll ceremony and receive her Rouge magic. It was something the Witch Queens enforced, anyway, but Calla had been so eager to try and cover up that she was a Siphon by embracing her witch blood instead. Her youthful naivety pained her now.

Here in her room, alone in the flickering firelight, she was ashamed to realize that it was not panic or fear she felt over this fourth cursed roll—though a fourth six undoubtedly meant she would be a walking target. Rather, it was the sadness of what she had lost tonight. Tomorrow she would have to tell the girls that they needed to start packing up to leave yet another home. If she settled their rent for this month in the morning, it would give them at least a week to get everything together before they would have to travel to another city in Estrella—if there were any left that they hadn't already been run out of. This felt worse than the time she forgot to glamour her eye color and sent an entire apothecary into a frenzy when they realized there was a Siphon in their midst. It killed Calla that something as painfully small as forgetting to hide her mismatched eyes could uproot her friends' lives. At

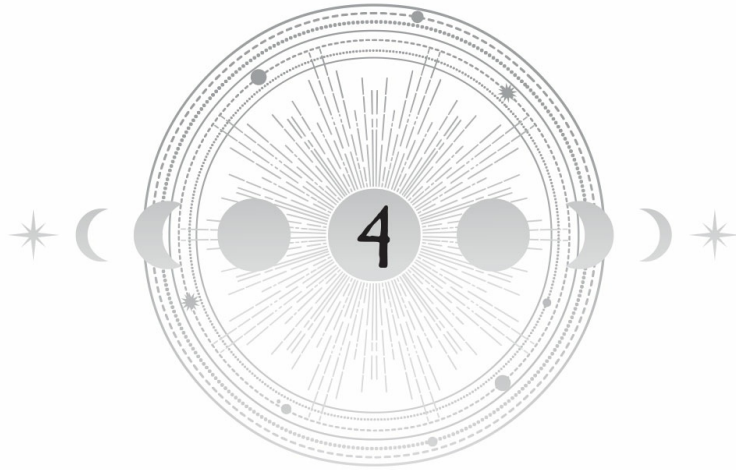
least that had been an accident, though. This time she had voluntarily gotten herself into trouble.

Flipping over to her back, she breathed in the comforting scent of lavender and ocean salt that clung to the sheets on the bed.

One day, she promised herself, I will make up for all the trouble I've brought them.

She took another steadying breath.

One day I will forget to think of Ezra Black.



Calla woke to light streaming over her face and a warm body next to her. Hannah.

The blond must have crawled into their bed during the night when Calla was too deep in her dreams to notice. That, or Delphine had kicked her out. Calla was betting on the latter.

The bright morning light flooded the small space of her room in a way that washed out the dingy paint and made the walls seem cleaner than they were. She absentmindedly rubbed at her left arm until she suddenly remembered the events of the night before. She turned over and snuggled closer to Hannah, trying to bury the spike of fear the new number incited in the back of her mind.

Hannah and Calla had always shared a bed while Delphine usually opted for her own space. Calla was grateful more than ever, in Estrella's cold winter, that she had someone to share warmth with at night. She hadn't always lived like this. Calla had once belonged to a coven that took care of anything she needed—before the Fates ruled her life, that is. Although, considering how low the odds of being born with the Siphon curse were, perhaps they had *always* ruled her life.

Calla had known the exact moment she had to leave her coven: when their fear of what she might become if the Fates had chosen her as their sixth—and final—Blood Warrior was so palpable she could feel it in the air. Once

whispers of her third roll being a six started to make the rounds, she felt the weight of everyone's stares following her everywhere she went. Covens were only so big, and rumors spread *fast*. Words that were once kind turned venomous, and eventually her coven members stopped speaking to her altogether. She had known once the silence began that it was only a matter of time until those who made it no secret they disapproved of her Siphon abilities would inform Myrea that she had rolled a six yet again. While covens would often do all they could to protect their own, there was no protecting anyone when it came to the Blood Warrior curse. Calla wouldn't have been the first person one of the Witch Queens slaughtered to keep Fate from claiming its final warrior, and she wasn't going to put those she cared for in any more danger.

To make life more complicated, there were only a few places she could travel to by land once she left the Witch Realms. The Land of the Valkyries, which bordered the northwestern side of the Witch Realms, hadn't been an option due to their rivalry with witches. The fae courts and human territories may have been less than welcoming to a witch but still wouldn't have been an awful choice if it wasn't for the fact that she was a Siphon. In Estrella, slipping up on her glamour meant being run out of town with scowls, but in the fae courts up north, separated from Estrella by the Neverending Forest, being a Siphon meant constantly dodging people trying to use her abilities for their own gain. Worse, in the human territories south of Estrella, Siphons had a nefarious reputation, which meant there was a fifty-fifty shot she'd be safer shouting that she was a Blood Warrior in the middle of a mortal village than she would be walking around with her single, amber-colored eye. Though Estrella had been the most appealing choice, it was also the most obvious. There had always been a clock counting down her time here. And it looked like her time was up.

Calla studied the new pattern of dots residing on her arm. She reached out and scrubbed her hand over them, rubbing and rubbing until the skin turned blotchy and red.

"Ugh!" she groaned when they didn't disappear.

"Mmm, Calla?"

Calla watched as the other witch blinked sleepily in the morning light.

"What time is it?" Hannah asked, her voice gruff as she sat up and stretched.

Calla shrugged, but judging from the amount of light flooding the room,

she assumed it was still pretty early. Good, she needed to get dressed so she could bring their landlord, a human named Jack, some of the sp  ctrals she had won the night before. It would be the last month of rent they ever paid for this apartment—a detail Calla was still dreading telling the girls about. While she and the girls could usually slip out of town with unpaid tabs, Calla had heard enough about Jack to know he had loyal patrons scattered across Estrella. If he put a hit out on the three of them, they would be even more screwed.

She climbed over Hannah and out of the bed. Rummaging through the tiny closet the three of them shared, Calla pulled on a high-neck black tunic, matching leather pants, and her usual weathered boots.

Just as Calla finished lacing up her shoes, Delphine’s silver head popped through the doorway.

“Are you both up?”

“Yes,” Calla answered. “I was about to go out to give Jack our rent money.” She figured the rest of the conversation could wait until tonight. She looked around, trying to locate where she had thrown the bag full of coins last night.

“Here,” Delphine said, bending down to pick up the black pouch and tossing it to her.

Calla caught it easily and slipped the bag into its place over her head and across her chest.

Hannah opened her mouth to say something, when she caught a glimpse of Delphine in her tiny lace nightgown. The nightgown was probably one of the shortest things Delphine owned—which was saying something given the siren’s preference for showing off her legs. The nightgown was also one of the most see-through articles of clothing their friend owned.

Calla could see two pink spots blooming on Hannah’s cheeks as she turned her head toward the wall so Delphine wouldn’t see.

“Well,” Calla said nonchalantly, intentionally moving Delphine’s attention to her, “I’m heading out. See you both later?”

“Wait, I’ll tag along. I’m supposed to be meeting Alex anyways.”

Calla resisted sliding a glance in Hannah’s direction at the mention of Alex. “Okay, I’ll wait while you get dressed.”

Delphine disappeared back to the living room, and Calla kicked the door shut as she sat gingerly on the corner of the bed. Hannah released a miserable sigh.

“How is she still with them? They’re not even immortal! This is just going to lead to heartbreak.”

In order to have an immortal life span *both* parents had to be immortal. Alex would live much longer than most mortals as a half-human witchling, but they would still eventually grow old and die; Calla didn’t think that was the point to be made here.

“Playing the immortality card isn’t the solution, Han.”

Hannah pouted and lay back on the bed.

“You know I’m right,” Calla said gently.

A mumbled “I know” came from the witch’s lips just as Delphine reentered the room.

“What do you know?” Delphine questioned.

“Nothing.” Calla easily waved off the question as she stood from the bed.

Their friend was dressed in a floor-length emerald skirt that had a slit all the way to the top of her thigh and a matching sleeveless top—despite the frigid temperature outside. Calla noted that the deep green of the garment complemented her friend quite well, and told her as much.

“Thank you.” Delphine beamed at the praise before clapping her hands together. “All right, let’s get going, I don’t want to be late to see Alex.”

“Are my eyes good?” Calla waved a hand over her face, a cautious habit she had developed after one too many slipups. Since her naturally mismatched irises were a dead giveaway to her Siphon curse, Calla had to constantly glamour the right one, the dark-honey-colored one, to match her left’s violet hue. Calla sometimes found herself begging the stars to just let the glamour stick permanently. It never did.

“Yep, perfect match,” Delphine assured her.

Calla threw a quick sympathetic smile at Hannah before slipping out the room after her friend. Calla shivered from the coolness in the air, though the temperature wasn’t nearly as bad as it was during nightfall. Delphine was unaffected.

“Where’s your cloak?” Delphine inquired as they began their walk down the cobblestone road toward the northern district.

“I left it at the inn. I’m going to have to stop for another one after I visit Jack. Even with the sun shining, it’s getting too cold to go without one.”

“Do you want to go back to the inn and check for it?”

“Absolutely not,” Calla said. “I won’t be going back there for anything any time soon.”

“Do you think Ezra will try and bother you again?”

“No. I think he’s done with me this time.”

His last words echoed through her mind again.

Myrea says hi.

She quickly pushed them away.

“He better be if he knows what’s good for him,” Delphine muttered as she lifted a hand to check her nails.

When they reached the first row of makeshift tents that indicated they were entering the shopping streets of the northern district, they hooked a left. The market ahead of them hummed with bustling patrons, the crowds of people growing thicker the farther they traveled.

“I don’t think I’ll have to worry about seeing him again.”

“I hope he accidentally wanders into a bad part of the Neverending Forest one day and gets eaten by kelpies.” Delph smirked over at Calla.

A surprised laugh burst from Calla as she bumped shoulders with Delphine conspiratorially. “One can only hope,” she said.

They weaved through the market’s crowd, watching as merchants and buyers went through their usual song and dance. Calla loved the shopping streets. There was just something about the constant hubbub of the crowd and the smell of flowers and herbs that some of the vendors sold. The girls sidestepped a centaur who was haggling with a merchant over the price of fish when Calla cleared her throat.

“So, Alex . . . it seems like you two have gotten awfully close.”

Delphine hummed a bit before saying softly, “They’re nice.”

The girls finally passed through the other side of the crowd. The roads were lined with small bricked storefronts where wealthier patrons shopped. Ahead to the right Jack’s home sat, tucked behind a few well-placed pine trees.

“Well—” Calla began.

“Delph!”

Calla watched as the mortal in question came striding toward them.

Delphine smiled and rushed forward to meet them halfway. Alex circled her in an embrace, and she easily gave them a kiss on the cheek since they stood barely an inch taller than the siren. Calla took in their wiry frame, all gangly limbs and lean muscles. They had short sandy hair, bright blue eyes, and a hint of a two-toned beard growing in, and though they weren’t necessarily Delphine’s usual type, Calla definitely saw the appeal.

Delphine's silver hair swished as she turned back to Calla. "Are you good from here? We were going to go grab a few pastries from the bakery."

"I'm good," Calla assured them with a smile.

"C'mon, you, there are sticky buns to eat!" Delphine said as she pulled Alex toward their new direction. "See you later tonight!" the siren threw back to Calla.

Calla raised her hand in a half wave before continuing toward Jack's place. As she walked up the sidewalk toward the front door, she was cast in the home's shadow and had to keep herself from gawking at the towering architecture not for the first time. She bounced up the white quartz steps and paused in front of the door, pushing herself up on the tips of her toes to knock with the heavy brass knocker that was shaped like a fox's head.

She waited a few moments before knocking again.

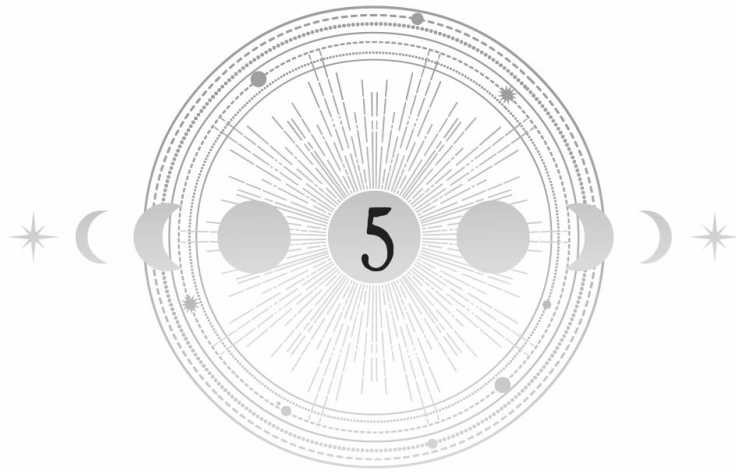
Maybe he's out this morning, she thought.

Calla had just turned to leave when she caught the curtains in the window to her left fluttering. She reached up to knock again, lurching unexpectedly when the door flew open.

"Hello, little witch." Boone grinned menacingly.

Run.

Calla straightened up as her instincts screamed at her, but before she could take another step, something smashed into the side of her head, and everything went black.



Gideon yanked his blade out of the viperidae's throat with a satisfying *squelch*. He used the side of his trousers to wipe the black blood off the knife before sliding it back into the leather sheath on his belt.

"We need to move the body, before the smell of fresh blood starts to attract any other visitors with fangs," he told his three companions.

The others finished fussing with the corpse, plucking off a few scales and extracting the creature's fangs as Gideon stepped toward them. Thin ash-tree twigs from the forest's evergreen namesake snapped noisily underfoot. Ezra and Caspian each gripped the beast's humanoid half, hoisting it up under its arms while Gideon and Kestrel lifted the serpent tail that made up the creature's bottom half. They walked the viperidae's lifeless body over to the lake that sat in the center of the clearing and unceremoniously threw it in.

"Got the items?" Gideon asked Cass.

Caspian tossed over the teeth he had pulled out of the viperidae's mouth, and Gideon easily plucked them out of the air. Kestrel stepped forward next, holding out two black-and-emerald scales in his palm. The scales' iridescent colors flashed in the sliver of light floating down through the tops of the ash trees. Gideon gave him a singular nod in thanks as he pocketed the items and turned to Ezra.

"Now all we need is the Valkyrie feather and the siren's tongue. My source at the inn assured me we could get a tongue in tonight's auction."

Ezra regarded Gideon darkly. “I would prefer not to go back there if it makes no difference to you. Last night was enough trouble for me.”

Gideon gracefully arched a single navy brow in amusement. “I thought for sure that you would be done brooding about that witch by daylight.”

Ezra shot him a glare.

Gideon suspected there was more to this entire situation, but Ezra was not the sort of person one should push for intimate details and Gideon was not the sort to care about someone else’s private life anyway. Especially when Gideon had no room to talk.

“I doubt she’ll be anywhere near the inn after you mentioned Myrea’s name,” Gideon reasoned. Truthfully, he preferred if Ezra didn’t come with him to the auction anyway. The less others saw them together the better. “If she were smart, she would already be leaving Estrella. Plus, I thought *you* were supposed to be leaving today?”

“If she were smart, she wouldn’t have hung around another witch in the first place—” Ezra broke off his thought with a frustrated shake of his head. “Never mind. I *am* leaving today—as soon as Myrea’s informant does their job.”

“Why did Myrea ask *you*, of all people, to do this task anyway?” Cass asked, reaching up to absentmindedly brush a hand over his shorn white hair.

“I think we all know the Rouge Queen would have absolutely requested Gideon had he not already been engaged elsewhere,” Ezra explained. “And my mother ordered me to accept the request, so I didn’t exactly have a choice.”

Gideon knew Ezra well enough to know there was something else the witch wasn’t saying.

“Interesting,” Kestrel finally spoke, his face serious.

Kestrel seemed genuinely intrigued by this last bit of information. Though whether his intrigue was over the concept of the Rouge Queen originally wanting Gideon to do her bidding or the fact that Ezra had mentioned his mother, a rare occasion, Gideon wasn’t sure.

“Maybe we all should stay away from the inn. Avoiding anyone Myrea is interested in seems wise,” Caspian half joked.

Gideon was inclined to agree.

“I should be in and out, anyway. It isn’t exactly a place you should hang around longer than necessary.” Gideon gave Ezra a hard look as he said the last part. “Hopefully, I will get a chance to see you once I’m done—before

you return to the Realms.”

“Great,” Ezra confirmed. The witch seemed to hesitate, however, and Gideon had a feeling he knew exactly what the hesitation was about.

“I doubt she’s daft enough to still be hanging around the inn after last night.”

Ezra’s coal eyes bored into Gideon’s, as if to say *I hope you’re right*. Gideon looked to his other companions.

“You two will travel to the Neverending Forest to find the Valkyrie’s nest and meet us at the forest’s southern border whenever your task is complete.”

Kestrel reached a hand to Gideon’s shoulder to give him a familiar squeeze in parting before dropping his arm and waiting for Caspian to say his own good-bye. Cass quickly stepped forward to give Gideon a fist bump with a smirk on his face, his expression glowing with excitement at the prospect of upcoming danger.

He turned to Kestrel. “You have the compass?”

Kestrel nodded and patted the front pocket of his leather trousers. The gilded compass had been a gift from Gideon’s father. It was enchanted to keep whoever used it on the correct path through the Neverending Forest, though it couldn’t guarantee you would escape without dying a painful death. If you weren’t torn apart by kelpies or banshees—which was a *pleasant* end by the forest’s standards—the demonic woods had a way of poisoning your mind and playing games until you begged for the darkness of death. Gideon was asking much more of his friends than he deserved. He would have done it all himself if they had not insisted on helping and he could only pray to the Gods that they all made it out in one piece.

“Safe travels, friends.” Gideon nodded to the men in departure before he and Ezra turned to walk away.

The two of them walked back from the Ashwoods in charged silence. Ezra was still in a mood and Gideon hoped the other witch wouldn’t get into any more trouble before returning home. All he wanted to do was get in and out as quickly as possible tonight, without any further distractions, so he could meet Kestrel and Cass and finish this entire mission before anyone back home grew suspicious. A couple of months was the blink of an eye to immortals, but there was no way to estimate how much time those two would end up spending in the Neverending Forest, and if Gideon and the rest of them were gone for too much longer, it would draw noticeable attention.

He assumed Kestrel and Cass could get to the forest well before sundown

tonight, but once they entered the forest, Gods knew how messed up their timeline in there would get. Gideon figured they would probably meet in a day or two his time, but it would be best to get to the border to wait for them as soon as he could. They might have been ready to head to the forest a month ago had it not been so hard to track down the siren's tongue.

"Are you happy to be going back home?" Gideon asked as conversationally as he could.

Ezra's face darkened. "I'm happy to finally be leaving this town."

Gideon noted the clench of Ezra's jaw and knew that wasn't the whole truth. He was surprised Ezra had stayed in Estrella this long, though he knew it was only because of the girl. He may not know all the details of Ezra's personal life, but he knew *Ezra*, and Ezra did not stay in one place without purpose for more than a few weeks.

"Do you miss it?" Gideon asked. "Home, I mean."

"No." Ezra kicked a fallen branch out of his path. "If it wouldn't cause a huge uproar, I might like to travel elsewhere in Estrella. I've heard the towns on the northern coast are like nothing we have in the Witch Realms."

"Probably because we have no coasts at all." Gideon lifted a brow.

"What about you? Do you miss home? You haven't spent this much time on leave from the Guild since you were fifteen."

"I miss having a routine," Gideon admitted. "I hate not knowing what's going on with my unit. The new recruits started a few weeks ago, and I wasn't able to be there."

"Do you truly love taking care of all those witchlings that much?" Ezra questioned skeptically. "I've never understood it."

"The Guild is what I'm good at. And it's not like I ever had a choice, so I may as well find something about it that I can look forward to."

"I know," Ezra murmured.

The two men were silent again, the icy leaves crunching under their boots the only sound as they weaved their way out of the woods. Estrella's winters were not nearly as harsh as the ones in their homelands, and they were much prettier. Gideon watched as a few ice pixies buzzed overhead in the treetops, the tiny fae beings coming out in droves now that the air was cold enough. He saw Ezra was watching them, too.

Gideon understood Ezra's skepticism about the Guild, and knew not everyone understood the sacrifice to join it. Gideon had been initiated as soon as he made his Initial Roll and received his Onyx abilities at thirteen, which

meant the entirety of his magic-wielding life had been spent tirelessly training. Hardly any of the active members ever wed or joined covens of their own—and the ones who did start families were the lucky few who managed to survive more than a few decades after they joined.

The training was hard, unyielding, but nothing else had ever made Gideon feel so alive. The Guild was the closest thing he had ever felt to freedom. He and his unit were some of the best magic wielders the Realms had seen in centuries—thanks to Kestrel’s notoriously rigid expectations. Unlike some of the others, however, Gideon wasn’t there for a vendetta against their Valkyrie rivals. Gideon was there to prepare his companions to fight for themselves in the future, to not just let the Witch Queens treat them as expendable pawns in their agenda with the Fates.

“Everything’s going to change soon,” Ezra suddenly spoke, as if he somehow heard Gideon’s thoughts.

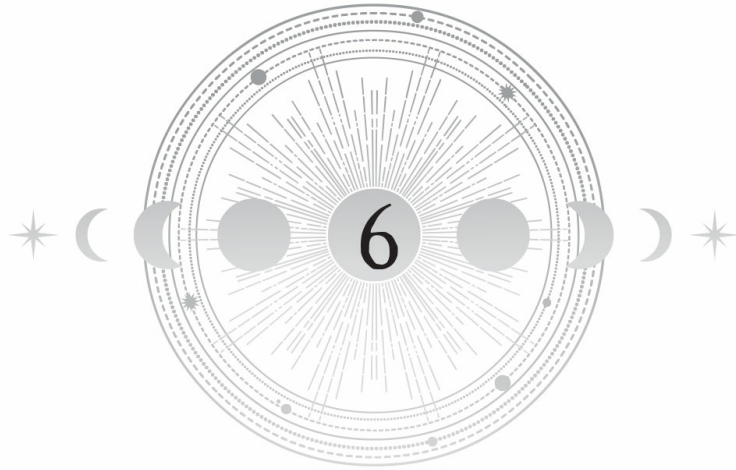
“What do you mean?” Gideon asked.

“The Fates’ War is coming, and no matter how much you try to prolong it or prepare, it can’t truly be stopped. It’s only a matter of time before the Fates force it to happen anyway.”

“What do you know about the Fates?” Gideon gave the other witch a sideways glance.

“I know if they want to find you, they will.”

Ezra didn’t say anything more, his mouth a hard line, when they finally broke through the tree line and emerged from the Ashwoods. Gideon thought for a second about asking the other witch to explain, but as he absentmindedly ran a hand over his bare left forearm, he had a feeling he knew exactly what Ezra meant.



Calla passed the bottle of spiced rum.

For the last hour, she had been sitting on the floor of her empty apartment trying to demolish the glass container of cinnamon liquor.

“You know, you’ve never told me why you’re in Estrella.”

Ezra lifted a black brow at her as he grabbed the bottle from her hand and took a swig. “Was that a question or a statement?” He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“A question.” She rolled her eyes. Obviously.

He gave her a smirk as he passed the bottle back, and she greedily lifted it to her lips again, letting the liquor slowly burn its way down her throat as she waited for his answer.

“I came for my brother.”

“You have a brother? Is he as handsome as you?” She batted her lashes at him mockingly.

“Definitely not. I’m afraid I got all the looks.”

“So, does that mean he got the brains?”

He reached out to flick her nose in admonishment. “Witch,” he said with a surprising amount of endearment.

She stuck her tongue out at him. “So, your brother . . .”

Ezra nodded. “He had to get out of the Witch Realms. He’s on a . . . quest of sorts, and I came along to help him.”

“A quest?” She laughed at how ridiculous that sounded. “What kind of quest?”

“That,” he drawled slightly as he lifted the bottle once again, “I can’t tell you. My brother is a very private person.”

She glanced down at her arm where the long sleeve of her linen shirt covered the dots that marked her skin. She thought about the glamour that was currently fixed over her eyes. She understood what being a private person was like. Now was not the first time she had the striking realization that she wanted, very badly, to not be so private with Ezra.

She smiled slightly at the thought.

“What?”

“Hmm?” she hummed absentmindedly, looking back up into his eyes.

“You were just smiling,” he said as he brushed a strand of her hair out of her face, a gesture that made her suck in a breath.

She had never been able to get used to how he touched her. Small caresses of his thumb on her wrists, the way he sometimes wrapped an arm around her to keep her from tipping over when she was drunk on their walks home. Only her friends had ever voluntarily touched her before. Even when she hid her true nature, people still went out of their way to avoid skin-on-skin contact. As if they could sense the dark curse that lay beneath the surface.

Before Calla could say anything, Ezra suddenly pulled his hand back and deliberately cleared his throat.

“If you want, we could do this now,” he said, not meeting her eyes as he took another gulp of the amber liquid.

She furrowed her brow. “Do what?”

“We could just get this over with. The lust between us, I mean.” He waved an impatient hand between them. “Better we get it out of the way, I think.”

She reared her head back. “What?” she asked, dumbfounded.

He looked at her with an overly puzzled expression. “I mean, that’s what you want, too, isn’t it?”

“You think what I feel for you is just lust?” she questioned, not sure if she quite managed to keep the hurt from creeping into her tone.

“Well, it can’t be anything else, can it? Did you think I would just stick around here, gambling and drinking, forever? I’m from an incredibly prestigious coven, one I plan to get back to soon. It would be a waste of time

to act like we could ever be officially involved.”

Her breath caught.

It would be a waste of time. You would be a waste of time, a small insidious voice inside her mind whispered.

And to think he didn't even know about her Siphon abilities. At least seconds ago she could have pretended he would want her despite that one detail, but the fact that he didn't want her and he hadn't seen the darkest parts of her yet? She looked at him with new eyes. Betrayed.

She shot up and stepped away from him as gracefully as she could, which was not very graceful at all given her state of intoxication. She shouldn't have had that last sip. Or the four before it.

“I can't believe you just said that to me,” she said, stumbling through her words, her eyes wide with disbelief.

He calmly, and elegantly much to her annoyance, stood to face her. His features were suspiciously smooth, as if he wasn't about to reach into her chest and yank out her heart.

“I'm sorry.” He did not sound sorry. “I thought we were on the same page.”

“Really?” she said sarcastically, a bit of contempt seeping into her voice as his words finally sank in. “You thought I was on the same page thinking we were just going to have sex? What the Hells have we been doing all this time, Ezra? Was I just a pawn in your con to get people's money?”

She could feel herself slurring her words, but she was too angry to feel embarrassed. Ezra's words were bringing back the raging insecurity that she wasn't a full-blooded witch—and never would be. He didn't even know she was a Siphon and yet it was like he sensed there was something wrong with her, that she'd never be good enough for anyone. Her magic was slow, unpracticed; she was only half a witch after all, and never had she felt less complete than she did right now. She was all too aware that in the Witch Realms being a full-blooded witch was something that mattered. A default. She never considered that was something she'd have to face with Ezra.

“I didn't realize you thought there was anything more between us than just . . .” Ezra stumbled to find the right label to use for what he thought they were, refusing to meet her eyes as he spoke.

“Just what?” she rushed out harshly.

“Just . . . this.”

“Just this,” she echoed numbly, before shaking her head and laughing

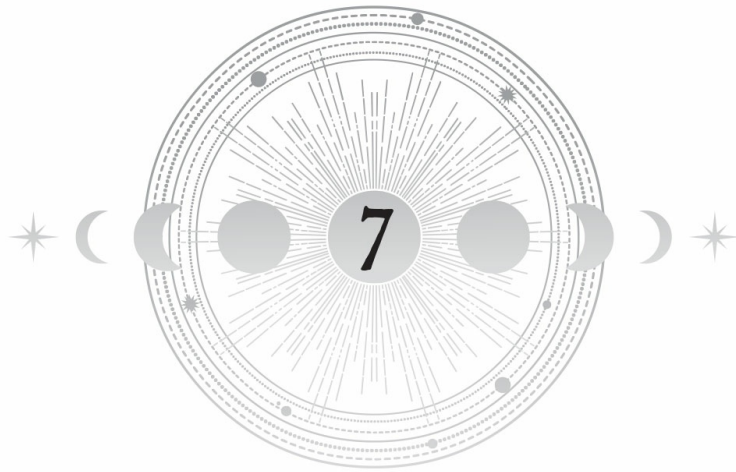
cruelly. “And I didn’t think you’ve spent the last few months with me just so you could get me into bed. Seems like a lot of effort for something that would last barely two minutes.”

It took all her concentration to spit out those last words without the hindrance of her inebriation. She felt a fleeting sense of victory when a hint of annoyance flitted across his features, and turned her back on him to stumble toward the door of her apartment. She thanked the Gods that Hannah and Delphine were still out.

She flung the door open and pointed outside. “Get. Out.”

“Let me know if you ever change your mind,” he said quietly, but obliged her demand.

“I wouldn’t hold your breath,” she hissed, and slammed the door behind him.



Calla had the unpleasant feeling one would have if they were waking up from a two-week drinking binge. She worried for a moment that she was truly reliving that night. Her head pounded behind her eyelids, and she was lying on a cold, hard surface—but for some reason, her wrists and legs were bound behind her.

“Ugh,” she moaned when she tried to lift her head and failed.

What happened? She slowly blinked her eyes open, letting her pupils gradually adjust to what little light was present. A shadow fell over her and she squinted up at the two large figures before her.

“Good. You’re awake.”

Boone. Ramor. Shit.

This was so much worse than the memory of Ezra. Struggling against her bonds, she managed to wiggle herself into a sitting position, wincing at the throbbing that was pummeling her head.

“What’s going on?” she asked weakly.

“You cheated us, so we thought it would only be fair to take back what we are owed.”

“By kidnapping me? You could’ve just taken the money back. It’s in my bag—” She broke off, looking down at herself and searching for her satchel.

“Looking for this?” Ramor held up the black velvet purse.

“Just take everything in it,” she gritted out. “I didn’t spend any of it, so

you can let me go. *Now.*”

Ramor tossed the bag down at her, the satchel clearly already emptied.

“We already took the money back,” Boone said.

“Then why don’t you be gentlemen and let me go?”

They gave each other a wicked look.

This is not good. She gulped and yanked against her bonds again.

As a Rouge witch, Calla’s abilities to control others through the life force in their blood, see someone’s future, or bring things back from the dead were all more practical when it came to making a living rather than in dire situations like this. Unlike Onyx and Terra witches, Calla couldn’t control any of the elements or move things with her mind. She could feel her adrenaline start to kick in as she figured out a solution. She could try to manipulate their bodies, but controlling someone else took a lot of strength—even for a full witch—and as weak as she felt at the moment, she could probably only focus on one of them, if that, at a time.

Which meant she was screwed.

“What are you planning to do? Kill me? Doesn’t that seem a bit dramatic?” It took all of her practiced bluffing skills not to reveal just how terrified she was.

“Why would we kill you when we could make a profit off you?” Boone said, as if he was genuinely asking her opinion on the matter. Ramor just looked infuriatingly smug.

“You’re going to *sell* me?” she screeched. “To who?”

“The highest bidder.” Ramor grinned, showing off the three rows of his small, pointed teeth that were dripping with yellow saliva. Gross.

“You’re going to enter me in the auction?” she choked in wild disbelief, the corners of her eyes pricking with tears, though she felt more like murdering someone than crying.

Calla had heard from time to time of how horrible the trafficking was in Estrella, and that was tame compared to how bad it was in the fae courts. The insidious underground markets were all too eager to collect beings with rare magic and sell them at high costs to those who would use them for their abilities, or worse. Still, she had never given the possibility of this happening to her much weight. She and the girls had spent so much time running the past few years that *this* never felt like something she had time to worry about.

“There are a lot of people who would pay good money to use the abilities of a Rouge witch,” Ramor explained as he wiped a hand across his sweaty

forehead. Calla scowled. His tone incited the overwhelming urge to stab him. If only she had a knife. And the use of her hands.

I should've drained the life out of Boone when I had the chance, she thought darkly.

Calla flinched, shocked, by how convicted that thought sounded in her mind. She could count on one hand the number of times she had used her Siphon abilities in her lifetime. These two bastards had her reconsidering her standards of morality.

“You both are bigger fools than I originally assumed if you think this is going to work. Even if someone does *buy* me”—she curled a lip in disgust as she spoke—“what makes you think I won’t escape and come after you? I only made you faint that last time, Boone, but if I ever get my hands on you again, I’m going to do a lot worse than that.”

Boone paled a bit at her threat, but Ramor didn’t even blink.

“We’ll see if you’ll still be talking big after tonight.” Ramor’s grin never wavered.

She swallowed her pride and gritted out, “What do I have to do to get you to let me go?”

Ramor cocked his head and smiled viciously.

“I don’t think you have anything we want except for the price tag on your head.” The troll laughed, an awful wheezing sound, and turned away from her to speak to Boone.

“*No*—that’s not acceptable. There has to be *something* you want. My abilities can—”

“Unless you happen to have two thousand spéctrals in your filthy pockets, little witch, you’re useless to me.” Ramor wheezed another laugh as Calla seethed. “Get her up, Boone, she needs to change into something more appealing than rags if we want to get a decent price for her. If no one buys her for her magic, maybe she’ll make a good addition to somebody’s brothel.”

Boone obediently leaned down and gripped one of Calla’s arms. She bared her teeth at him, but he only ignored her and swung her up and over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. He carried her out of the small stone room, which had to be no bigger than a broom closet, and into an awful-smelling corridor.

The hallway was lined with old wooden doors, all closed and all hiding unsavory things. Ramor flung one of the doors open and Boone dropped her

unceremoniously to the ground inside. Calla yelped at the pain as she hit the hard floor.

“Make her presentable,” Ramor ordered.

With that, her captors left the room. Calla lifted herself up as best she could and took in her surroundings. It looked like a dressing room for a theater. There were mirrors leaning against the wall by the door, and the rest of the room was crowded with racks and racks of what looked to be gaudy costumes. There was a wooden vanity in the far-right corner that had glass pots and bottles of what Calla guessed was some type of makeup.

Someone cleared their throat.

Calla spun her head toward the others occupying the room.

Two fae women stood behind her with measuring tapes hanging from their necks. They looked like most of the other fae she had seen in Estrella—stunning in a sharp, angular way, their pointed ears and symmetrical features a dead giveaway to the type of beings they were. Most fae had some sort of physical feature that hinted at what court they came from and what type of magic they may possess, but from Calla’s experience, they almost always kept that special attribute glamoured. She didn’t have much experience with fae magic, but she knew it was vastly different from witch magic. She narrowed her eyes skeptically at the two women, wondering what sort of abilities they may possess, and they peered down at her with their own mix of curiosity and apathy.

“Help me! *Please*,” Calla pleaded.

The two women simply stared.

“Please, you *have* to help me,” Calla implored when it became clear that they were going to silently follow Ramor’s orders.

One of the fae shook their head. “You’re not the first to beg for help, and you will not be the last. It’s much easier if you just cooperate.”

“How can you do this to people?” Calla sneered disgustedly. “You’re helping these monsters *sell* innocent victims!”

Both women only pointedly ignored her and went back to shuffling through the clothes.

“What about this, Dahlia?” the blue-eyed fae asked her partner as she turned away.

Dahlia peered at the awful green garment for a moment before shaking her head. “Not her color. She’s too warm-toned.”

The first fae nodded in agreement and rehung the dress. “Wasn’t there a

purple set somewhere? The one that Rema brought in a few weeks ago?”

Calla didn't know who Rema was, but Dahlia's face lit up at the suggestion.

“Yes! That would look amazing with her eyes. If I could just remember where we put it . . .”

The two rifled through the hangers and the metal clicking filled the small room.

“Aha! This is *perfect*,” Dahlia suddenly exclaimed.

“Why do you care if I look nice or not?” Calla asked as she glowered at the chosen garment.

“Because it's our job,” the other fae shot back. “Now, be quiet while we get those filthy clothes off of you.”

Calla wanted to defend herself, say that they hadn't been filthy when she put them on, but she didn't think it mattered. The women worked to untie the bonds on her legs, and Calla was hoping they would untie her hands as well, but that hope was quickly dashed when they took out a pair of scissors and cut her top right off her, leaving her hands tied tightly behind her back. Once she was stripped to her undergarments, they unbuttoned the two-piece set they had picked out for her.

The set was made of lavender silk and wispy gossamer and consisted of a corseted top with about thirty buttons running down the back. The light billowy sleeves matched the floor-length skirt that they tugged over her hips, never once touching her skin. One of the women fastened her skirt while the other buttoned her corset, the top quickly tightening until her lungs were hardly able to expand enough to take in air.

“Now, makeup!” Dahlia exclaimed once they were done.

The fae gracefully flounced over to the vanity and grabbed a few pots before returning to smear some of the contents onto Calla's face. The other woman began combing through her hair, pinning some of the long, dark tresses half up and letting the rest fall down her back. When the one doing her makeup finished, they turned Calla around toward the mirror.

She hated it.

Her curves were accentuated by the tight top and skirt and any blemishes she might have had on her face had been smoothed out by whatever concoctions they had covered her face with. Her full lips had been smeared with some sort of sticky, clear gloss and the skin of her bare shoulders was shimmering with a sparkling dust. They had somehow managed to make her

thick brows and too-big eyes look sensual, the purple eyeshadow they brushed on matching perfectly with the violet color of her glamourised irises. The chin she had always thought of as slightly too-pointed blended in with the sharp vixen appearance they painted. She was stunning, but she was being dressed up so someone could *purchase* her, and that thought ignited a powerful fury in her belly.

“Exquisite,” Dahlia said matter-of-factly—as if she were speaking about a beautiful piece of art rather than a person. The fae’s partner nodded in agreement.

Calla had just about enough of this. She took a deep breath and gathered all the strength she had in her reservoir and concentrated her magic on the essence in their blood. She uncoiled the little bit of power she currently had on tap and reached out with it wildly, searching for something to strike. Just before she could wrap her magic around them, she hit a block. Like her magic reverberated off some sort of invisible wall.

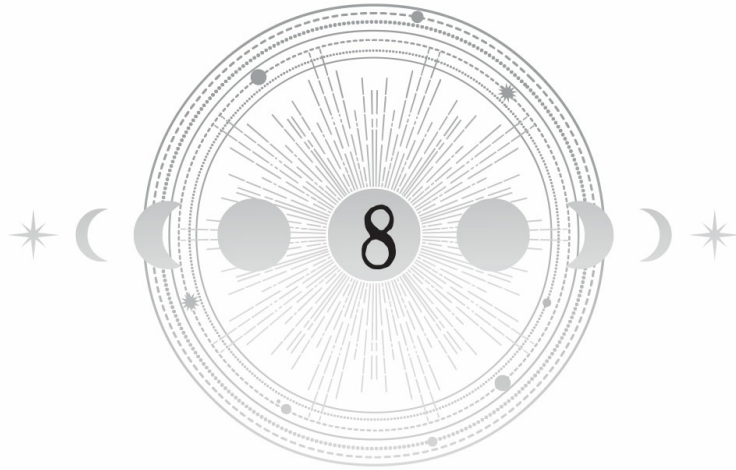
Calla opened her eyes to find both women snarling at her.

“This room is warded against magic, *witch*.”

Dahlia’s tone made Calla narrow her eyes, but before she could think of what to do next, a bell rang from somewhere in the building and both women broke into terrifying grins.

“Sounds like they’re ready for the next round of items.”

The woman grabbed Calla’s upper arm—over the gossamer sleeve—and shoved her out of the room.



The two fae walked Calla down the hallway to a set of wooden stairs. The floors in the hallway were covered in an awful patterned green carpet, but the walls were completely bare, the paint peeling in most places as if it were trying to get away. They marched her all the way up the withered, creaking steps to the next level before finally stopping in front of a closed door. A noisy hum of a crowd was coming from several doors down, and she could vaguely make out someone yelling numbers in the distance.

Those must lead to the auction room.

The women opened the door in front of Calla and shoved her inside. She stumbled for a moment at their force before regaining her balance and frantically glancing around. The only light in the room came from the far left, where a few wall sconces illuminated a line of people. The line included a small group of ice pixies struggling to hold up what looked to be a jar of eyeballs.

I'm going to be sick.

She spun around, but the women were already slamming the door with a hollow *bang*.

Calla's heart hammered in her chest.

"Who's your patron, girl?" a deep, masculine voice asked.

"My patron?"

"Who's claiming your sale?" the voice said impatiently.

“No one. I’m here by mistake.”

The man standing before her laughed quietly.

“You may as well tell me who your patron is before *they* have to get the information out of you.” He gestured to two hulking shadows behind him.

As Calla’s senses adjusted to the dark, she could see the man in front of her was another fae and the two large figures standing behind him, with *spikes* fastened to their hands, were some sort of giant. Calla tried not to panic. This place was worse than the Hells, and if she had known just how horrific it truly was, she would have never stepped a single foot inside the inn. She wondered if Ezra had known the extent of what happened on the floors above the basement.

Now is not the time to think of Ezra, she admonished herself.

“Answer,” the fae said forcefully, and the giant to his left balled his fist threateningly.

“Ramor,” she finally gritted out reluctantly.

She didn’t bother to mention Boone’s name, as there was no way this whole scheme had been the giant’s idea. Whenever Calla got out of here and hunted the two of them down, Boone would get a quick death. Ramor, however . . . Calla vowed to herself that she would make his punishment as painful as she could.

The fae nodded and wrote the name down on the weathered paper in his hand.

“Stand over there,” he said gruffly as he pointed to the line with his quill.

She took a deep breath and walked over to stand behind a troll holding a —*severed hand*?

I could try and run for it, she thought in a panic, sliding her eyes to the two giants in the corner. *But they would definitely catch me.*

Adrenaline burned through her system as the troll ahead of her moved up in line.

“I need to use the bathroom,” Calla blurted to the fae in charge.

“Too bad,” one of the giants grunted.

“Okay . . . but I don’t think my *patrons* would be too happy if you sent me out there with soiled clothing after they took all that time to make sure I looked presentable.”

The two giants looked at each other, suddenly unsure. The fae sighed in exasperation.

“Just take the girl to the bathroom before she relieves herself on the floor

and makes this room smell any worse.”

Calla smirked to herself. The troll in line ahead of her stepped forward through what she now noticed was a black curtain, the pixies with the eyeballs having already disappeared through the same exit. Anticipation began buzzing through her body as one of the giants walked toward her, but just before he could touch her, the fae in charge held up a hand for the giant to wait.

He glared at her intensely. “There is nowhere for you to run. I suggest you don’t waste your time. You don’t want to know what those spikes feel like, I guarantee you.”

“I don’t think a girl with cuts all over her body would be too well-received.” The words burned like acid in her throat.

The fae grinned coldly. “It’s a good thing witches heal quickly, then, isn’t it?”

If Calla wasn’t in such a dire situation, she might have snorted at his gross overestimation of her healing abilities. The giant reached her and spread a large hand on the lower back of her corset, easily ushering her toward the exit.

You can get out of this, she told herself as she rolled her shoulders back in anticipation.

The giant stopped in front of the door and reached for a key in his pocket. He slid it in the lock, turned the knob, and wrenched the door open with unnecessary force, the old hinges creaking in protest. He reached for her upper arm, where the slits in the sleeves of her top fell open, and gripped her bicep to roughly pull her forward. For a moment, she thought about how easy it would be to siphon from the giant—much easier than forcing her already depleted Rouge magic to cooperate. The moment quickly passed as she reminded herself who she wanted to be—a whole witch, a *good* witch—and she focused on every last drop of energy she had in her body.

She seized as much of the giant’s blood as she could and paused its circulation. It was just for a second, but a second was all she needed.

“Whoa!” the giant exclaimed as he began to go down faster than even Boone had the night before. Unfortunately, his hand was still clasped on to her arm, and he began pulling her down with him.

Calla used all her strength to yank herself from his grip before tumbling headfirst out into the hallway. She slammed into the far wall, struggling to keep her balance with her hands still tied. She pushed her shoulder against

the wall and quickly regained her footing before turning down the hall to escape.

"What in the Hells?" the fae yelled behind her, but Calla was already running—

In the wrong direction.

Damn it. She skidded to a halt and spun around to go back toward the stairs, but the fae and his other giant were already on her tail. Turning around, she hauled herself forward and right into a wall.

"Oomph!"

She staggered back, and a hand shot out to her left side, steadying her easily. She looked up, and up, and into somewhat-familiar silver eyes.

Definitely not a wall.

The Onyx witch, the one that Ezra had left with the night before, arched a dark blue eyebrow at her before peering over her shoulder to the commotion behind her. Before Calla could think of what to do next, someone jerked her head back with a fistful of her hair.

"Gotcha," the giant said gruffly, and Calla bucked and twisted against him.

The blue-haired witch in front of her watched the whole ordeal with hardly any expression; his gaze simply roamed over her with a little too much intensity for her liking. When his stare finally met hers, he narrowed his eyes slightly. As if he was trying to look right through her.

"Like what you see?" she sneered at him, though she couldn't manage to keep the slightest quiver out of her voice as she jerked her wrists side to side, desperately trying to pull them from their bonds.

He ignored her as his gaze zeroed in on her twisting arms, before suddenly sucking in a sharp breath. His silver irises flashed to pitch-black as he spotted the dots etched into her left forearm, and she instantly shifted her limbs behind her back once more.

My rolls, she thought in panic.

"You're lucky it's your turn next," the fae sneered at her. *"I should have them punish you regardless—"*

"Let her go."

The fae paused and looked at the Onyx witch as if he had only just noticed the muscular, blue-haired man standing in front of them. The witch's tone screamed *lethal* when he spoke, and Calla's entire body tensed with alarm. Thankfully, she didn't need to protest against the newcomer, because

the fae in charge was already shaking his head.

“Sorry . . .” he said, oddly dazed. “She’s entered for the auction. If you want her, you’ll have to bid on her like everyone else. . . .”

Calla was taken aback by how strange the fae’s voice sounded, as if he was almost considering listening to the Onyx witch’s demand. The hand gripping her hair even dropped to loosely hold on to her sleeved arm instead. Calla looked back to the witch, who was still staring at the other man menacingly, and noted the air of authority that seemed to permeate the space around him. He probably wasn’t used to being told the word *no*.

Flicking his eyes down at Calla, the witch promised, “I will.”

She almost shivered but managed to give him a scowl instead. The giant roughly dragged Calla back down the hall to the first room. New occupants with other horrifying items in their hands were crowded near the entrance. The fae apologized to the waiting patrons, though he did not sound sorry in the least, and began taking their names and listing their items while the giant continued to drive her toward the black curtain by her arm. Once they reached the curtain, he shoved her through, and Calla was plunged into a small black corridor. The noises from the room next door were clearer from inside the dark space.

“Your item?” a scraggly voice asked.

Calla startled, not realizing anyone else was in the small space with her. She searched ahead of her in the dark, and sure enough, there stood a small fire pixie.

“Your item?” they repeated.

“*Seriously?*” she said with a razor-sharp edge, yanking on her restraints.

“Oh.” The pixie hissed a laugh. “*You* are the item.”

Calla didn’t dignify that with a response.

They opened a small crack in the doorway they guarded and poked their head through to whisper something she couldn’t hear. After a moment, the pixie looked back to her and ordered, “Step through. And Gods help you, girl.”

Calla’s stomach dropped at the creature’s sentiment, but she took a deep breath and managed to walk forward. When she was only a few more steps away, the being threw the door open, causing her to squint as light streamed down and hit her in the face. She walked out onto a creaky wooden stage, where a giant dressed in a ridiculously gaudy green outfit waited for her to reach the center. Calla froze when she realized everyone in the room had

stopped talking. At tiny wooden tables, creatures of every kind were huddled together staring intently, some excitedly, at Calla. She couldn't make out the Onyx witch in the crowd, but she swore she could feel his intense stare from somewhere in the back.

"What a beauty, ladies and gentlebeings!" the giant shouted to the crowd. "Whose entry is this?"

Calla felt her face heat at being called an *entry*. She so badly wanted to burn this place to the ground.

"Ours!" Ramor's voice called from the middle of the room.

"Give us some details so we can offer a starting bid," the auctioneer requested.

A chair squealed on the floor as Ramor pushed back from his table and stood.

"Calliope here is a Rouge witch. How many of those do you see outside of the Witch Realms, huh?" he boomed to the waiting bidders.

A few of them murmured to one another, and Calla saw some in the front nod to their acquaintances in interest.

"But that's not the best part." Ramor's face-splitting grin was bigger now than any of the times she had ever seen him win a hand of cards.

The troll paused for max effect and Calla paled, her nerves feeling as though they had just been zapped by lightning. Did he know she was a Siphon? Had her glamour slipped one of the nights in the basement?

A voice from the back of the room cut through her thoughts, yelling, "Spit it out!"

Ramor cleared his voice. "The best part is that the Rouge Witch Queen has put a hefty bounty on poor Calla's head to anyone who is willing to bring her back to the Witch Realms."

The entire room went utterly silent—stunned—before bursting into a raucous uproar.

Ramor grinned, the reaction exactly what he had hoped for, and for a moment, Calla thought she would faint from the overwhelming terror that shot through her body. If word that Myrea had her eyes on Calla had reached *Ramor*—who spent most of his nights drunk at the tavern or gambling in the inn's basement—the Witch Queen must be more hellsbent on finding her than she thought. Calla had suspected Myrea would find out about her rolls sooner or later, and Ezra's mission proved that. Now she wondered just how much *others* could possibly know about her rolls. Considering she had rolled

a *fourth* six last night . . . it could only get worse from here.

Calla was working herself up to a full panic. She knew that even if she did make it out of here in one piece, she would have people trying to kidnap her left and right thinking they could sell her to the queen for a fortune. She desperately needed to warn Hannah and Delphine.

This is the beginning of the end, said a voice that creeped into her mind, and Calla was damn well seconds away from giving in to that cynicism when a flash of blue caught her eye to the right.

Him.

He stepped forward into view, his cobalt hair glinting in the light as he crossed his arms over his broad chest, an infuriatingly calculated expression on his face. Calla wondered if this ambush had anything to do with him, and suddenly her blood was boiling with rage. She tilted her chin up and rolled her shoulders back as his silvery gaze met hers. All these years, Calla had successfully lived without anyone so much as whispering Myrea's name, and now she was going to be *sold* to someone willing to trade her life to the Witch Queen for money. She wasn't going to give the Onyx witch—and by extension, *Ezra*—the satisfaction of watching her sweat.

The energy in the room was at an all-time high—people yelling out numbers and jostling one another at their tables to get a better look at Calla.

“Why doesn't the queen come get her herself?” Calla heard one voice ask.

She managed to roll her eyes. These fools knew nothing about the Witch Queens or the Realms. It almost made her feel better to think that if one of them tried to bring Calla back to the Realms they could be easily disposed of along the way.

“Quiet!” the auctioneer called.

The crowd settled.

“Now, Ramor”—the giant looked toward Ramor's hunched-over figure still standing in the crowd—“what is your starting bid?”

Ramor grinned like a man who'd just struck gold.

“Two thousand *spéctrals*,” he said.

Someone in the crowd moaned in disappointment. Two thousand *spéctrals* was enough to pay Calla's rent for at least a year.

“Here!” someone yelled up front.

It was a fae with dull-yellow eyes and long muddy-brown hair. He had a scar across his left cheek that traced all the way up to his temple. Fae were

often renowned for their beauty, but Calla doubted their reputation included this one. Though his unattractiveness had nothing to do with the scar and everything to do with the way he was leering at her chest.

The man glanced at her greedily, and Calla swallowed and looked away, her eyes shifting directly to the witch. The Onyx witch was glaring so hard at the fae creep that Calla was half expecting the man to burst into flames.

“Twenty-one hundred!” someone else suddenly shouted.

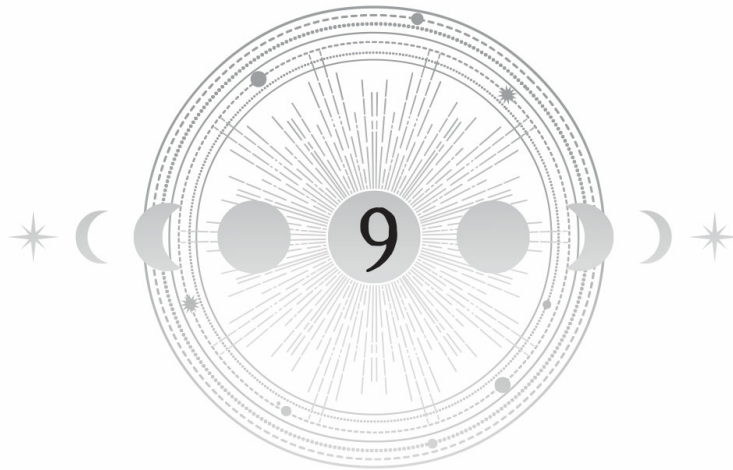
“Twenty-five hundred!” the creepy fae in the front countered.

This went on a few more times until the scarred fae was in the lead with three thousand and two hundred gold spéctrals on the table.

Please let someone else bid, she thought. Someone I can easily dispose of later.

“Six thousand spéctrals,” a smooth masculine voice rang out above the rest.

Anyone but him.



The leering fae bidder twisted around and hissed at the Onyx witch as he stepped out of the shadows and into the center of the room. The witch was devastatingly handsome, but in a way that seemed dangerous—like a predator who used their beauty to lure unsuspecting victims blissfully to their graves. His cropped cobalt hair stood out against his skin, which had clearly been warmed from being out in the sun but was still only a few shades darker than Calla’s fair complexion. His body was corded with muscle, accentuated by the black leather armor he wore across his chest and legs. He had a dagger sitting at each hip and a black cloak clasped at both his shoulders. Three small hoops were pierced through his upper right ear, while sharp black spikes dangled from each of his pierced lobes, perfectly completing his foreboding demeanor.

Calla found that she was becoming very tired of pretty Onyx witches.

“Well, unless someone can beat that offer, it seems we may have a winner,” the fae announced to the crowd, and Calla didn’t bother to hide her curses. The scarred fae in the front smashed a fist against his table in disappointment.

“Wait, sir, don’t you want to make another bid?” she implored the man. Calla was confident she could easily dispose of the fae once they got out of here, but there was no way she could take her chances with the witch. The bidder frowned, his eyes swimming with disappointment.

“I can’t match six thousand spéctrals. But if you ever want to look me up to have some *fun* . . .” he crooned at her, his tongue flicking out to lick his lips.

What in the Hells am I thinking?

The Onyx witch strutted all the way up to the stage and crossed his arms once again.

“Are you saying you’d like me to withdraw my bid? If you’d rather go home with *him*”—he gestured to the scarred fae, challengingly—“be my guest.”

Calla hesitated and weighed her options. When she didn’t speak for a few moments, the Onyx witch raised his eyebrows at her in disbelief.

“You’re kidding me, right?” He looked at her as if she had lost her mind.

She sneered at the witch, dropping her voice low enough so only he could hear her words. “Excuse me for trying to decide if I would rather take my chances going with *you*, who most likely has been sent here to take me back to a queen who will kill me, or if I’d rather be *sold* to someone who I can just get rid of on my own later.”

Even as she threatened it, Calla’s stomach churned.

“Would you like me to withdraw my bid or not?” the witch implored impatiently.

Just then, Ramor made his way up to the stage. “No! She gets no say in this—”

“Quiet,” the witch ordered, and to her surprise, Ramor stopped talking. Though the troll didn’t look pleased about it.

Calla stared at the witch a moment longer. He hadn’t denied her accusation about selling her to Myrea, and Calla was starting to think spiting both the queen and anyone involved with Ezra was rather appealing.

“Withdraw your bid. I will not owe you anything,” Calla gritted.

“No!” Ramor protested furiously.

The Onyx witch looked genuinely stunned for a moment before masking his features and shaking his head at her.

“Bold, aren’t you?” he asked with a low laugh, stepping closer so only she could hear his next words. “Fine. If that doesn’t work for you, then we’re going to have to figure something else out, aren’t we?”

“What?” She looked at him, completely puzzled. “I thought you said—”

“I need you to get ready to jump,” the witch told her slowly, deliberately, a smirk still playing on his lips.

“What?”

“Jump,” he repeated before raising his hand and releasing a blast of power around them.

The wind was powerful enough to make the lights overhead shatter. Ramor and the fae onstage staggered back several feet.

“*Jump!*” the Onyx witch demanded again as the room went pitch-black around her.

Calla didn’t have time to think twice. She quickly leaped off the stage and, to her surprise, landed in the witch’s strong arms.

“Move. *Quickly,*” he said as he dropped her to her feet and the room around them exploded into commotion.

Calla could hardly see two feet in front of her. The squeaks from the chairs being scraped back against the wooden floor made her cringe as she got jostled from her left. She wove herself through the room, following the buzz of the witch’s energy in front of her as they made their way to the exit, and narrowly escaped a few grasping hands as they fumbled for her in the dark.

“Where is she?” someone yelled from her right.

Calla let out a hiss as she narrowly avoided a hip check from her left. She spun away and continued pushing forward, letting the crowd behind her converge on itself as she channeled her Rouge magic to sense when to dodge the bodies around her. There was a shout near the stage, followed by a booming crash, and Calla’s entire body tensed as she felt everyone’s blood pressure around her suddenly spike.

“Hurry,” the witch urged unhelpfully as he reached the door, yanking it open and making Calla blink against the sudden stream of light that flooded into the room. She was only a few steps away when someone grabbed at her skirt—the fae with the nasty scar.

“Where are you going? I thought you wanted to have some *fun.*” The man smiled at her, showing his yellowing teeth. Immortals had to actively work at having hygiene this bad. Gross. The fae dragged her back a step, and Calla twisted around, her hands still tied inconveniently, but that didn’t stop her from smashing her head against the fae’s jaw.

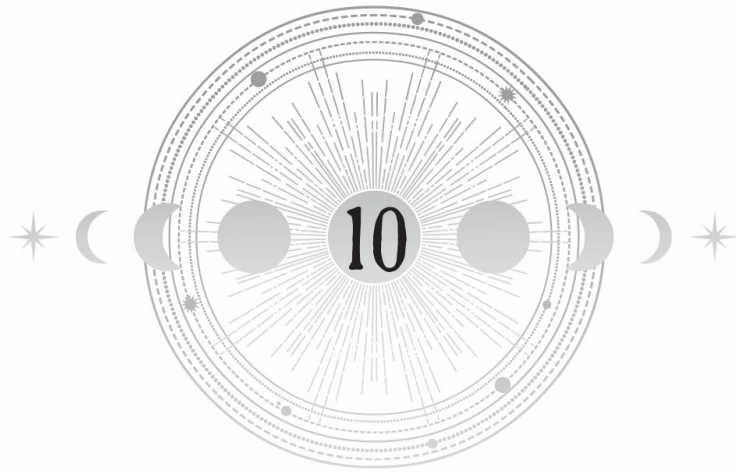
“*There,*” she said, stamping down a wave of nausea as she ripped her skirt from his hands. “That was my definition of *fun.*”

She stumbled a step, her head throbbing. More disorienting yells and grunts rang out around her as the fae flashed his teeth and leaned forward—

To find a fist in his face this time.

The Onyx witch shook out his hand as the fae dropped to the ground like a rock.

“I haven’t hit someone with my bare hands in a long time,” the witch mused. “That *was* fun.” He glanced back to Calla’s shocked face. “Now—let’s get the Hells out of here.”



Calla and the Onyx witch made it four blocks before they stopped to catch their breaths in a hidden alleyway. Or at least for *Calla* to catch her breath. He hardly seemed out of breath at all, which only made her ire spike.

As soon as her breathing steadied, she hissed, “What the Hells were you thinking? That was too risky—”

“Riskier than you willingly going home with some sadistic fae?”

She sputtered for a moment, and he unleashed a smug grin that made it clear he knew he had won that argument. She was about to call him a very creative insult when he moved to pull one of the onyx-encrusted daggers out of a sheath on his belt. Calla paled.

“Calm down. I’m just going to cut off your restraints.” He rolled his eyes and then gave her a slow smirk. “Unless you *like* being tied up?”

Calla was unamused, but her heart didn’t stop hammering despite his reassurance, and she held her breath as he moved behind her. As a rule, she never liked to have her back turned to anyone. It was a good way to get stabbed there. She nervously waited as he sawed through the tight bonds and when her hands were finally free, he slid the knife back into its holder as she rubbed away the ache on her wrists.

“Those were awful,” she muttered half in relief, half in thanks.

He dipped his chin in acknowledgment before informing her, “We need to keep going before—”

A shout echoed a few yards behind them, and Calla let out a squeak of alarm as she heard a few sets of footsteps grow closer.

“Move,” the witch threw at her as he turned and began making his way up the street again, his cloak billowing behind him as he hugged the buildings as closely as possible to stay drenched in the shadows of their awnings.

She followed behind as fast as she could, but he was much taller, his strides much longer, and a few moments later, he disappeared around a corner to the left. Calla would have left him to his own devices and sprinted home then and there if her apartment wasn’t inconveniently in the same direction that he had just gone—and if he didn’t yank her sideways by the elbow as soon as she rounded the corner.

She almost let out a yelp in surprise, but one of his hands came down over her mouth as he pressed her back into a small nook between two shops and lifted his other hand to gesture for her to keep quiet. Calla snapped her teeth at the hand covering her mouth, desperate for him to stop touching her skin before her Siphon reacted. He dropped his hand; his amused expression quickly turned serious as the sound of pounding footsteps hurried closer. Calla held her breath as they both watched a small group of furious beings rush across the street from where they had just come, sighing in relief when no one seemed to spot them pressed together in the shadows. The Onyx witch waited until the mob was well into the distance before finally taking a step back and giving her some space.

“Why are you helping me?” she asked warily as he ducked his head out into the open to check if they were clear.

He flicked his gaze back to her and watched her with those unusual silver eyes—not so unlike the familiar color of Delphine’s, though his seemed much more *alive*. Where Delph’s were pure starlight, his were unsettling. As if there was a darkness swirling just beneath the surface.

After a moment of his silence, Calla impatiently lifted a finger to point in his face. “If you’re bringing me to Ezra—”

He huffed a surprised laugh. “Why would I be taking you to Ezra?”

“Because the two of you are friends?”

“I have no desire to get in the middle of Ezra’s affairs. Now, we need to —”

“We don’t need to do anything.”

He sighed. “I don’t have time to sit here and explain anything as long as there’s a bunch of pissed-off people chasing after us. Can we at least get to

safety before the third degree begins?”

She didn't have time to answer; he was already moving again with the same brisk pace as before.

She made an annoyed sound as she hustled to keep up. “What about your name? You could at least give me that much so I can stop calling you *Ezra's bastard friend* in my head.”

He laughed lightly as he sidestepped a loose stone on the sidewalk. “I'm not Ezra's friend.”

“If you're not Ezra's friend, then who are you?” she demanded as she closed the distance between them and kept pace at his left side. “Because I know I saw you two leave together last night.”

“We did,” he confirmed easily. “But I'm not his friend.”

“Then—”

“I'm his brother.”

Calla flinched back, almost tripping over a stack of empty wooden crates that had been discarded in the front of a shop. She may have fallen to the ground if not for the witch quickly reaching out and pulling her out of the way.

“You're *his brother*?” she screeched at him as she halted.

“Keep your voice down,” he ordered.

“Oh, this was a mistake,” she said, backing away from him.

He lunged with lightning speed, placing his hands on her shoulders.

“Do not run,” he warned.

“Why? Because you'll suffocate me like your *brother* did? What's the difference if you kill me here and now, or if Ezra or Myrea kills me later?” she seethed.

“I'm not going to hurt you, and I'm not bringing you to Myrea.”

“Even if *you* aren't planning on bringing me to the queen, your brother made it quite clear that he was working for her and that he is more than willing to get rid of me.” The Onyx witch's eyes flashed black for a moment before returning to silver. She had seen them do the same earlier but had thought it simply a trick of the light. Before he could say anything else, a roar of yelling sounded from their right.

The witch backed up a step, searching for the source of the noise as he rushed out, “My name is Gideon Black. And I know you don't trust me, but what you *can* trust is this—you're about to have who knows how many people trying to find you so they can get rich, and the only thing worse than

the Hells is the underground market of Illustros. Believe me. If you come with me, I have a much better proposition for you.”

“A proposition?”

“Yes.”

Another bout of yelling rang out in the cold air; Calla twisted her head to assess the small mob that was currently searching the alleys of a few of the shops across the intersection.

“Fine, walk and talk.” She nodded frantically.

The witch—*Gideon*, she sounded out in her head—sighed in relief and continued forward.

After a getting a couple more blocks away, Calla waved a hand. “Well? Are you going to explain this proposition?”

“Ezra mentioned once that you were stubborn,” Gideon said. “I thought saving you would at least spare you some doubt—”

“No one told you to save me,” she cut him off, her face heating at the thought of Ezra telling him anything about her. “It’s your own fault for wasting your effort, and let’s be incredibly clear—I owe you absolutely *nothing* just because you think you *rescued* me. Really, you did the bare minimum that someone should do when they see someone being *sold* against their will. I was perfectly happy to deal with the situation myself.”

“That would have ended well, I’m sure”—he gave her a pointed look—“but you’re right.”

“At least it would have been *my* decision. I’ve hardly gotten to make any choices for myself in the last twenty-four hours and— Wait. What did you just say?” She looked at him in disbelief.

“I said you’re right,” he emphasized.

“Are you sure you’re related to Ezra? I don’t think he’s ever said those words in his life.” She eyed the other witch skeptically.

Gideon only smirked.

“So?”

“So . . . I’ve been in Estrella to collect ingredients for a difficult spell. A spell that I think you’d be very interested in.”

Calla’s body went rigid. “If you want me to perform dark magic,” she enunciated every word carefully, “you’ve got the wrong witch.”

He shook his head. “It’s nothing like that—no necromancy or spirit magic involved. I don’t need you to *perform* the spell at all. You couldn’t do this sort of magic.”

“Then what do you want from me?” A dangerous question, she knew.

“Like I said, I am collecting ingredients for a spell. I thought I was done after I found the last one at the auction tonight—but then I ran into you.”

“Ezra mentioned that you were once on a quest of some kind.”

Gideon almost looked surprised, as if he hadn’t expected Ezra to have mentioned him to her. He nodded at her in confirmation. “The spell I’m doing requires a kind of magic we don’t have access to. Not only have I had to find the ingredients, but I’ve had to collect the price to have the spell performed as well.”

Now she was intrigued. “So, what is the spell for? And who would have to perform it?”

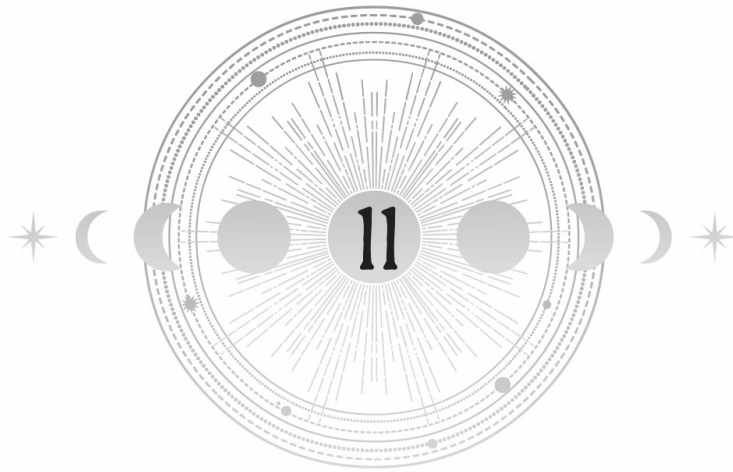
“There’s an ancient fae ancestor who lives in the middle of the Neverending Forest called the Witch Eater, and they have agreed to help me. For a price of course.”

“You want to travel into the *Neverending Forest* to find someone named *the Witch Eater*?” Calla questioned incredulously.

“The Witch Eater is the only one that can do this sort of magic.”

“And what sort of magic *is* that?”

He turned to look at her intensely for a moment before declaring, “I’m going to erase my Rolls of Fate.”



Silence.

Then Calla burst into laughter. She was laughing so hard she had to stop her stride and bend over, prompting Gideon to shepherd her into an alley a few feet to their left.

“I’m sorry.” She laughed in between words as Gideon crossed his arms over his chest. “I just didn’t realize delusion was something that could be genetic. You and your brother—” She broke off, laughing too hard to finish the sentence.

“I’m not delusional,” he stated, completely unbothered by her outburst.

The shallow alley they were standing in was connected to a noisy tavern, the smell of vomit and liquor burning her nose as she collected herself.

“Reversing your rolls is impossible.” She rolled her eyes. “The magic of Witch’s Dice was created by the Fates themselves. What makes you think you can override magic from the *Gods*?”

Calla was trying to keep herself calm, but beneath her skepticism she could feel her heart beating a million beats per minute, and it wasn’t because of how fast they had been walking. What he was implying . . .

No. It’s impossible.

“I know of someone who has done it before.”

Calla blanched. “How?”

“Like I said, the Witch Eater knows rare magic. I’ve been told they aren’t

pleasant to work with, and their price has been almost impossible to get, but my companions and I have been collecting the items required over the last couple of months and I thought we were almost done. Until I saw *you* at the auction.”

Calla’s head was spinning. What he was saying had to be a trick of some kind. Some sort of lie to lure her back home into Myrea’s waiting arms.

“I don’t believe you,” she said. “You’re lying to me just like—”

Ezra. But she didn’t say it.

Instead, she affirmed, “There’s no way this is possible.”

Gideon dropped his chin to peer directly into her eyes. “I’m not lying to you, Calliope.”

Her brows lifted. “You know my name. What else has your brother told —”

“This isn’t about Ezra.”

“So, you’re saying you didn’t know about his entire plan to give me the die last night?”

Gideon shrugged a bit.

“I was just as surprised as you when he actually went through with it,” he spoke sincerely. “I’m not going to pretend I understand what goes on in my brother’s head, but after all the moping he’s done this past week, I thought he’d surely leave without giving you that die. Truthfully, I couldn’t understand why the Rouge Queen would request such a thing of him in the first place. Until tonight. When I saw *those*.” He pointed to her left forearm where the pattern of her rolls was embedded into her skin.

Calla instinctively covered the dots with her hand.

“He was moping?” she heard herself ask, acutely aware of the fact that she sounded too hopeful for it to come off smug as she intended.

“Is that all you got from what I just said?” Gideon mused.

Calla’s cheeks heated. He was right.

“Well, even if you aren’t lying, which I’m still not convinced of, what does that all have to do with me? Like you just said, you didn’t see my rolls until tonight, so how would I fit into your ludicrous spell?”

“There is an item on the Witch Eater’s list of ingredients that I thought I had figured out, but finding you has complicated things. Plus, I have a feeling you’re going to need to get as far away from here as possible and I can offer you my protection. Not to mention I think you’ll be interested in helping me out, regardless, once you hear the reward.”

“How have *I* complicated things? Also, I guarantee there’s no reward big enough to convince me to enter that demonic forest.” A small shiver ran down her spine when she thought about going anywhere near those demonic woods.

“Oh, I believe there is. The reasons I want to erase my rolls are the exact same reasons you probably want to erase yours. If you come with me to see the Witch Eater, you can partake in the spell with me.”

With that last bit of life-changing information, he rolled up the left sleeve of his shirt. He pulled the black material up, past his elbow, and when she saw what lay beneath, the breath rushed out of her lungs and her heart almost stopped beating altogether.

Because there, on Gideon’s left forearm, was a pattern of black dots identical to her own.

“Holy shit,” she whispered.

Calla wasn’t sure she believed what she was seeing. Never before had she met another witch who had consistently rolled the same numbers. The last time a Blood Warrior was chosen was just short of two decades ago—the year she was born, in fact. It never crossed her mind that someone else could currently be going through the exact same situation she was.

She looked back up to his eyes, which were regarding her with intensity.

“I don’t understand,” she said numbly. “Which one of us do you think—”

He shook his head before she could finish, his blue hair falling over his forehead.

“I don’t know, but you can see how the situation is more complicated than I originally expected. When I saw your rolls, I thought I had been mistaken, that there was no possible way I had seen them correctly. But it suddenly made sense why Myrea sent Ezra with that Witch’s Die. I’ve been able to keep my rolls hidden all this time, but I cannot wait around and risk Lysandra or one of the other queens finding out about them.”

Lysandra, Calla recognized, was the Onyx Queen’s name.

“And you don’t want to be chosen? You seem like the type who wouldn’t mind a bit of heroic danger,” she noted, her eyes roaming over his physique and catching on the multiple piercings in his ear.

“Do *you* want to be chosen?” he asked with a bit of bite.

She didn’t answer.

“Exactly,” he said.

“This is a lot,” Calla said, rubbing her temples.

“Yes. But I *have* to complete this spell. I have spent years training to help my companions survive the Fates’ War. I, however, have not planned to fight *in* the Fates’ War against my mother.”

Calla started.

“Your *mother*? Your mother is Queen Lysandra?” Calla asked in disbelief as she quickly put the pieces together. Stunned, she asked, “That would mean that you and Ezra are the Onyx *Princes*?”

Gideon’s jaw clenched a bit. “Yes.”

Calla could hardly pay attention to anything else he was saying. She was still in shock that he, that *Ezra*, was a prince. Calla knew of them. Of course she did. The Witch Queens had not had children in centuries until Queen Lysandra. There had been widespread shock across all of Illustros when she birthed not one child in recent years, but *two*. Calla stared at him with new eyes. She couldn’t believe Gideon and Ezra were the two princes her childhood friend Kai used to imagine marrying.

She almost laughed.

“What?” Gideon asked cautiously.

“Nothing, it’s just . . . I’ve heard of you. A friend from my coven used to pretend that someday he would travel all over the Realms and meet one of you and you would fall in love.”

“And?”

“*And* I guess I just thought you and Ezra would be more . . . princely, I suppose.”

He quirked that pierced blue eyebrow again.

“Was rescuing you from a horrible fate at the inn not princely enough for you?”

“Considering you probably wouldn’t have bothered if not for your ulterior motives, I don’t think it counts,” Calla deadpanned. “And besides, you watched as your brother threatened to suffocate me to death on the street last night, so *excuse me* for not thinking of you as my hero, Your *Highness*.”

“I would have rescued you regardless of if I had seen your rolls, and if you think Ezra would have ever truly harmed you, *you’re* the one that’s delusional. And please never call me that again.”

“Well, since you said *please*,” she replied sarcastically as she tried to ignore the bit about Ezra. That wasn’t a statement she felt like unpacking at the moment.

“I’m genuinely sorry this was the way we had to officially meet.”

She narrowed her eyes, trying to gauge the sincerity in his voice, before finally saying, “Thank you, at least, for getting me out of there without . . .” She couldn’t bear to finish the sentence aloud. She cleared her throat and quickly changed the subject. “So, if the Onyx Queen doesn’t know you’re here, where does she think you are?”

“My mother thinks Kestrel, Cass, and I are out looking for any information we can find on the last Blood Warrior.”

“And what’s going to happen when you go back to your mother with no information on the last Blood Warrior? Especially after the stunt Ezra pulled for Myrea?”

“More of a reason for you to come with me. If Myrea finally tracks you down, and you no longer have any sixes on your arm, you’ll be of no interest to her then.”

“She’ll know what we did if I don’t have *any* of my Rolls of Fate, though.”

Gideon sighed a bit, not quite in agitation, just in frustration that he had so many blanks to fill in for her in so little time.

“That part can easily be glamourised if you needed. I’ve had to glamour my own from my mother for years. Though, I don’t recommend getting captured by Myrea regardless.”

She shot him a look that said *Obviously*, before moving on. “So, this spell you’re doing, you said you know someone who has done it before?”

“Kestrel is over a century old. He once knew someone who’s been through it. He witnessed the Witch Eater successfully perform the spell a few decades ago on a friend of his—an Onyx witch who was on track to be the fourth Blood Warrior. She went to the Witch Eater and all her rolls were erased. After that, the Fates chose someone else.”

Calla considered this information.

“Does that mean if we erase our rolls, we are damning someone else to take our place?”

His jaw ticked. “It’s a price I have to pay,” he said automatically.

Calla understood the position he was in—since she had been on the run for the last four years herself. She left her coven, everything she’d ever known, because of the damned Fates. That didn’t mean, however, that she was sure she wished to condemn someone else.

“Look, I know this is all very sudden, but I have to leave as soon as possible to meet my friends, and considering there’s now a target on your

back, I don't think you have the luxury of staying around here any longer anyway."

"Meet your friends where?"

"The southern border of the Neverending Forest. The Witch Eater asks for a few rare items as payment for doing the spell—the canines and scales of a viperidae and the feather of a Valkyrie. The latter is what Kestrel and Cass are currently looking for in the forest."

"Feathers from a Valkyrie? Do all of you have a death wish? Witch Eaters, Valkyries . . . being the last Blood Warrior sounds more appealing."

"Ah, but unlike the current Blood Warriors, we wouldn't have the luxury of being invincible. It's not as appealing now."

Calla had never thought about that. The first five Blood Warriors may have still been cursed, but at least they got to spend their foreseeable future as close to gods as anyone in Illustros could get. Once the last Blood Warrior was chosen, however, the war would immediately begin and then no one would be safe.

"Damn," she muttered. "The Fates must really hate one of us."

Gideon laughed, his angular face softening with the action.

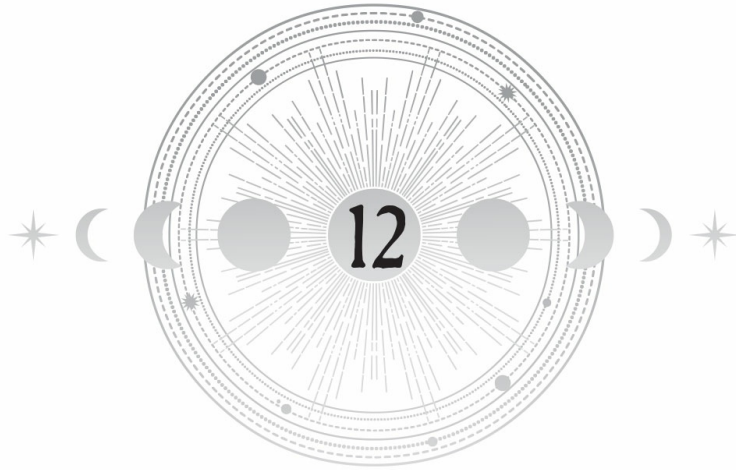
Calla took a deep breath. She knew it was foolish to go with him. Knew he was probably another trap in a pretty package just like Ezra had been. They were related, after all. But after Ramor's little announcement back at the auction, she had to admit the promise of protection would make her feel better for putting Hannah and Delphine in yet another dire situation. Maybe it was her overwhelming, desperate hope that what he was saying was true—that there was a spell out there that could fix all her problems. Or maybe it was the fact that he hadn't hesitated to fight their way out of the auction, instead of putting her through the humiliating experience of purchasing her, that made her want to believe he meant what he was saying.

Calla clearly hadn't seemed to have learned her lesson about meddling with Onyx witches.

"Fine," she said slowly. "But if I see your brother again, I'm going to knee him so hard in the balls he will never be able to think of spawning any children."

Gideon smiled. "Be my guest," he said.

And as if the Fates suddenly decided to have a sense of humor—Ezra crashed out of a door behind Gideon and into the alley.



Calla's veins thrummed—a familiar vibrating shiver running over her skin—at the sight of the person who had just stumbled upon them.

Ezra's long black hair was falling in his eyes, and he had to shove a hand through it to brush it back as he exclaimed, "*Calla?*"

Calla was surprised not to hear any hint of malice in his tone, only shock.

"*You,*" she hissed at him, her fists balling involuntarily at her sides.

Unfortunately for him, there was nothing *but* malice in her voice.

"What in the Gods' names are you doing here?" he questioned, sounding incredibly relieved. His eyes fully took her in, roaming over her outfit. She glanced down at the purple ensemble, just now remembering how she must have looked. She blushed, and before she could open her mouth to answer his questions, Gideon was already speaking.

"I found her being auctioned off by a troll at the inn."

Ezra shifted his gaze to his brother in bewilderment, but after a moment, Calla watched his eyes darken again. She stepped forward and pointed a finger directly in his face. "I wouldn't have been at the inn tonight, forced to wear this ridiculous outfit, and almost *sold* if it weren't for *you*. I went to pay my landlord our rent and, wouldn't you know, Ramor and Boone were there waiting for me!"

"It's not ridiculous."

"*What?*"

Ezra's cheeks heated. "I meant your outfit," he muttered.

"You both are incredibly good at missing the point of things," Gideon commented from behind her.

"Look, I didn't mean for any of this to happen. I only just found out that Myrea had someone spread rumors about a bounty for you I—"

Calla seethed, "Yes, a *bounty*, on my *life*. I'm going to *kill* you—" She lurched forward, but Gideon reached out and grabbed a handful of her skirt, easily pulling her back by the delicate fabric.

"Let me go!" She struggled against his hold, worried the skirt was so fragile it might rip right off, but he refused to budge.

"I can't let you kill him here. It would attract way too much unwanted attention, which is exactly why the two of you need to keep your voices down. I think we lost the crowd who followed us from the inn, but now that the word is out, *anyone* could be after Calla."

"I've been looking for you," Ezra continued, the lowered volume of his voice the only acknowledgment he gave Gideon's words.

She stopped moving. "What?"

"One of Myrea's informants was here tonight. They told me about the bounty, and I've been looking everywhere for you since. I came to the tavern to see if anyone was gossiping since you weren't at your apartment. That siren of yours is pretty terrifying when she's mad, by the way." He looked slightly traumatized as he said the last part.

"You were looking for me. *Why?*"

He didn't answer, rubbing at his jaw with an uneasy look. Calla noticed the brothers' resemblance. Though they had different hair and builds, they still shared the same sharp jawline and angular noses.

"You know what?" she said, her rage slowly coming back to her. "I don't care if you were out looking for me. You betrayed me to Myrea. You said the most awful things to me and then made me make a Roll of Fate. I *hate* you." For a second, she thought Ezra had flinched from the venom in her voice, but he was keeping himself so carefully composed, just like he did during their card games, it was hard to tell. She thought she would feel better after saying those words, words that she had imagined saying to him for weeks now, but somehow she felt worse. It didn't help that her head was still spinning at the thought of him out there looking for her.

"I bet you do," he muttered as his obsidian eyes darkened even more.

"But I didn't have much of a choice. I didn't know you when I was given the

assignment, I—”

“I don’t care what your excuses are, *Prince*,” she spat at him.

He turned to Gideon and accused, “You told her about our mother?”

“There’s something about her that I don’t think you know.”

A shadowed expression fell over Ezra’s face as he asked tightly, “And you know so much about her?”

“Show him your arm,” Gideon prompted her, finally letting go of where he held on to her skirts.

Calla crossed her arms. “No way in Hells. I’m never trusting him again.”

Something flickered across Ezra’s face before he instantly smoothed out his expression.

Gideon sighed. “I’m not doing this with you two. If you don’t tell him, I will.”

“Fine! Here!” She thrust her left arm out and waited.

Ezra’s forehead crinkled in confusion before he stumbled back. “Your rolls.” He looked wildly between her and Gideon. “What is going on here?”

Gideon held up his hands ready to explain, but Calla was already speaking before he could say anything. “What’s going on is that your brother has offered me a solution to the problem *you* helped cause.”

“I didn’t know, Calla,” Ezra said, swallowing. “I wouldn’t have—”

She laughed darkly at him. “Oh, please—spare me. I don’t believe for a second that you would have done anything differently. Especially considering what you said that night in my apartment.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “Which, speaking of, I think I still owe you something for that.”

She lurched forward and brought her knee up between Ezra’s legs.

“*Hmph!*” he gasped, leaning forward with his hands on his knees as he whipped his head up to bare his teeth at her.

“Oh, right,” Gideon spoke flatly behind her. “She did say she was going to do that.”

Ezra cursed at his brother colorfully.

Calla, feeling satisfied with herself, crossed her arms and watched *Ezra* gasp for breath this time.

“You both are giving me a headache,” Gideon huffed as he pinched the bridge of his nose to emphasize his point. “You’re going to have to get along if Calliope decides to come with us.”

“No. Way,” Ezra said between gritted teeth. He slowly straightened up, watching her carefully, making sure she didn’t try to attack him again.

“Gideon, she shouldn’t—”

Calla smirked. “Shouldn’t what? Crash your party? Would that make you upset? I was on the fence about the whole dying-in-the-Neverending-Forest thing, but if *you* don’t want me to go, then maybe I’ll have to reconsider.”

He ignored her and turned to his brother. “If the two of you want to risk your lives for a spell that you don’t even know will work, fine. But the plan was never for me to go with you.”

Calla grinned wickedly. “Even better.”

“Plans unfortunately change,” Gideon said dryly. “You’re coming with us, Ezra. There’s no way we’re risking you going back home to get interrogated by Mother, or Myrea, until this mess is cleared up.”

“Gideon—” Ezra started.

“Ezra.” Gideon sighed. “We don’t have time to argue about this.”

“And we still need to warn Hannah and Delphine—”

“Oh, I am definitely not going anywhere near that siren,” Ezra quickly interrupted.

“Too bad,” Calla snapped back at him. “I’m not going *anywhere* until they’re somewhere safe. We need to get to them before someone realizes they can use them to get to me. If you want my help, you need to bring me back to them, *now*.”

“The two of you are just determined to make this difficult, aren’t you?” Gideon murmured.

“Don’t lump me in with him.” Calla wrinkled her nose.

“Please, as if *I’m* the one who’s difficult, when you want to make a complete detour—” Ezra started until Gideon threw him a firm look that clearly said *Silence*. Calla wished she had that power over Ezra.

“We have to go hunt down a Valkyrie and you think going back for my friends is the hard part?” Calla rolled her eyes at them both. “Is drama in the family blood, or what?”

“Yes,” Gideon said at the same time that Ezra scoffed, “No.”

Calla resisted the urge to snort as she turned fully to Gideon. “Do you want my help or not, Prince?”

“Don’t forget I am offering *you* something to come with me,” he reminded her.

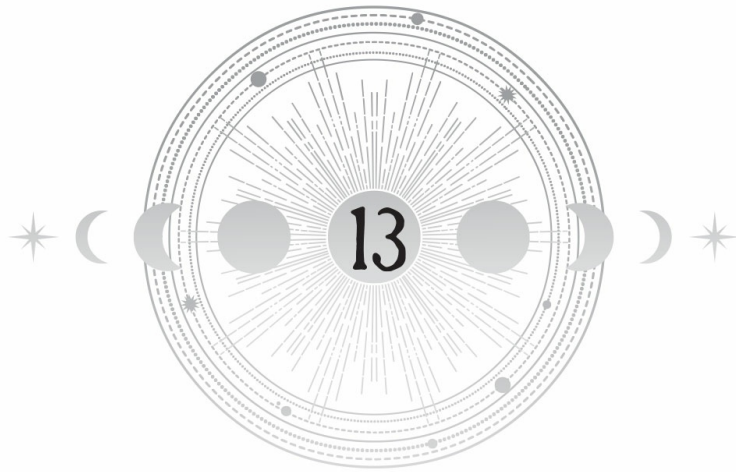
“Earlier you said you needed me for your spell. First rule of cards—don’t show your hand too early.” She lifted her brows haughtily.

Ezra chuckled darkly as he ran a hand through his own disheveled

strands. “I suppose you’ve met your match, Gideon.”

Gideon stared at her a moment. Finally, he rolled his eyes and conceded with an exasperated “All right.”

Calla’s expression softened a bit, satisfied. “Let’s get going, then. I’ve had a long day.” She didn’t wait to see if they would follow her. She simply braced herself against the cold and stepped out into the street.



Kestrel settled back into the top branch of the tree that he and Caspian had chosen to camp in for the night. Caspian was currently hoisting himself onto the opposite limb with a groan.

“I hate this forest. One of the branches tried to slap me!” Caspian exclaimed as he threw a leg over the tree’s limb. He leaned himself back against the trunk and glared down.

Kestrel chuckled as he loosened his long, pale hair from the leather strap that was securing the tendrils away from his face. Caspian was digging in the pack of food slung across his body, and Kestrel watched as his beta procured a green apple. Caspian’s steel-gray eyes glowed in delight as the sunlight streaming above them through the tops of the trees beamed down on his handsome face. The beta took a giant, messy bite out of the apple, chewing a few times before holding out the fruit in offering. Kestrel gave him a look that said *Absolutely not*, and the other witch simply shrugged before taking a second bite.

Kestrel knew Caspian was beautiful with his kind eyes and the stark white hair that contrasted with his deep, dark brown skin. He had witnessed firsthand how the witch’s partners would practically melt when the beta’s playful smile found its way so easily onto his lips.

However, it wasn’t Caspian’s face that Kestrel so often pictured in his mind. It wasn’t Cass who had stunning blue hair that Kestrel loved to run his

fingers through. Or three black hoops in his right ear that Kestrel loved to bite.

For years, Kestrel had never even run into the elder Onyx Prince. With hundreds of recruits in his unit, he did not have the time to know any of them individually, and he was much more concerned with keeping track of those in higher stations than he was with those trying to learn how to use their magic for the first time. It was not until two years ago, after the prince had faced his first Valkyrie and needed Kestrel to dress his wounds, that he had noticed Gideon for the first time.

They fought the attraction for months before they both finally caved.

Naturally, Kestrel had been confounded when Gideon pushed for his promotion to beta, despite the prince knowing full well what that would mean for the two of them. The Guild's higher rankings were not permitted to have relations with each other, and even the elder of Queen Lysandra's sons would not be an exception to that rule. Kestrel had seen many commanders get themselves killed throughout the years because they had been paying more attention to their beta—or in some cases *betas*—than their jobs. Gideon had never bothered to explain his decision, just seemed to effortlessly slip back into being platonic without missing a beat.

For Kestrel, it had not been that easy. Despite it having been the better part of a year since things had ended, he could still feel the rejection burning in his bones. But he would not grovel for the prince's affections.

No matter how much he missed him.

At least he knew the Guild would have a worthy future commander. While the Witch Realms did not have many enemies, the Valkyrie Queen made sure that she made her citizens worthy opponents. Originally meant to guide immortal souls to their place in the afterlife, the Valkyries had become something else entirely in the last few centuries. They reaped souls not yet ready in order to fuel their own strength and power, and for some reason, those souls usually happened to belong to witches.

Kestrel had only laid eyes on the Valkyrie Queen once, a woman with dark red hair and fair, alabaster skin, her cheekbones sharper than the harsh way she treated her people. He had no desire to meet her again or watch as she corrupted the magic she was gifted.

Which is why Kestrel was here, in this tree, trying to find the last item of payment for Gideon's spell. He would give anything to save Gideon from the fate of being a Blood Warrior if it meant he could come home and continue to

fight by Kestrel's side.

Kestrel leaned his head back and took the compass out of his pocket, running his thumb over the smooth glass surface. The compass did not point north—rather it guided you from one end of the forest to the other. They were on the east side of the great Crystal Lake, and if they continued on this path straight through the forest, sooner or later they should run into the nest of a Valkyrie rumored to be exiled from her lands. He and Caspian needed to get in, get what they needed, and get out.

“What are you thinking about, old man?” Caspian asked with a curious look.

“Don't call me that,” he admonished sternly as he slipped the compass back into his pocket.

“You're in a good mood.” Caspian smirked.

“Having to be alert every second in a forest that has murderous trees will do that to you.”

Caspian laughed. “The trees seem more flirtatious than murderous to me. But then”—he stroked his chin—“I *am* gorgeous. I would want to flirt with me, too.”

Kestrel rolled his eyes and peered down. He could see the vast lake and its clear waters spreading in the distance to his right. The tree they were resting in was one of the smaller ones in the forest, only thirty or so feet tall. He sniffed delicately, the crisp scent of the greenery almost hiding the smooth scent of glamour and magic that clung to the air.

Caspian was munching on the last bit of his apple, wiping his mouth as he dropped the core to the forest floor.

Suddenly, the core came flying back up, hitting Caspian square in the face.

“What in the Hells?” he barked, catching the core and rubbing the new welt on his forehead.

Kestrel looked at the apple warily, his entire body suddenly alert.

Caspian leaned over, looking down with a small frown on his lips. He opened his mouth to say something when his branch suddenly gave out.

“Hey!” Caspian shouted as he tumbled down, blindly snagging a nearby branch and catching himself.

Kestrel untangled himself from sitting on his branch before lithely swinging down to help Cass. He grabbed his comrade's hand and was getting ready to pull when his own branch gave way. A curse rang out of his mouth

as he fell a few feet, the twigs that were coming off the branches slapping him in the face as he slid down the trunk. He summoned a powerful gust of wind and floated down onto another branch, gripping the rough bark of the trunk as he looked up to see where Caspian hung.

Before Kestrel could think of his next move, Caspian's new branch detached from the tree and the witch started falling again. Kestrel lurched forward and snagged the back of the man's shirt, grunting and almost buckling at the weight of catching him, before he dropped him onto a branch below his. Learning the tree's game, Kestrel hopped down beside Cass and quickly leaned out of the way to dodge the branch he had just been on as it fell a few seconds later.

"We have to keep moving!" Kestrel yelled, gracefully dropping to another branch, then another, Caspian hot on his tail. Every branch they touched fell only moments later, making it difficult to keep moving down while they avoided being hit by the debris.

Kestrel kept one palm to the trunk to steady himself as he continued sliding down and down and down, his white hair whipping around him in the wind. When they were just a few branches from their last fall to the ground, Kestrel summoned another gust of wind to cushion the impact. He fell as nimbly as possible, hitting the ground and rolling easily into a standing position. Cass followed suit.

Both witches paused for a moment, their breathing mirroring each other. Kestrel tilted his head to look up at the newly bare tree.

"Okay . . ." Caspian said, his usual mirth gone. "Maybe the trees *are* murderous."

Kestrel looked at his beta and nodded. "We need to get the Hells out of this forest and back to Ezra and Gideon."

Caspian, for once, had no protests as he rearranged the food pack slung across his body and nodded. "I second that."

Kestrel reached into his pocket for the compass and watched as the arrow spun in a few different directions before deciding where to stop. Caspian and Kestrel both peered down in confusion as the compass pointed directly to the left—the direction of the lake.

Cass furrowed his brow.

"That's weird. Why would it tell us to go toward the lake—" His beta cut off as he lifted his head back up and gasped in surprise.

The lake was no longer ahead of them. In fact, the tree that had just tried

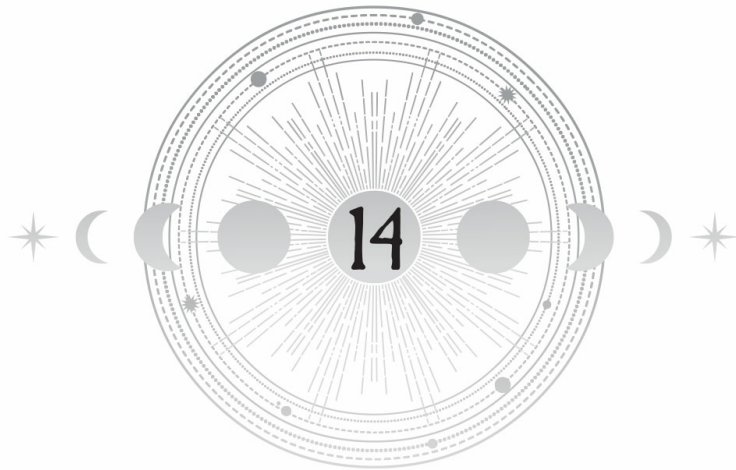
to kill them was no longer beside them. Instead, the forest around them was filled with lush pink cherry blossoms, the smell of leaves and earthy foliage replaced by the floral scent of the petals that were now blanketing the ground.

Kestrel sighed in annoyance, as if he wasn't at all shocked that the forest had completely transformed.

"Welcome to the Neverending Forest," he said to Cass.

Caspian made a low whistling sound. "Hells, this is about to be quite an interesting trek."

Kestrel could only nod in agreement.



Aren't you freezing?" Ezra asked her as they passed through the city in the shadows.

Estrella's clear night sky twinkled, clusters of blue and purple stars dancing above them, all three moons visible for the first time in at least a week. Her apartment wasn't too much farther, only a couple blocks or so, and Calla had already gone this long in the cold.

She looked at Ezra, her eyebrows raised at him in challenge. "Why? Do you suddenly care about how I'm feeling?"

His jaw clenched in annoyance, and he looked forward, refusing to answer. Calla grinned to herself. Annoying Ezra was quickly becoming her new favorite hobby, though, to be honest, she *was* freezing. She rubbed her hands up and down her arms and suppressed another shiver, refusing to give Ezra the satisfaction. Suddenly, something heavy and warm dropped over Calla's shoulders and she jumped a bit in surprise. Gideon's cloak.

The heavy material slid over her shoulders and down her back like a waterfall. It was made of a thick velvet that was clearly expensive—much more expensive than her lost one had been and three times as warm. Something she was currently grateful for as she pulled the black material tighter around her body. Gideon stepped out from behind her and she threw him an appreciative look. He gave a single nod. Calla caught Ezra watching their silent exchange out the corner of his eye before he quickly shifted his

gaze away a moment later.

Calla was about to throw out another dig, when, suddenly, not too far in the distance, someone screamed, “No!”

The three of them whipped their heads toward the shout. Calla knew that voice.

“Hannah!” she cried in alarm.

Calla broke into a run, her steps echoing against the stone road, her long skirt and Gideon’s cloak billowing behind her in the breeze as she sprinted down the last block toward the stone building. The two witches kept up easily as she finally rounded the corner of her street.

There, in front of Calla’s building, was a trio of fae surrounding her friends. One had a hand firmly clasped over Delphine’s mouth—a move that may have seemed smart if the siren wasn’t trying to rip her teeth through the palm clamped over her face. Hannah, on the other hand, had her arms pinned behind her back and was facing the fae who held her friend, a furious look on her face as she watched Delphine struggle.

“Hey!” Calla called to them as she got closer. “Let them go!”

All three of the fae looked in her direction, confusion in their expressions. She stopped a few feet away, her breathing labored as she assessed the situation. The fae holding Delphine was tall and lean, the particular shade of his rose-hued skin clashing horribly with Delphine’s blue. The other two had pallid ivory complexions, unruly blond hair, and identical faces. Twins, Calla noted. One of the twins, the one closest to Calla, took in her appearance, lingering on her face in a way that didn’t make her think he was admiring how she looked. He studied her eyes for a moment that was too long to be casual, and a grin unfurled at the corner of his lips.

“Well, well, well. Looks like Jack wasn’t wasting our time after all, gentlebeings. The Siphon does live here.”

A strangled noise came from Calla’s throat and from the corner of her eye, she saw Ezra’s head whip toward her. Her face heated in shame, and she clenched her fists by her sides. She forgot how easily fae could see through glamour.

“Siphon?” Ezra asked hoarsely. Gideon simply lifted a brow at his brother.

Calla tilted her chin up in defiance, blood still rushing wildly through her veins as she taunted, “Here I am.” She spread her arms out challengingly. “So, you can let them go. *Now.*”

The fae that had just spoken flashed a smirk at his twin. “I don’t think we will, leech.”

“Watch it,” Ezra growled back at the man.

The fae’s eyebrows lifted in gleeful challenge, satisfied that he had struck a nerve.

“Are all fae disgusting fiends back in your courts?” Calla inserted. “Or are you just extra pissy because you’re courtless exiles?”

The other twin stepped toward Calla and sneered, “Watch your mouth, *witch*.”

“Watch *your* mouth, asshole,” Ezra threatened again, stepping up beside her.

All three fae bared their teeth.

“I suggest you let the girls go,” Gideon warned as he stepped in place next to Ezra. His voice held the same smooth authority she was beginning to think of as his prince voice.

“Or what?” the fae holding Delphine countered.

“Do you really think the three of you can take on four witches and a siren?” Gideon asked, sounding almost bored with the whole situation—though Calla could see how calculated the prince was beneath the surface. Calla refrained from mentioning that Hannah never used her magic—she didn’t think it would be particularly helpful at the moment. Hannah’s violet eyes met Calla’s as if the small witch was having the same thought.

Delphine tried to say something beneath the fae’s hand, but her voice was too muffled to understand. The man squeezed her tighter and she squirmed. Calla snarled and took a step forward, ready to let them have it, but the advance was just enough for the twins to attack.

Calla feinted left as the twin closest to her lunged forward. She quickly spun away and unfurled her Rouge magic, flexing it like a muscle. She pushed an invisible coil of her power between them, focusing on the hum of the blood rushing through her opponent’s veins. The notes of the blood calling out to her were so familiar she knew every beat by heart as if it were one of Delphine’s siren songs.

Calla easily slipped through the lazy defenses her opponent had up and felt the instant her power joined the flow of energy that ran through his body. Once she knew her essence had fully intertwined itself with his, she tightened the veins in his throat with a hard jerk. His hand flew to his neck, a strangled sound coming out of his floundering mouth. Her opponent narrowed his eyes,

and just before she could twist his veins harder, she suddenly felt as though her skin was on fire.

Calla screamed, her power recoiling back into her and releasing its hold on the fae. He laughed as she fell to her knees, running her hands over her skin as if she could brush off the invisible flames. Calla heard someone call her name in concern as the man crouched down in front of her, his angular face twisted with a cruel grin.

“What’s wrong, leech? Can’t take the heat?”

He snickered at his joke, but his humor was quickly cut short as she launched herself at him, throwing him back onto the ground with a heavy grunt. He wrestled with her for a moment before digging his sharp nails into her shoulder, tearing through the delicate fabric of her sleeve, and flipping her onto her back. With her sleeve ripped, his skin made contact with hers and her Siphon called out from her core. She ignored the urge, reaching up to his sides and digging in her nails as hard as she could, until he grunted in pain and loosened the grip on her shoulders where he was pinning her down. She bucked her hips again, trying to throw him off, but he only bared his teeth and pressed her down harder, being more careful not to accidentally touch her skin this time.

“If only witches didn’t heal so fast, I could make you suffer how I’d like.” He curled his lips, before breaking out into a sinister smile. “Maybe I should try it anyway.”

Calla thrashed beneath him wildly, desperately trying to remove him, but the moment the fire began crawling up her legs again, she could do nothing but scream. She uncontrollably ripped at his shirt with her hands. A moment later, she heard the tear of fabric, felt the bare skin of his sides, and her Siphon immediately latched on. Calla knew she could end the pain then and there, knew all it would take was one pull of her Siphon and the fire would stop. Louder than the burning pain in her mind was the fear that if she lost control Ezra was going to witness firsthand how much of a monster she could be.

“I lost my brother to a parasite like you,” the fae hissed through the haze of pain. “I’m going to melt the flesh from your bones—”

Calla let out a shriek of pain as his flames intensified. She heard someone yell her name, but she couldn’t tell who it was. Darkness was closing in on her mind as the heat melted her bones. Her body was begging her to take from the fae and end the searing pain. She struggled against the feeling, tried

to shove it away—and then she heard another screech.

Hannah.

Calla's mind cleared just enough for her to make out the blond's scream of pain and her Siphon flared to life. She knew what she was about to do was bad, a different kind of heat crawling up her arm as she flattened her palm against the fae's skin. Her adrenaline and fear kicked in tenfold, but somewhere beneath that fear anticipation lurked.

Calla let out a gasp the moment her Siphon started to drain energy from the fae. She pulled harder than she ever had before. The fae's face became a sickly white, his body swaying above her. Calla dragged herself from underneath him as he went too limp to hold himself up. He crashed onto the ground next to her, and she squeezed her eyes shut as she continued to drain him, feeling wisps of his magic tangle themselves through hers as their energies merged. She knew she needed to stop, that what she had already taken was more than enough and that he would be out for a good while.

But she couldn't.

She couldn't stop *taking and taking and taking*, and some part of her, the dark part that was buried in her cells, didn't *want* to stop. It was like the high you get after a sprint, once you push past the feeling of your lungs exploding in your chest, your body floods with euphoria. The fae's power pulsed through her body, heat sparking like fireworks all over her skin, wiping away any pain she had felt moments before and replenishing strength through her bones. His energy sped up her own healing, the burnt, blistered flesh of her legs smoothing out to fresh, unmarked skin.

She understood why other Siphons took with no restraint.

Calla felt herself sob in terror as she hit the bottom of the fae's magic well, the place in every magical being's core where their power was stored, and found it completely depleted. Yet she still couldn't make herself let go. She knew if she held on too much longer, she would kill him. His life easily extinguished like the invisible flames he wielded. Siphons were parasitic, after all. *Leeches*. Every time she called herself a witch, she made herself a liar. She would never be a true witch as long as this monster hid beneath her skin.

"She has to stop!" a musical voice yelled from somewhere above her.
"She's going to make herself sick!"

Someone tried to peel her grip from the fae's wrist, someone who felt oddly familiar, but Calla bared her teeth from where she lay on the ground,

eyes still squeezed shut, tightening her hold on the fae's side.

This is the monster you've always been, a voice in the back of her mind whispered.

"Calliope," someone said softly.

She paid the deep, velvet voice no attention. Just kept holding on to the feeling of energy filling up her body as she descended further and further into darkness. The only thing left inside the fae was his life essence now that she had taken all the magic and energy available. She could count on one hand the amount of times she had siphoned. She had never taken this much from someone that she could remember. Still, she needed *more, more, more*.

"Calliope, you have to stop," the same calm voice spoke again, a strong hand circling her wrist and pulling gently.

"*I can't*. My friends . . ." She let out a half sob.

"Your friends are safe, Calliope. You can let go now."

Her grip slackened, the hand on top of hers firmly pulling the fae's wrist out of her hold.

"Move the bodies," the smooth voice turned away and ordered.

It was *that* voice. The prince voice.

Gideon, she realized.

Her eyes slowly fluttered open, and he finally dropped her hand. Calla watched as it fell limply to the ground. He was crouched over her, and Calla pushed herself off the ground with a shaky arm, managing to fully sit up for barely a moment before she was diving forward—only stopping when her forehead crashed into his shoulder.

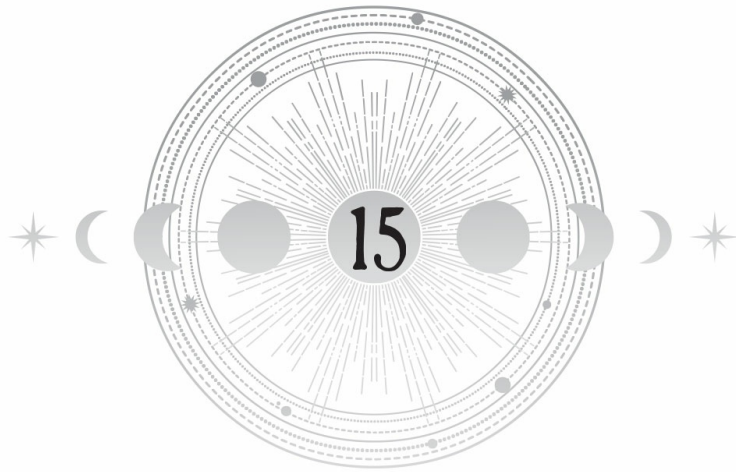
"Calliope, what's happening? How do I help you?"

"You can't," she whispered against his shirt miserably.

His strong hands gently lifted her away from him by her shoulders. "Do you think you can try and stand so we can get you inside?"

She nodded.

Gideon wrapped his left arm around her and slowly pulled her to her feet, allowing her to lean most of her weight on him so she could find her balance. She stood on wobbly legs for a few seconds more before weakly trying to push him away. There were too many things going on in her head and body to get a good read on how she was feeling, but just when she thought she would be staying upright, she had to turn away as she violently retched onto the street.



Gideon stepped back as the siren rushed to Calliope's side, her delicate blue hands brushing the hair back from the witch's face. Delphine affectionately gathered up the long tresses before expertly twisting Calliope's soft waves so they stayed out of her way.

The siren glanced at Gideon, a grim look in her silver eyes. "She took way too much from him. He's barely still living."

"That's better than he deserves," Gideon responded without sympathy. "Will *she* be okay? Why did that make her sick?"

"Because," Calliope said meekly, wiping the back of her hand across her mouth, "I'm too full. The energy I took needs somewhere to go, some way to burn off."

Delphine worried her dark blue lip as she watched her friend straighten up. Calliope shifted to lean on her friend, the siren's arms circling the other girl in comfort. Calliope's skin, which had been a warm ivory before, was now unnaturally pale and shiny. Gideon searched for Ezra and the small blond witch—Hannah, if he heard correctly. Everyone needed to get inside to regroup as soon as possible. He quickly spotted when Ezra and the girl came rounding the corner of the building, his brother's clothing disheveled, a few spatters of blood staining his shirt.

It had all happened very fast. Without taking a step, Gideon had easily incapacitated the fae holding on to Delphine. The twins had been the real

problem. Both wielded fire magic and the moment Ezra and Gideon started to get an upper hand on the twin they were dealing with, the bastard shot his flames toward Hannah instead, using her to make the Onyx witches back off.

And then there was Calliope.

When Gideon heard her scream, he left Ezra to finish off their opponent, but by the time he got to Calliope, she already had a firm hold on the other twin. Her eyes were squeezed shut and Gideon watched all of the color fade from the fae's body. He knew what Siphons could do, had heard many stories about the rare immortals born with unusual power, but Gideon had never actually met one in person until now. He had definitely never seen anyone do what Calliope just did—she had begun to drain the *immortality* from the fae.

And she hadn't stopped, maybe *couldn't* stop.

Not when the siren tried to speak to her.

Or when Ezra had gone over and tried to pull her hand away.

Not until she heard Gideon's voice.

Hannah and Ezra were just coming back from dragging the bodies into an alley next door, the blond quickly joining Delphine in helping Calla steady herself after emptying the contents of her stomach. Ezra cleared his throat at Gideon. "The fae shouldn't wake up for a while, but I don't think it's a good idea to leave the girls here."

The siren's silver head popped up at Ezra's words. "Where are we supposed to go?" she asked indignantly.

Hannah sighed. "We have to move again."

Calliope cleared her throat, her voice muffled slightly as she said, "I doubt this helps, but we were going to have to move anyway. I just didn't know how to tell you before—"

"Tell us *what*?" Delphine cut her eyes to Calliope's worn-out face.

Calliope swallowed. "It's a long story, and we need to get going. I say we just head south, toward the human territories, and find a place for you two before I leave with Gideon."

"Well, make it a quick story. And who in the Hells is Gideon? And where do you think you're going with him?" the siren questioned rapidly before turning and pointing menacingly at Ezra. "And *you*—I believe I told you if I ever saw you again, I would cut out your intestines and shove them down your throat. Did you think that sounded like fun?"

Ezra *almost* looked nervous, but still he said, "Is that your way of saying 'Thanks for saving us'? Because you're welcome."

Delphine sneered at him, but before she could retort, Hannah jumped in.

“What *are* you doing here?” the blond asked curiously, as if it had only just occurred to her that the two men had shown up *with* Calliope and that their timing had been strangely impeccable.

“I’m Gideon,” he finally interjected, with a slight bow of his head.

“Ezra’s brother. I ran into Calliope at the inn earlier, and honestly, it just gets more complicated from there.”

“You’re *brothers*?” the two girls half screeched at the same time.

“Why is everyone always so surprised at that?” he mused to no one in particular.

“Seeing witches outside of the Witch Realms is strange enough. I guess it’s just surprising to see sibling witches,” Hannah said, her eyes still wide with shock.

Delphine snorted. “Speak for yourself, Han. I’m just surprised someone grew up with Ezra without killing him.”

Gideon pressed his lips together to keep from laughing, but continued, “Let’s go inside, and I’ll explain everything.”

Hannah nodded easily, Delphine following her lead begrudgingly as she helped Calliope toward the building. As soon as the girls were a few feet away, Gideon turned to Ezra.

“That was . . .” Gideon began, his voice low.

“The easiest part,” Ezra finished dryly.

Gideon cleared his throat. “Did you know she had the Siphon curse?”

“No.”

“Interesting.” With that, Gideon headed after the girls, Ezra trailing behind.

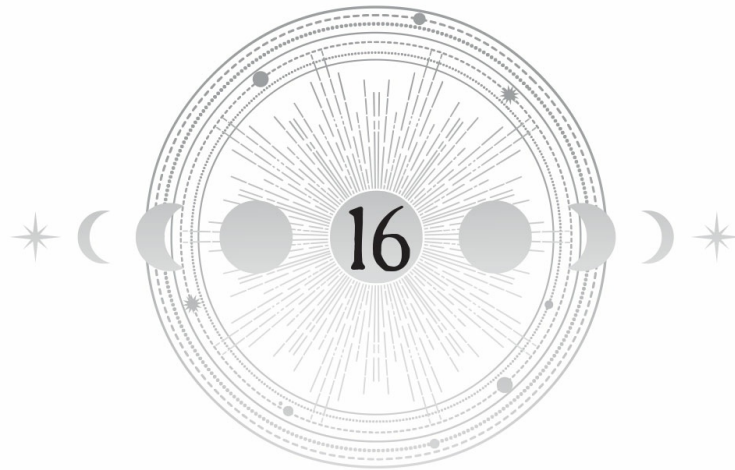
“I can’t believe Ezra has a *brother*,” Hannah whispered, though Ezra and Gideon could clearly hear her.

“Did you know he had a brother?” the siren asked pointedly.

Calliope nodded. “But that’s not even close to the most shocking thing you’re going to learn tonight.”

“It’s going to be a long night,” Ezra muttered.

It’s going to be a long few days, Gideon thought.



You're telling me *Ezra* is a *prince*?"

Delphine's jaw was wide open, her words incredulous as she looked sideways at Calla, but Calla wasn't paying any attention to the siren or Ezra's sharp retort. She felt like her insides were molten lava, and as Gideon filled everyone in on the night's events, she couldn't keep her legs from bouncing on her side of the couch or stop her mind from racing.

Calla hadn't siphoned from anyone in years, had never *voluntarily* taken from anyone, but she remembered well enough how antsy it made her—the excess energy making her body hum. What she didn't remember was how much it *burned*. The blood in her veins was boiling, her forehead feverish, and she could feel a small trickle of sweat rolling down her left temple. She swiped it away, wondering if this is what happened when she went too far. It was as if her body was punishing her for giving in to the darkness, preparing her for what it would feel like when she inevitably burned in the Hells like the monster she was. Because she was a monster. She almost killed that fae; seconds more and there was no doubt in her mind he would have been gone.

The worst part wasn't the loss of her control. It was how amazing it had felt to take the fae's power. She had never felt such a high in her life, and though her body was rejecting having so much foreign energy in her system now, it had *reveled* in draining that bastard dry.

As she rubbed her hands over her thighs to ease their anxious bouncing, a

small burst of invisible flames sparked from her fingertips. She sucked in a breath as she shook the flames away, ignoring Hannah's look of concern. Luckily, the blond seemed to be the only one who had noticed. Calla sucked in a small breath. Surely, the fire was just a figment of her imagination and a result of her fever reaching its crescendo. She felt like she needed a cold glass of water or an ice bath.

"Calla?" Hannah asked softly. "Are you all right?"

Calla only nodded and Hannah looked like she wanted to press, but Delphine was already waving for Gideon to continue.

"You were saying there's someone you're looking for in the forest?" Delph prompted.

"There is a being called the Witch Eater. They—"

Delphine's face turned a concerning shade of purple at the name and Gideon paused.

"You recognize the name?" he asked.

"The Witch Eater is infamous," the siren told them, her teeth nervously worrying her bottom lip before continuing. "They live not far from the Siren's Sea, where my fam—" She shook her head before her dark blue lips could shape the word *family*. Hannah reached out to lay a comforting hand on their friend's thigh. Delphine's siren clan, or Shoal as they were called, was no longer her family, if they ever were, and Calla knew how painful it was for the girl to think about them.

"I've heard nightmarish stories about the Witch Eater. Seeking them out is too risky." Delphine turned to Calla. "There has to be some other way."

"If there was another option, do you think that I would be bothering with this one?" Gideon asked.

Everyone was quiet for a moment at the truth of his statement.

It was Hannah who spoke first. "Delphine and I are coming with you."

"What? No!" Calla said, her blood pumping faster. Tendrils of foreign energy were snaking their way through her veins, making it hard to concentrate on anything but the anxiety rising in her core.

"Han's right. There's no way we are leaving you with *them* alone in *that* forest," Delphine asserted.

"The only reason I'm going to risk the forest is because keeping my rolls and being turned over to Myrea is a worse fate. The two of you have no reason to take that chance."

"You are the reason we *will* take that chance, Calla." Delphine rolled her

eyes in exasperation. “You’re not going to change our minds.”

“Also . . . there is another reason I’d need you to come, Calliope,” Gideon admitted.

“What?” Calla lifted her brows. “What would you need me for?”

“When Kestrel informed me about the spell, he gave me a list of ingredients to collect. There’s one in particular that may concern you.”

“What are the ingredients?” Calla asked at the same time Hannah and Delphine blurted, “Who’s Kestrel?”

“Kestrel is my commander in the Guild,” Gideon explained simply.

Ezra huffed a laugh from the window and turned his face back to glance at his brother in amusement. “Is that what you tell people, Gideon?” the man asked slyly. Gideon shot Ezra a look that seemed to command his brother to shut up.

“Anyway,” Gideon continued as if his brother had never spoken, eliciting another small laugh from Ezra that the elder prince studiously ignored. “The list of ingredients for the spell was given to us as a verse. There are supposed to be four items total. It goes like this: *Fate’s blood, a siren’s song, and a prince of heartbreak’s vice, transforming your destiny comes with the change of Witch’s Dice.*”

Gideon’s smooth voice finished out the lyric and the prince waited for everyone to absorb the information. The Witch’s Dice was the most obvious item in the poem—the other pieces a little more ambiguous.

“So each of these must be a physical item, right?” Calla asked, straightening up.

Gideon nodded.

“You have Witch’s Dice, I’m assuming?” She ticked a finger off. “What about the siren’s song? What item could that be?”

Ezra huffed another laugh from where he stood. “This ought to be fun for you to explain, Gideon.”

Gideon gave his brother a hard look.

“Well?” Calla prompted.

Gideon absentmindedly reached up to tug on one of the hoops in his ear as he answered, “That’s why I was at the auction tonight . . . I needed a siren’s tongue.”

“A *what?*” Delphine screeched. Calla winced. Hannah’s mouth gaped open.

“I know this doesn’t exactly do me any favors, but I was assured the siren

had already . . . passed before the tongue was collected,” Gideon said evenly, though he at least had the good sense to look a little regretful about it.

Hannah looked at Delphine, the witch’s eyes hesitant. “Think of it this way, Delph: maybe it was someone you hate?”

Calla grimaced. “There is a good possibility it was someone you hate.”

Delphine stared at the elder prince a moment longer before her shoulders finally relaxed, but Calla could tell her friend was still a bit put out.

“Whatever.” The siren flicked back a piece of her hair. “As long as it helps Calla. Right, Prince?”

“That’s it?” Ezra exclaimed in disbelief. “You threatened to shove my own organs down my throat and he gets off with a *whatever*?”

“He hasn’t betrayed my friend.” Delphine glared back at Ezra.

“I’m assuming the Prince of Heartbreak is an actual person, then?” Calla changed the subject.

Gideon hesitated, the shift of his eyes almost imperceptible. If she hadn’t been watching closely enough, she might have missed the gesture.

Interesting.

“Yes,” he said slowly. “Though they’re better known as the Heartbreak Prince.”

“I’ve never heard of them,” Calla noted.

“That’s because they aren’t real. It’s an old legend,” Ezra muttered from his place by the window. “A ridiculous fae tale told to children.”

“The line said something about their vice?” Delphine tilted her head.

“An object from the person of their affection,” Gideon explained with a nod.

“And how are we going to get that? If this person is just a legend?” the siren continued.

“Our mother used to read us the story from an old fae book when we were children,” Gideon went on. “I got an idea from there I think we’ll be able to use.”

Very interesting.

That answer seemed to satisfy everyone enough because Hannah pressed on, “Then the ‘Fates’ blood’? Is that where Calla comes in?”

Gideon looked mildly impressed with Hannah as he nodded. “Calliope and I both could have Fates’ blood depending on which of us is the actual intended Blood Warrior. Obviously, before tonight I had thought my blood would surely be what was needed for the spell. But now that I know about

her rolls . . .”

“You can’t take the chance that the spell won’t work without my blood.”

“But if it didn’t work with Gideon’s blood, wouldn’t we know that he isn’t the Blood Warrior? There wouldn’t be a need to erase his rolls in that case,” Hannah pointed out.

Delphine elbowed Hannah in the ribs, and the blond winced.

Delphine’s rib-check was unnecessary, however, because Gideon was already explaining, “As long as my Rolls of Fate are all the same, I would still be hunted by the Witch Queens until the last Warrior is chosen. They wouldn’t take their chances based solely on my word.”

“Even your own mother would hunt you down?” Hannah gasped.

“Contracts with the Gods are stronger than blood,” Gideon spoke solemnly.

“Then why did she have kids?” Delphine threw out absentmindedly.

“Your guess is probably better than ours,” Ezra chimed in, crossing his arms and leaning back against the window.

“The real question is what are the odds that one of the queen’s own children was fated to become the final Blood Warrior?” Calla asked.

“Given the Fates’ sick sense of humor?” Gideon reasoned. “Pretty high I imagine.”

“So, what?” Delphine began lazily. “All of you are just running around breaking your backs trying to prevent some ancient bargain from being fulfilled to spare three sadistic bitches with crowns? Didn’t they get themselves into this mess in the first place?”

“It’s more complicated than that,” Gideon said at the same time that Ezra muttered, “Yes.”

“Regardless of whether or not you care about this war,” Gideon emphasized, “Calliope and I are in danger until we get our rolls removed, and so is every other witch you know.”

“Well, that settles that, I suppose.” Delphine jerked a nod as she stood. The siren ran a hand over her outfit to smooth out the wrinkles Calla knew were nonexistent. “When do we leave?”

Ezra turned to the group and answered, “I suggest we leave as soon as possible.”

Gideon nodded. “I’m supposed to wait for Kestrel and Cass outside of the forest. I’d try to meet them within, but since they took my compass, I’d have no safe way to get through.”

“Compass?” Calla asked.

“Magic compass, long story.” Gideon waved a hand. “What about scrying? Would you or Hannah be able to locate them that way?”

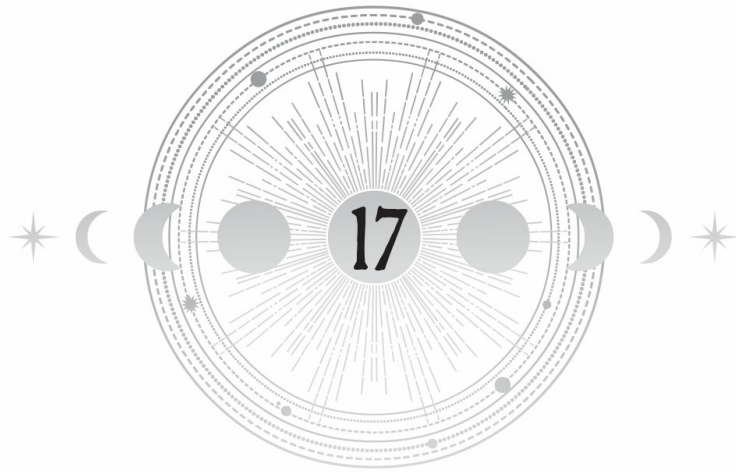
Calla shook her head. “We’re too out of practice. Besides, I’m not sure scrying works in a place like the Neverending Forest—the glamour in the forest interferes.”

“No need for any of that anyway—you’ve got me.” They all turned to Delphine, curiously. “Those born in the Neverending Forest are immune to its glammers,” she explained nonchalantly.

Gideon looked at her approvingly. “I was hoping sending Kestrel and Cass ahead with my compass meant they would be able to get in and out of the forest by the time I could meet up with them. Then they could go home and wouldn’t have to risk facing the Witch Eater with me. I should’ve anticipated splitting up would just cause more trouble.”

Before the elder prince could say anything else, Ezra was pushing away from the window, a serious look on his face.

“Speaking of trouble”—Ezra hooked a thumb over his shoulder—“we’ve got company.”



Gideon stalked to the window to confirm his brother's words, cursing at whatever he saw there. "We need to go. Those fae were evidently tougher than they looked."

Delphine's brows rose as she also moved to inspect what was going on outside.

"How on earth are they awake? I thought Calla had surely almost killed the one." The siren peered out of the murky glass, missing the way Calla flinched at her words.

"It looks like that one is still down, but his twin and their friend look awfully pissed," Ezra spoke as his coal eyes roamed the apartment. Probably for another exit.

"What about our things?" Hannah asked, worry creeping into her voice.

"Leave them. Is there any other way out of here?" Ezra moved toward the door to Calla's room.

"I'll grab a bag with some of our belongings," Delphine murmured to Hannah reassuringly before she strode to the other side of the living room.

Calla left her friends to gather the few portable belongings they had as she moved to peek out the window herself. She got a glimpse of the two fae just as they disappeared around the front of the building. Spinning from the window, she rushed into her room after Ezra, halting in the doorway.

Ezra was crouched at the foot of her bed, pulling out a small wooden box

that was peeking from underneath. He opened the lid and peered at the few trinkets that were held inside—small tokens of memories Calla had collected over her years with the girls along with a few things from her childhood. She remembered a time he had brought her home because she was too drunk to walk up the stairs by herself—and she had shown him the precious collection. A time when she had been too inebriated to be embarrassed about being so sentimental. Now her cheeks heated.

When he finally looked at her, his expression was softer than she had ever seen it.

“Calla . . .” he murmured, his voice heavy. “I’m sorry you have to leave like this.”

She stared back at him, not knowing what to do with the sincerity she heard in his words. He quickly closed the box and stood up, reaching out to place it into her hands.

“I regret that day, you know.”

Calla looked away. She couldn’t do this right now.

“You were given a task by Myrea.” She spoke slowly, almost robotically, as if she was trying to convince herself that it was no more personal than that. “I can’t say in the same situation I wouldn’t have given you the die to protect myself from the wrath of a Witch Queen.”

Calla felt his warm fingertips brush against her chin as he turned her head toward him. A breath fell from her lips at the shockingly brief contact. The first time he had touched her in so long.

“That’s not the day I’m talking about,” he said quietly.

Calla only stared back at him.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were a . . . ?” He swallowed as he trailed off.

“Monster?” she finished for him, her voice thick. “Why would I? You already didn’t think I was good enough for you.”

Before he could respond, there was a loud bang on the front door.

Calla’s head whipped toward the sound and Ezra cursed. He walked over to the window, reaching up to open it. He offered an arm to her in assistance and helped her onto the bed just as the others came skidding into the room. Delphine carried a bag slung across her body and opened the canvas satchel for Calla to place her box in. Calla was glad that Ezra had discovered it under the bed, or she feared she may have forgotten all about the items.

Another bang reverberated through the apartment.

The front door to their apartment was solid reinforced wood, Calla and the girls had made sure of that. They had also added four locking mechanisms. A detail they all learned could come in handy throughout their time together. Even with the extra precautions, it would probably take the two fae only a few minutes to bust through. To make matters worse, the inside of their apartment was suddenly becoming intensely warm and the back of Calla's neck grew slick with moisture.

"Whoa," she said, lifting her hair off her neck. "Did anyone else just get hot?"

Delphine and Hannah nodded.

Gideon sniffed the air and cursed again. "That fae is going to burn the whole building down!" he said urgently.

Calla's eyes widened at the realization. "Yeah, it's time to go." She stepped onto her bed using Ezra's waiting hand. She was too short to reach the window without the bed as a stepping stool, but once she was up, she waved away his help and hoisted herself up by the window ledge. She awkwardly pulled herself through the opening and half out into the chilly night air until she could twist around and sit, spinning until her feet were outside and she was peering down at the ground. Calla felt for the ladder to her right with her foot and guided herself onto it to begin her descent. Delphine's slim figure easily followed, and then Hannah.

Once all three girls were on the ground a moment later, they looked back up to watch as Ezra tried to squeeze himself through the small opening.

"Damn, what are they going to do? There's no way they're going to fit," Delphine said in a tone that wasn't at all concerned for the princes. "If Ezra burns, it's no mark on my conscious, but the other one is way too pretty to die like this."

Calla threw an exasperated look at the siren.

"What?" Delph said with a flick of her hand. "How are we supposed to fix this?"

"Stay here," Calla demanded with a huff, and before they had time to protest, she was stepping up to the ladder. She made a point to glance behind her a few times to make sure they didn't try to follow her, but Delphine only sighed and threw a blue arm around Hannah's shoulders. The blond witch's ears turned pink as she leaned into her friend's embrace, and they both simply watched as Calla went back for the princes.

When Calla finally climbed back to the second floor, Ezra stuck his head

out to glare at her.

“What in Hells are you doing? Gideon and I will take care of them and meet you! Get out of here!”

“There’s no way you can take them out alone; we don’t have the element of surprise on our side any longer. Now, help me back in! I may have an idea.”

Ezra looked like he was about to stand there and argue with her until a large *bang* sounded from the front door of the apartment. Gideon easily shouldered his brother out of the way and helped her maneuver her way back through. They all stepped away down off the bed as she explained her plan.

Gideon nodded once she finished, and they rushed out of her bedroom to move into place. Gideon slid behind a bookshelf that sat in the living area across from the couch, and Ezra and Calla worked on crowding themselves into the small storage closet on the opposite side of the room. The thick smell of smoke was quickly permeating through the air. The heat billowed from the hallway making the room feel like a furnace. Just then, the banging noise on the other side of the front door morphed into splintering. They were almost in.

“This is a ridiculous idea,” Ezra complained as they wedged themselves chest-to-chest into the closet. Calla could feel the movement of every word he spoke. “Fae have a superior sense of smell; they’ll sniff us out immediately.”

“Not with the scent of smoke in the air,” she said, their proximity leaving her inexplicably agitated. “However, there is a good chance they may hear us if you don’t *shut up*.”

Ezra gave her an annoyed grunt, but he thankfully stopped talking.

Calla held her breath as she listened for Gideon’s signal. She hadn’t been this close to Ezra in a while, and she wondered if it would end up being the thundering of her heartbeat that gave them away.

Boom!

Calla could almost feel the room vibrate with the force of the front door busting open. The energy in her veins buzzed with adrenaline and anticipation.

“Come out, come out wherever you are!” one of the two fae growled.

“Give us the leeching bitch, and we’ll leave the rest of you alone!”

Ezra’s entire body tensed against hers. Calla paid him no mind as she waited for Gideon’s cue.

There, she thought as she finally heard the loud creaking sound of her bedroom door move from Gideon manipulating it with his wind magic.

“The bedroom!” the first fae shouted as he took the bait.

There was a rush of feet outside the closet, and Gideon yelled, “Calliope!”

Ezra twisted the doorknob and threw the closet door open, causing them both to hastily spill out.

“*What the—*” the same fae hissed from just inside her bedroom doorway.

Calla had seconds to get this right.

She threw out both her hands in front of her and pushed every ounce of stolen magic out of her body toward the two figures inside her room. Focusing on how much she hated them, how angry she was that they hurt her friends, she let the rage build up inside her as she expelled as much energy as she could.

The twin made a snarling sound as he lunged toward her—

Just in time to run into her wall of flames.

The fae let out a blood-curdling screech as he breached the transparent fire that was blocking the doorway. Calla could see the hazy outline of the flames as they licked their way up the wall to the ceiling. Her breathing was labored as she turned away from where the fae was still screeching, on his knees, his companion trying to help. Ezra was gaping at the wall of fire, and Gideon’s normally composed features were regarding her as if she had just grown a second head right in front him.

“I won’t lie, I wasn’t quite sure that was going to work,” the elder prince said.

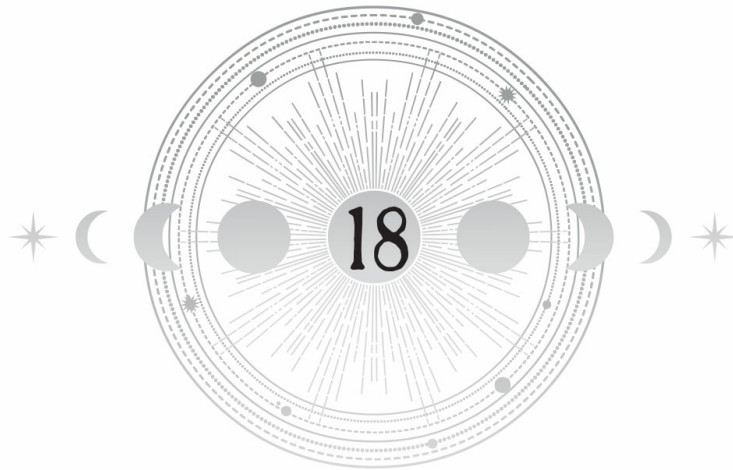
“Yeah?” Calla huffed, her body still trying to adjust after burning up all that energy in such a short burst. “Me either.”

Ezra looked at her wildly.

“*You didn’t know if that would work?!*” Ezra half yelled as his eyes widened with shock.

Calla winced, but before she could answer, Gideon was grabbing Ezra’s coat and pulling him toward the door.

“Let’s go!” the blue-haired witch threw at Calla as he dragged his brother backward, and she quickly followed on their heels out into the hall.



There was a mad rush when the trio stepped out of Calla's apartment as other residents rushed to evacuate. There were several voices shouting ahead of them in the stairwell and as they got closer, Calla could hear the sputters of coughing starting to grow louder. The three of them were taking the steps two at a time and they had almost hit the first floor when a scream rang out above them.

"Elba! Elba, where are you?"

Calla paused on the last step and whipped her head around. She looked back at the Onyx witches. "Someone needs help!"

"Calla, we have to *go*," Ezra started as a few last stragglers pushed around them.

"I can't just leave someone in a burning building, Ezra! This is *my* fault!"

"*Fine. I'll go back,*" Ezra emphasized to her before turning to his brother. "Make sure she gets out of here and doesn't do anything else reckless."

Gideon simply gave him a look that said *No promises*, and before Calla could protest, the elder prince ushered her down the last step. She tried to twist away, but the witch easily blocked her. She could already see Ezra dashing back up the stairs. When she and Gideon finally managed to exit the building, the cold night air was a welcome balm on her overheated skin. Groups of people were clumped outside together watching the black smoke billow out of the building. A hushed murmur was making its way through the

crowd as Calla whipped around to face the building.

The invisible flames made it look as if a shimmering film had descended over everything in front of her. Calla worried a lip as she clutched her hands to her chest and waited for Ezra.

“He’ll make it out.”

Calla looked at Gideon a little desperately, but the Onyx witch was staring straight ahead, his body as tense with worry as hers was. His eyes were pitch-black, not an ounce of silver to be seen. Calla shivered and turned back to the building.

There was no way Ezra Black was going to die in a burning building. It would be heartless of the Fates to give him such a grotesque ending. As the seconds ticked by, Calla was beginning to think if Ezra was so unlucky, it would have nothing to do with him and everything to do with the curse that was her existence on everyone she loved.

Loved?

A deep sense of dread vibrated throughout her body as that thought echoed through her mind. Because standing there, holding her breath as she watched the exit praying for him to appear, she worried that’s what the dark pit of despair unfurling in her stomach told her. That despite everything that had happened these past few weeks, her feelings hadn’t disappeared.

They waited six excruciating minutes before Ezra finally emerged from the building.

Six.

“Look!” someone behind her shouted.

Ezra stepped out from the entrance, his sweater hiked up over his nose and mouth. And he was carrying something.

No, *someone*, she realized. A girl with unruly dark curls was cradled in his arms, her mother following closely behind. Once they were out, Ezra quickly set the girl down in the middle of a crowd of people. A laugh that quickly became a sob bubbled up in Calla’s throat.

“Ezra.”

He looked toward her, and she took off, rushing to him. She stopped at a dead halt as she got close enough to touch him. They were both breathing hard. Him from the billowing smoke filling up the burning building and her from something else entirely. But she couldn’t bring herself to touch him, couldn’t make herself take his hand like she used to do so easily. Not now that he knew what she could do with her touch, she didn’t think she would be

able to stand it if he flinched away.

"I'm fine," he assured her slowly, his voice laced with an intensity she could feel.

They stared at each other for another charged moment before he suddenly broke out into a fit of coughs. A throat cleared behind her.

"I believe I just heard someone say the landlord was on his way?" Gideon spoke.

That information easily broke the weird trance she had just been in.

"Shit! Jack cannot see us. Are you good to go?" she asked Ezra as he continued to hack the smoke from his lungs.

He managed a nod.

The three of them started to leave, when someone tugged Ezra back by the elbow.

"Thank you so much, young man," the mother of the unconscious girl said to him with a watery smile.

Ezra simply nodded through another cough as he turned away again.

"If there's *anything* I can do to thank you," she continued, making him pause, "please let me know."

Gideon stepped up. "You can make sure no one mentions we were ever here."

The woman looked at him, puzzled, but nodded despite her confusion.

The three of them finally broke away from the building and the crowd and hurried back to meet Delphine and Hannah. Delphine was pacing around Hannah when the girls finally came back into view.

"Oh, thank the Gods," Delph said as she rushed forward to check on Calla.

The two girls fussed over her for a moment before Gideon stepped in.

"We need to get out of here *now*. Head straight for the forest."

"With no food or supplies?" Hannah asked.

"We can always buy some on the way or scavenge in the forest," Gideon said seriously.

Delphine looked at him dubiously. "Sorry, Prince, but I don't scavenge. I will, however, tell *you* where to scavenge once we get there."

While Gideon looked amused, Ezra looked perturbed. "Tell *us*? Does that mean you don't plan on helping us find your meal?" His hoarse voice still managing to sound indignant.

Delphine glowered a bit, "Does this outfit look like something I want to

get dirty?” she asked as she smoothed a neatly manicured hand down the dark emerald-green skirt of her ensemble from earlier that morning.

Calla coughed a laugh at Ezra’s incredulous expression.

“We are venturing into one of the most dangerous territories in Illustros and you are worried about your outfit?” Ezra scoffed.

Delphine shrugged easily. “We all have our priorities.”

Ezra gave her a look full of disdain as Gideon heaved a sigh.

“*Regardless*,” the elder Onyx Prince interrupted, “we can find food later. Right now, we need to get moving before your landlord shows up with reinforcements.”

All three girls nodded in unison and Gideon started moving, leading them north and around the back of the building in the direction of the forest.

“How long do you think the walk is from here to the border?” Hannah questioned.

“About five hours on foot. Give or take,” Gideon answered.

Delphine groaned a bit, but Calla was relieved. “I used most of the energy I had taken creating those flames. The walking will help burn up the rest of it now.”

“You did *what*?” Delphine asked at the same time that Hannah said, “Flames?”

“The fae I drained had fire magic like his twin, so I used it to trap the two of them in the bedroom,” she explained.

“What she’s failing to mention is that she didn’t know if she actually *could* use it when she made the plan,” Ezra said indignantly.

Calla gritted her teeth. “Sorry I’m not as reliable as a real witch who has endless resources to find out what their magic can do, but it *worked*, didn’t it?”

“Do you not think of yourself as a real witch?” Gideon murmured at the same time that Ezra shouted, “*Luckily*, it worked! And, luckily, he wasn’t immune to it either!”

“Ezra,” Gideon warned as Calla froze up a bit.

But Ezra wasn’t done. “Why didn’t you just convert the siphoned energy into Rouge magic?”

“Because I can’t! I’ve never tried to mix the two.” She balled her hands into fists. She suddenly couldn’t remember what had caused her to be so concerned about him earlier. She had finally done something right—her Siphon powers had been *useful*—and here he was finding yet another flaw in

her. “And *you’re welcome*, by the way. I could’ve just left you to figure it out for yourself!”

“She should’ve,” Delphine muttered to Hannah.

Ezra swung his gaze to Delphine. “You don’t have to be here, you know.”

Delphine snorted. “I swear to the Gods I’m going to *mur—*”

“*Enough.*”

They all stopped cold at *that* voice.

“We have a long journey tonight, and if you think I’m going to deal with the four of you bickering the whole time, I swear to the *Gods.*” Gideon pinched his nose.

“Hey!” Hannah said with a pout.

“Sorry, Hannah, you’re right,” he said with a little more warmth than before. “But *you three.*” He turned to the rest of them. “We are not doing this for the rest of this mission. Ezra, your mouth is going to end up getting you maimed. You did what you did and you’re going to have to deal with that some other time.”

“But—” Ezra started, but Gideon was already pointing at Delphine.

“You have to stop threatening to murder my brother. At least until this mission is complete. And then you can rip each other’s throats out for all I care.”

Delphine grumbled a bit, but otherwise didn’t talk back.

“And me?” Calla asked.

Gideon looked at her, straight on.

“You . . .” he started slowly.

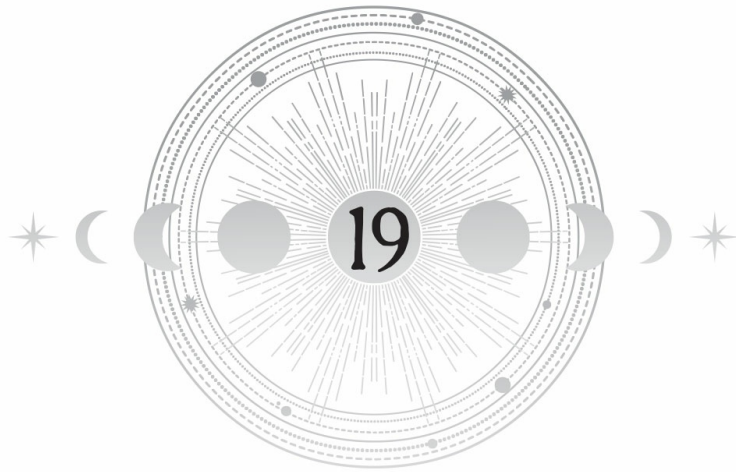
Ezra narrowed his eyes and butted in before Gideon could finish his thought.

“We get it, Gideon,” he lamented before turning to Calla. “*Thank you* for coming back to help us. Now, can we just go?”

Calla gave a grudging nod, and everyone slowly shifted into action.

As they walked forward—in silence this time—Calla looked at Gideon. She wondered what the rest of his sentence was going to be. Gideon must’ve sensed her gaze because his eyes slid over to meet hers, his irises back to molten silver. Calla held his stare for a moment before breaking away.

The prince had something to say to her, and Calla had a gut feeling she wouldn’t like whatever it was.



The group had been on foot for almost three hours, the apartment and flames long behind them. Estrella's towns were all connected by the same gray-and-white stone roads, making it easy for travelers to get from one end of the country to the other. Calla was already familiar with many of the cities their group had traveled through tonight.

Inland Estrella, the part they were currently trekking through, had never excited Calla the way some of the other cities near the ocean did. Last year, the girls had lived in a small town near the eastern border, in a tiny house that sat on a cliff overlooking the wild waters with a path right out to the pink-sand beach. That house had been one of Calla's favorite places the three of them had ever lived. Infinitely better than the first place they had shared, which had a hole in the roof that would flood the communal space every time it rained.

When Calla had met the girls, she had only been in Estrella for two whole days, sleeping in an overly priced inn that smelled intensely of alcohol due to the tavern that was connected to the front. Calla had been sitting in a back booth of that tavern, people-watching, the first time she had ever laid eyes on Delphine and Hannah. She had observed person after person offer to buy Delphine a drink, all of which the siren promptly turned down, until a girl with a disheveled black pixie cut and sharp facial features finally stole her away to a dark corner of the bar. The rest of that night's events—an ornery

elf who wouldn't leave Hannah alone, Calla intervening on the girl's behalf, alerting Delphine to the commotion, and, subsequently, getting the three of them thrown out from both the tavern *and* the inn—led to two new roommates and lots of new trouble.

Delphine had been skeptical at first; after knowing what Hannah's coven had put the witch through the siren wasn't keen on trusting any other Rouge witches. Calla had been able to use her own unluckiness to *gain* the trust of someone. One reveal of her rolls and Siphon eyes and Hannah was convincing the siren that Calla could be an asset to the group. Calla now knew the only reason the siren had given her a chance was because, much like Calla, the girl had been betrayed by her own family and forced to leave the place she grew up. Calla had a feeling that if she hadn't been able to pull on that particular heartstring, Delphine wouldn't have lost a second of sleep abandoning Calla in that alley behind the inn.

The three of them eventually found their rhythm together. They moved from place to place with the help of the money Calla had brought with her from her coven, and they were pretty decent at budgeting it out—until that little house on the sea. The rent had been astronomically out of their budget, and before Calla realized it, they had run out of the last of her money. Delphine had sweet-talked, or rather she had *sung*, their way out of paying a couple months' rent from time to time. It still hadn't been enough to catch up. They had tried to gather as much money as they could, but the ocean towns ran on the economy of their fish markets and the girls were *horrible* fishermen. Well, Delphine was quite good at fishing when she decided to put the effort in, considering she was semi-aquatic, but Calla and Hannah were hopeless.

Their efforts hadn't mattered anyway. One slipup with Calla's glamour and they were chased away like pests. Despite the bad luck, Calla missed the smell of the salty sea air of the east coast and the feel of squishy sand between her toes. It was one of the last times she could remember being genuinely happy. Back when they could go swimming every day and she could watch Delphine in her element. Back before she developed a gambling problem or met Ezra. When the three of them could rent horses to ride through the countryside and down the cliffs if the weather was nice.

Horses would be useful right now, she thought.

Currently, her arm was hooked through Delphine's, and the two girls were giggling as they swayed from side to side to sync their steps as they

walked. Hannah watched, amused, keeping up beside them.

Ezra looked back at the trio and told them in an exasperated tone, “Would you two stop that? You’re slowing us down. Fae are three times faster on foot than we are. Do you want to chance them picking up our scent and catching up with us?”

“Wouldn’t they have done that by now?” Calla asked as she stepped wrong, causing herself and Delphine to lurch clumsily sideways.

“Maybe they burned down with the building,” Delphine added as both girls righted themselves.

“They weren’t nearly as lethal as I thought they would be.” Hannah tilted her head thoughtfully. “Fire magic aside, of course.”

“Well, what else do you expect? They were courtless.”

“How can you tell the difference, anyway?” Hannah asked. “I’m not sure I’ve ever been able to know which fae are courtless and which are just traveling through.”

“Easy.” Delphine clicked her tongue. “Just follow the smell of desperation.”

Gideon laughed a bit. “That’s not too far off. The courtless are always more impulsive because they know their power isn’t going to hold up as well here. Same with how witches are much stronger in the Witch Realms. If the Guild had to constantly defend against the Valkyries outside of the witch territories, who knows if we could continue to hold our own.”

“I love the Valkyries.” Delphine sighed dreamily, and Gideon eyed the siren in curiosity.

“You *would* get along with a Valkyrie.” Ezra rolled his eyes at her before agreeing with his brother. “I can definitely feel the difference in my magic here, but it isn’t as bad as I assumed it would be.”

Hannah tilted her head as she reasoned, “Aren’t you in the Onyx Queen’s army? Don’t her soldiers practice their magic regularly?”

Ezra shook his head. “Gideon is in the Guild. I am not.”

Hannah raised her eyebrows at that bit of information but didn’t pry.

“I need to get back to training,” Calla spoke as she stretched out her limbs, finally unwrapping herself from Delphine. “My body is *definitely* not used to the strain it’s been through in the last two days.”

“Training is such a *bore*,” Delphine huffed. “Remember how our whole first year living together Calliope would get up at the crack of dawn and wake us up with that nonsense? After we so graciously took her in, too. I was

the happiest being alive the day she finally decided to give up scrying.”

Calla elbowed her friend as Hannah gave a small laugh.

“You *were* a bit loud at times, Calla.” Hannah gave her friend a toothy grin, her slightly crooked smile lighting up her whole face as she thought of the memories. “Delphine was always saying she was going to start charging you extra on rent for making her lose out on her beauty sleep.”

“I would’ve, too, but somehow she managed to weasel her way into my cold, aquatic heart.” Delphine said this last part with dramatic flourish as she clutched a hand to the left side of her chest.

“I think if the last forty-eight hours have taught us anything, it’s that I never should have stopped in the first place,” Calla pressed on.

“Isn’t Rouge magic mostly silent?” Ezra asked, confused. “Or does your . . . curse . . . have some sort of unusual effect on that?”

“That, I wouldn’t know. I never use my Siphon abilities.” Calla crossed her arms with forced nonchalance.

“Why don’t you practice your siphoning?” Gideon prodded gently. “It would help you with your control.”

Calla didn’t answer.

“Then how did you manage to constantly wake up your friends by practicing magic?” Ezra asked, filling the silence.

“I wouldn’t say we were truly friends until *after* she stopped waking us up,” Delphine corrected him matter-of-factly.

“I thought we were friends,” Hannah said cheerily as she brushed a piece of lint off her white-linen top.

“That’s because you could be friends with a rock, Hannah.” Delphine sighed. “You’re much too nice.”

Calla ignored them both. “To answer your question: The reason I woke everyone up in the morning that first year was because I was often scrying. Scrying works best at dusk and dawn and if you’ve ever seen a Rouge witch scry—”

“Ah,” Gideon said in quick understanding. “The earthquake effect.”

Hannah giggled.

“One time, she shook the whole apartment and—” Hannah laughed louder in between her words. “And a whole tray of Delphine’s perfumes fell off her vanity and shattered. We had to air out the place for two weeks!”

“We never did see our deposit again.” Delphine sighed mournfully.

“Well, if *someone* didn’t wear perfume that smelled like salt and *fish*,”

Calla accused.

“It did not smell like fish! It was made from a rare seaweed that I grew up with—”

“Fish, Delphine. It smelled like fish.”

Delphine made a vulgar gesture at Calla, who laughed loudly.

Gideon looked amused at the girls’ banter, and even Ezra had a slight smile on his face at Hannah’s giggling.

“Do you not practice your magic, Hannah?” Ezra asked.

“No,” Hannah squeaked out hurriedly. The mood quickly changed, and Gideon gave her an odd look but otherwise didn’t press.

Hannah had not been able to use her magic since she left her coven, but it wasn’t something the blond ever voluntarily talked about. The small witch had hardly divulged many of the details to her friends, but from what Calla had been able to piece together over the years, the reasons involved a sadistic mother and some sort of necromancy. Calla almost shivered.

“Are you not taught about other kinds of magic in the Onyx Realm or something?” Calla questioned, trying to shift the attention away from Hannah as quickly as possible.

“I was,” Gideon inserted, “but our mother had other priorities for Ezra.”

“I don’t think she had any priorities for me, actually.” Ezra spoke in a way that made it seem like he was bored with this particular topic, but Calla thought she heard a touch of hostility. The group walked in a strange silence for a bit, Calla watching the ground, counting each stone she stepped over. She could see Delphine edge closer to her in her peripheral, and when she looked up, her friend was unshouldering the bag of items she had grabbed from their apartment.

“Want me to take that for a bit?” Calla offered.

“Please,” Delphine said gratefully, handing over the bulging sack.

Calla looped the heavy bag over her head and across her chest, surprised at how weighty it was.

“What all did you bring?” Calla asked curiously as she rummaged through the contents.

There were a few spare articles of clothing, as many as Delphine had been able to ball up and stuff on top of the other items. As she dug in farther, she noticed the little box of keepsakes Ezra had found from under her bed, and—

“You grabbed a *sticky bun*?” Calla half shouted in disbelief.

“I’m not sharing that.” Delphine pointed to the sticky bun Calla had

procured, the treat carefully wrapped in thick brown parchment paper.

“Delphine,” Calla said exasperatedly, “we had an entire bundle of fruit in the kitchen and you grabbed *this*?”

Delphine did not look like she could be bothered in the slightest about the sticky bun as she waved a hand at Calla. “Put it away before you accidentally drop it or something.”

“You’re an unbelievable creature,” Ezra said in a way that suggested his words were *not* a compliment.

“Thank you.” Delphine beamed.

“Does this mean we have no other food, then?” Hannah tilted her head at Delphine, looking uncharacteristically disappointed in the siren.

“I just figured *they* would find us food.” The siren thrust her arms in the direction of the Onyx witches.

“And why would you figure that?” Ezra shot at her.

“Aren’t Onyx witches supposed to be warriors or something? Shouldn’t you have basic survival skills?”

“Again, Gideon is a trained warrior, I was—”

“Spoiled? Too prissy to get your hands dirty?” Delphine guessed.

“You mean we have something in common?” Ezra gasped, clutching his chest in mock surprise.

“In Ezra’s defense,” Gideon inserted, ever the peacekeeper, “we were targets when we were younger, and he was not allowed out of the Onyx palace often. Not many opportunities to learn survival skills when you’re stuck in a gilded cage.”

Calla thought about this. She had never been caged in, only the exact opposite—she had always been forced out. Never before had she thought of Ezra as *sheltered*, though.

“So, if you weren’t taught how to survive the outside world, what *were* you taught?” Calla asked.

Ezra gave a tense shrug. “I’m sure I was taught similar things in my schooling that your covens taught you in yours. Gideon’s expanse of knowledge is only more in-depth because of the Guild.”

“All the time you two spent together and none of this ever came up?” Delphine said in a bored tone.

“We were usually too busy winning your rent money to talk about our childhoods,” Ezra retorted.

“We were usually drunk, too,” Calla muttered in agreement, slightly

embarrassed to realize that Delphine was right—how had they not talked about anything deeper than how to get away with their next scam? Calla knew the answer, of course. She didn't exactly let her guard down that easy, and neither did Ezra. She had spent most of their time together so afraid of getting hurt, she never had the guts to tell him how she felt. Looking back, she was almost grateful for what he said that time, drunk in her apartment. Otherwise, she would have made more of a fool of herself.

Calla quickly turned to Gideon, hoping to change the subject before she fell into another Ezra spiral. "Does the Guild teach you about types of magic other than your own? Fae and sirens and . . ."

And Siphons? she finished in her mind.

"Yes. The Guild teaches us not only to recognize the specific abilities different beings can use, but also how to undermine their specific brand of magic. Although, all magic is from the same source, of course—the Gods."

Calla nodded as if she understood, though the truth was, she hadn't a single clue about how other types of magic worked except for the bit of experience she had gotten in the last few hours. Gideon's vast knowledge undoubtedly had helped him against the three fae back at the apartment.

"How long do you think we'll be in the forest?" Hannah interrupted Calla's thoughts.

"Hard to say." Gideon reached up and tugged on one of the dangling spikes in his earlobe. "To us it could be a day or two, but out here? An entire week could go by in that time—"

"Oh my Gods!" Delphine suddenly exclaimed. "What am I going to do about Alex?"

Hannah's expression soured at the name.

"Who in the Hells is Alex?" Ezra asked.

"If you only just remembered them, do they really matter?" Hannah asked innocently, and Calla elbowed the girl gently.

Delphine didn't pay Hannah any mind as she continued. "Alex is my partner. They'll be worried sick if I just disappear."

"Well, we can't do anything about that now, can we?" Ezra looked mildly pleased at the siren's disappointment.

"Can't I send a letter when we reach the next town? Just to tell them—"

"Absolutely not." Gideon shook his head.

"But—"

"No one needs to know where we are going. I'm sure you trust this

person, but one decent bribe from someone looking to find Calliope and we're all screwed. As it is, you're already going to have to use your siren's song on anyone we come across tonight."

"Alex would never betray me. I don't have to tell them where we're going, just that I'll be away—"

"It's too risky," Gideon said firmly.

Calla and Hannah simply watched the two of them volley back and forth, not wanting to get in the middle, though Calla had to admit she understood Gideon's point.

Of course Ezra just had to open his mouth. "I agree with Gideon, if anyone cares about my opinion."

"We don't," the three girls said in unison.

Ezra crossed his arms with a grunt as Gideon coughed to cover a laugh before clearing his throat and reiterating, "I'm sorry, Delphine, but you can't risk telling anything to anyone."

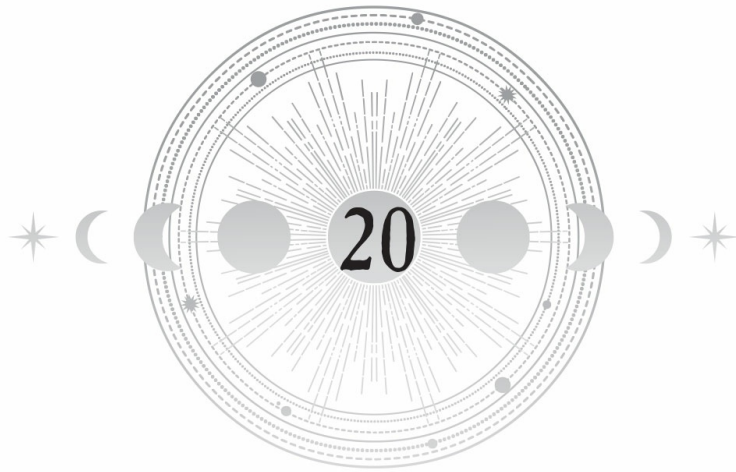
"*Fine.*" Delphine begrudgingly complied, and they all began walking once more.

"We are going to have to stop for water soon," Calla said softly, the tension between everyone suddenly thick and weird.

Gideon turned to her. "Like I was saying before, we can stop somewhere in the next town, but only if Delphine is willing to use her abilities to make sure whoever serves us doesn't remember that we've been there."

"Easily done," Delphine said in a flat, unconcerned tone.

Gideon gave a nod in thanks, though Delphine didn't bother acknowledging the gesture. Calla wondered how long the siren would stew over being told no. Calla sighed. At this rate, she wondered what was more dangerous: the deadly forest or this group being forced to spend the next few days together.



What in the Hells is happening now?” Caspian said, his voice saturated with annoyance.

The two men had already stumbled into a pit that had been conveniently hidden beneath cherry blossom petals, chased by angry spring pixies (out of the previously mentioned pit), *and* gotten chased by a tree nymph.

The last part Caspian hadn’t minded quite as much. At least not as much as he had minded the pixies, who had a nasty habit of biting. And not in the fun way.

“It looks like it’s changing seasons again,” Kestrel said, his tone equally as frustrated.

The two witches watched as the pink-and-white petals shriveled to ash and blew away. Shadows scrolled over their faces as the trees grew thicker, and taller, their limbs twisting together. The trees were now straight out of nightmares; black bark oozed with midnight liquid as the gnarled limbs braided themselves into the air. The sun had disappeared, causing everything to be drenched in an eerie shade of blue. The air no longer smelled like blossoms but instead like dirt and something else dangerously too close to the scent of dark magic.

Cass noticed the air around them shimmer, almost like the reflection of water. Glamour.

That’s how this forest changed, Caspian knew. Still, he had never seen

glamour this powerful up close before—not even Gideon’s carefully practiced abilities were this strong—and one second the air before him had been shimmering and the next he couldn’t quite remember what it looked like to see the forest change before his eyes at all.

Cass suddenly stumbled back as a large root from one of the trees started crawling along the ground—plunging itself into the earth like a needle. He gulped.

“What in the Hells are these?” Caspian asked.

“Demon’s oak,” Kestrel said, almost breathlessly.

Cass looked over at his commander incredulously. It almost sounded as if he were frightened. Almost.

“Don’t touch the sap,” Kestrel demanded.

Cass didn’t need to be told twice. He looked ahead of them, the ground covered in tangles of tree roots.

“It’s going to take forever to get out of here. How much farther to the Valkyrie nest, do you think?”

“Another few hours,” Kestrel said with a grunt as he gracefully leaped over a pile of roots. Caspian followed, not quite as graceful.

“The nest is rumored to be in the northwest part of the forest—the compass should lead us straight through pretty efficiently. But we need to hurry,” Kestrel said, his voice strained with concern, “Demon’s oak tends to attract—”

A palpable hiss reverberated through the air, cutting off Kestrel’s sentence and causing Caspian’s skin to crawl with a shiver. A branch above them creaked with weight as a dark serpent-like figure unraveled itself down from the tree ahead of them.

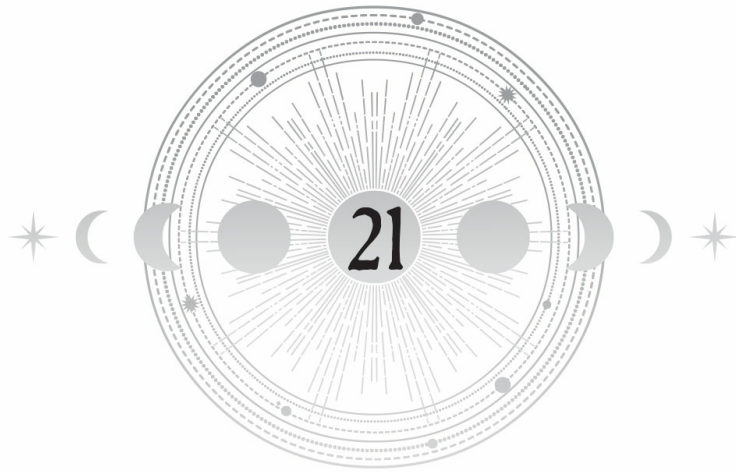
“Viperidae,” Kestrel breathed.

The two witches didn’t move for a moment, watching as the gray-skinned beast appeared in their view.

Caspian held his breath.

The creature’s blistered gray lips twisted into an unnerving smile, its yellow-green eyes lighting up with desire. The viperidae’s needlelike fangs poked out of its gums in all directions as it flicked its tongue, and Kestrel didn’t move his eyes from the beast for a second.

“Run.”



So. Delphine has a lover?”

Calla choked on the water she was drinking.

She was standing alone in the corner of the small tavern, leaving the others to eat their fruit and pastries. It was a few hours after dusk, and an hour ago Calla hadn’t been convinced anything would be open. Luckily, they stumbled across this place, its sconces lit outside to indicate they were still serving, and Calla had been incredibly grateful to the Gods for allowing them this one stroke of luck tonight. The owner, an older elf with dark hair and kind brown eyes, lived above the café space, allowing him to keep the place open later than most shopkeepers would.

Calla was still sputtering water as she turned to Gideon from the window she had been looking out of in her little corner of the shop. The elder prince had crept up behind her, so close that his tall frame seemed to tower above her more than usual. She leaned back into the wall, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, and pulled his cloak tighter around her shoulders.

“Why? Were you interested?”

He chuckled, his muscular chest shaking with the movement. Calla looked away from him. He was much too close to her. So close that she could clearly pick up the same scent of him that faintly clung to his cloak. He smelled like cedar and citrus—so different from Ezra’s scent of spice.

Calla felt her cheeks burn. She shouldn’t be noticing either of their scents.

What was going on with her lately?

“No,” he continued softly, an easy smile playing on his lips, “I’m not interested in Delphine.”

Because you’re in love with someone else? she wondered, thinking of what Ezra had implied earlier in the night about Gideon’s commander.

Is that what you tell people, Gideon? the younger prince had said.

“I just thought, maybe, Hannah . . .”

Ah. Calla smiled sadly at him. “It’s complicated.” She shrugged.

“Delphine is . . . Delphine. I don’t think she’s ever noticed Hannah’s feelings—despite how obvious they may be to the rest of us.”

“And this Alex person?”

Calla shrugged again. “Delphine has a bad past, and I think to her Alex is easy. Uncomplicated,” she whispered in a low voice, looking over his shoulder to make sure the rest of the group couldn’t hear what she was saying. This was Delphine’s business to tell, not hers. Still, she said, “I don’t think she’s ever been able to see what’s blatantly obvious.”

Gideon stared at her silently for a moment, his eyes liquid silver. “And what about you?”

“What about me?” Calla asked warily.

“Do *you* see what’s blatantly obvious?”

She peered up at him in puzzlement. She wasn’t sure what he meant until he nodded his chin behind him—toward where his brother stood near the other girls. She lifted herself onto the balls of her feet to peek over his shoulder.

Ezra was staring directly at her. She quickly ducked back down.

“I’m not sure what you mean,” she said in a rush.

“I think you know exactly what I mean.”

“He betrayed me.”

“I know,” he said easily. Reassuringly.

“He told me I would ruin his image back home, and that was *before* he knew I was a Siphon. Imagine how true that sentiment is now.” She looked away, twisting her mouth a bit.

“Calliope, being a Siphon doesn’t make you inherently bad. It’s completely random.”

“Well, it happened to *me*.” She clenched her jaw. “And don’t try to flip this conversation around. Ezra sold me out to Myrea and gave me a Witch’s Die. If you’re trying to get me to forgive him out of some brotherly

obligation, I wouldn't waste your time."

"I don't think you should forgive him, if you don't want to," he said seriously, though his eyes softened a bit. "I just think you should know that some of his decisions have nothing to do with *you* or what you mean to him. Though I do admire your and the siren's dedication to maintaining the desire to murder my brother. I like a group that's goal-oriented."

Calla swallowed. "I think his decisions have made it quite clear that I don't mean anything to him."

Gideon tilted his head as if he didn't believe her words for a second, but Calla was done with this conversation. When she stepped out around him to go back to the others, Ezra was still staring in their direction, but as soon as she met his gaze, he looked away.

"Let's get going," Gideon told them all, walking past them to go and thank the elderly elf. Gideon's manners were impeccable as usual. Unlike . . .

Her eyes slid to Ezra, who was still several feet across the room with the other girls, his arms crossed.

I just think you should know that some of his decisions have nothing to do with you or what you mean to him.

Gideon was wrong. If she had meant anything at all to Ezra, he never would have said those things that night in her apartment—or given her that die.

Right?

Ezra caught her gaze again, though he looked away first this time. Calla knew she had to talk to him soon; maybe when they reached the forest and camped for the night. It was time they both got closure. Once and for all.

She sighed as she made her way to where the girls were chatting quietly to each other. She had a feeling facing the Neverending Forest was going to be easier than talking to Ezra about anything remotely close to the subject of *feelings*.

"What are you thinking about?" Delphine asked her when she didn't join their conversation.

"I'm thinking about what it would be like to meet a dragon," she said dryly.

"What?" Delphine asked with a shocked laugh. Hannah looked wary.

Calla chuckled back. "Actually, I was thinking about talking to Ezra. Which, honestly, seems just as awful." Her laughter died for a moment as she took a deep breath. "I just need to talk about . . . about everything that's

happened. I need to . . . move on. Especially if we're going to have to continue to be around each other. I can't hold a grudge forever."

"Don't worry, I can hold it for you." Delphine gave her a small shrug of understanding, and Hannah nodded in loyal agreement.

Calla smiled at them both. Her girls.

Before she could say anything else, Gideon announced, "It's time to go. Delphine, if you wouldn't mind . . . taking care of things."

Delphine nodded in understanding and, with one last comforting look at Calla, turned a beaming smile on the shopkeeper. The rest of them followed Gideon out the back of the small café into the cold night to let Delphine work her magic. The moment they stepped outside they could hear the sweet melody of her lyrics, lamenting to the shopkeeper that they were never here and that he closed up early because he had a headache. The proximity to Delphine as she worked meant Calla could feel the warmth of the song's magic, though it wasn't being directed at her. It felt familiar and comforting. Like home.

When the siren finally rejoined them, the five of them quickly fell back into an easy, silent rhythm toward their destination. Calla let herself trail behind and turned her face up to the stars. She closed her eyes for a brief second and let the cool air caress her skin as she sent a wish to the Gods.

Let me choose my own fate. Or ruin myself trying.



Calla and the rest of the group were all sitting on the ground munching on the various fruits Gideon had bought them from a nearby village earlier in the morning. They had managed to make it all the way to the border the night before and set up haphazard pallets of clothes on the ground outside the small village to sleep on. Not that there had been much time to get sleep before dawn broke and they had to change into fresh clothes and prepare to be on their feet for the rest of the day. Calla had been more than ecstatic to take off the constricting purple ensemble and change into the extra clothes Delphine had packed for her. Unfortunately, the change of clothes didn't come with a change of shoes, and she was dreading having to walk in the uncomfortable lavender slippers again. It had taken her feet all night to heal the blisters from yesterday's trek.

The small village they found was in the northwest corner of Estrella, only a few miles from the Rouge Realm border and barely a small sprint from entering the southern territory of the Neverending Forest. Calla had never been this close to the Neverending Forest in her life, and she was grateful. The magic that resided around the forest was a completely different kind of beast than the magic used throughout the rest of Estrella. The buildings here were covered in thick fae glammers, making it rather disorienting to look around. She noticed there were rowan and elderberries strung in garlands on almost every entryway they passed. The berries were used for protection,

according to Gideon, to keep the villagers safe from certain beings or creatures that might wander their way out of the forest. Gideon had stolen quite a few pieces of these garlands as they passed through, giving strands of them out to each of the girls to wrap around their wrists. Delphine had noted with delight that the bracelet complemented her outfit.

“Just in case,” Gideon had assured Calla last night as he fastened the strands around her wrist.

Calla now looked down at the protective strand of dried berries, her skin underneath stained slightly pink from sleeping with it on all night.

“We need to refill the canteens before we set off,” Ezra observed.

Calla glanced back up to see the Onyx witch turning over an empty bottle.

“We can go,” Delphine volunteered, a bit too quickly to pass off as nonchalant as she shot a loaded look to Hannah in insistence. Ezra narrowed his eyes at Delphine’s sudden agreeability.

“What—” Hannah started asking the siren in confusion before noticing Delph’s imploring expression. Delphine nodded not-so-obviously in Calla’s direction, and Hannah’s eyes widened in understanding.

The siren cleared her throat. “We’ll go refill the bottles. We may need Gideon’s help to carry them all back, though.”

Subtle. Calla rolled her eyes.

The other girls looked at where Gideon was sitting, one of his arms propped up on a bent knee, the other polishing an apple on his black leather chest plate. He finally noticed their stare mid-bite. He raised a brow at them, but when they didn’t budge, he sighed.

“All right,” he allowed, getting to his feet gracefully. “I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to see if any of the shops have extra supplies anyway.”

Gideon didn’t look at Calla or his brother as he followed the two girls who were speeding away from their little camp toward the town. Calla fidgeted with her bracelet while she found the courage to face Ezra. Never had someone muddled up her feelings more, and Calla rallied every drop of confidence she had in her to look him dead in the eye.

“We need to talk.”

He looked at her evenly, as if he had been waiting for her to say those words forever. “Yes.”

“Ezra . . .” she spoke quietly. “I don’t want to keep fighting like this. I just want . . .” She trailed off. Truthfully, she didn’t know what she wanted.

Closure? An apology?

Him?

“Everything that’s happened,” he finally spoke, slowly, deliberately, “is my fault.” Calla’s mouth fell open a bit. “You don’t have to look so shocked. I’m well aware of the way I treated you,” he said, looking down at his hands for a split second before peering back up at her with his midnight eyes. “You have to understand, the things I said to you I didn’t mean. I didn’t *want*—”

“Then why would you say them?” Her tone was imbued with more anger than she intended. But she *was* still angry. It wasn’t just the fact that he had told her those awful things; she was angry because he was claiming he hadn’t *meant* any of them. He ruined whatever it was they had over words he didn’t mean. That made her *furious*.

“I knew you were going to hate me for what I had to do.” His eyes bored into hers with a shocking intensity as he spoke. “But I had no idea you had so much more at stake, Calla. You have to believe me.”

“I don’t have to believe anything you ever say to me again. I don’t *know* you. Everything that has ever happened between us was all a lie.” She swallowed, trying hard not to let the hurt bleed into her voice.

“Of course you know me,” he pleaded. “I know how it looks. My motivations for getting close to you weren’t always good, I get it, but those last weeks, Calla? They were *real*. *We* were real.”

She could feel her armor start to crack at the raw emotion in his voice, emotion he had never once shown her in all the time she had known him. She clenched her fists. “Then why? Why would you go through with it? Why would you say those things and give me that die?”

“I would do anything for my brother.” Ezra swallowed. “He’s the only person who has ever taken care of me.” He shook his head with a bitter laugh. “My mother doesn’t give a shit about anyone but herself and her own agenda. Everything Gideon has ever done is in spite of her. He knows the repercussions the Fates’ War will have on the Witch Realms, and if he can’t stop it from happening, he at least wants to save as many people as he can. He’s out here risking *everything*, and she gets to sit on her throne and do nothing to help. *She*’s not going to save Gideon if he’s a Blood Warrior, but *I* will do *anything* to save him. Even if the bastard doesn’t think he needs it.”

Calla wasn’t necessarily shocked to hear that the Onyx Queen was that selfish—she had just enough experience around Myrea to know what the Witch Queens were like. She *was* a bit shocked that Gideon was putting

himself through all this just to spare the Realms any grief, though maybe that was because she was so used to those in power treating everyone like pawns.

“What does your relationship with your mother and Gideon have to do with me?”

“I would do anything for Gideon,” he repeated again. “Including putting up with my mother’s antics to keep her from paying too close attention to him. If I didn’t care about Gid, I would’ve left years ago. But that would leave all her focus on him, her golden child, and there’s no way he would’ve made it this far without her finding out about his Rolls of Fate if that were the case.”

“So . . .” she prompted again, still not fully understanding what he was getting at yet.

“So, that means going along with whatever she asks of me. Including completing all of my Rolls of Fate to ‘ensure my loyalty.’”

Calla furrowed her brow. “But I’ve seen your rolls before. You only have five.”

“I’ve faked having my Final Roll for the last three years.”

Calla balked at his claim. “But *how*? Whenever a queen asks a witch with completed rolls to do something—” Calla broke off and stared at him in horror.

“Exactly.” Ezra’s voice dipped low. “I truly didn’t have a choice, Calla. It was either oblige my mother’s request to help Myrea or expose the truth about my rolls.”

Calla stared at him in silence. Shock. Her resolve to hate him for what he had done breaking down after that one revelation.

Ezra’s eyes were pleading. “I didn’t protest the request as much as I should have. I’ll admit that. But the Rouge Queen offered me a great deal of money to complete the task. Enough money for us to survive on our own for *years* if Gideon’s spell goes wrong and we have to run. If I had tried to take that kind of money from my mother, she would have been suspicious. I thought the Gods were finally granting me a stroke of luck. I thought if I could just find you and give you the die everything would be solved. But then I met you.”

Calla closed her eyes for a moment. It was too much. He took a step toward her. He was close enough that if she reached out she’d be able to touch him. Close enough that she could smell the familiar spice of his scent, feel his magic’s warmth with her own.

“You weren’t the foolish one, Calla,” he whispered. “I should have just given you the damn die and left.”

Those last words scorched through her, and she realized that he was absolutely right.

“Yes,” she told him, the word coming out almost breathless.

“Yes what?” he implored.

“Yes, you *should* have just given me the damn die and left,” she agreed, heat lacing through her voice as she turned his words over in her mind.

“Instead, you pretended to care for me and then *ripped it away*. Just giving me the die would’ve been less cruel.”

“*Calla*,” he said, desperate.

“You think this is just about the die, Ezra.” She shook her head. “But it isn’t. Something was broken here before you handed me that die, and we both know it.”

“I told you, I didn’t mean what I said that night. It was a bluff. I needed you to hate me, to not want to ever seek me out again, in case you tried to ask around about me and got tangled up in more of my mess. It was a ridiculous lie.”

“*Exactly*.” She thrust her palms into his chest, cutting off his excuses and forcing him to take a small step back. “You didn’t mean *any of it*. You’re claiming that night you were just trying to make me hate you, but that doesn’t change the fact that you led me on all this time. Our whole relationship was based on a lie.”

He looked at her as if he was shocked by her outburst, and she didn’t know why, but his surprise annoyed her. As if he assumed she would never reach a breaking point. She stared back at him, and for a split second, she thought he was going to say something else. Perhaps tell her that she was wrong—that he hadn’t been leading her on, that the moments that had felt so real to her had been real for him too and not just a part of his plan—but in the next moment the emotion wiped from his face and he clenched his jaw. Calla’s chest tightened. She had seen him go through these motions many times before—right before he revealed his hand and stripped his opponent of every last bit of hope.

“Is this about my brother?”

Calla blanched, her arms dropping to her sides. “Is *what* about your brother?”

“The fact that you so badly want to believe that I never cared for you.

Would it be easier for you to move on if you believed that? Is that it? Gideon will break your heart in two minutes.”

“*Gods*. I have never met anyone with so much *nerve*,” she hissed. “How I feel about what has happened between us has everything to do with the decisions *you* made and nothing to do with anything else. *You broke my trust*. You don’t get to just have it back.”

“But *him* you’re willing to trust? If you think him sharing this spell with you will somehow bond the two of you—think again. Much stronger people than you have fallen for him and gotten trampled in the process.”

“*Fallen for him?*” she practically screeched. “I’ve known him for barely more than a *day*, Ezra! Gideon needs me for the spell, and *I* need the spell to use for *myself*. We have a mutual goal. Unlike *you*, Gideon has spelled out his exact intentions from the beginning. Do not project whatever issues you’re harboring against your brother onto me.”

“Don’t think I didn’t notice that within hours of you and Gideon meeting, he already knew about your rolls *and* that you’re a Siphon. You never once showed me any of that.”

“Again—because I didn’t *trust you*.” She threw her hands up at him. “Revealing that I’m a Siphon to the wrong people can get me *killed*, Ezra, do you understand that? And I was right not to trust you considering you were here on behalf of Myrea in the first place!”

“But you trusted *him* enough to come along on this quest? After one conversation? Even if he’s using you?” Calla saw something in Ezra’s eyes when he spoke about her trusting Gideon that she had never seen there before.

“He laid all his cards on the table the second we met,” she asserted. “If he’s using me, I’m using him right back. We’re both on the same path, Ezra.”

“Don’t,” Ezra said quietly. “Don’t act like you know what he’s going through better than me.”

“Maybe I don’t. What I do know is you have no room to talk about using people or breaking people’s hearts.”

Ezra looked at her, devastated. “Calla.”

“No. You don’t get to look at me like that. Not after what you just accused me of.”

He closed his eyes. “I always say the wrong things to you, don’t I?”

She didn’t answer.

“I don’t want it to end like this.” He opened his eyes again. “I don’t want

it to end.”

When she still didn’t respond, he turned from her and stalked toward the forest. Calla wrapped her arms over her chest as she watched him leave. Every time they talked, they always ended up in the exact same spot that they began.

I don’t want it to end like this.

Neither did she, but she had a feeling their destiny had always been out of their hands.

“Calliope?” a deep voice sounded from behind her. She swiped at her eyes before spinning around to face Gideon. The girls were nowhere to be seen.

“What?” she asked harshly. Too harshly. No matter that there was nothing going on between her and Gideon, Calla couldn’t help but feel extra wary of him.

He ticked a perfect blue brow at her in concern. “Are you all right?”

“Ezra and I talked, and it went as it usually does. Now if everyone with the last name Black could leave me the Hells out of their family problems, that would be great.”

She made to stomp off, but he sidestepped in front of her.

“Dear Gods, what did he say to you?”

“He wants to blame everyone but himself for losing my trust.” She shook her head in frustration. “But even if the only reason you stepped in back at the auction was because you need my help for your own benefit, at least *you* warned me of that from the beginning.”

“I’ve told you before. I would have helped you either way. But it doesn’t surprise me that Ezra can’t understand holding back does more harm than good. Because holding back with our mother is the only way to have any self-preservation. Regardless, both of you were going to realize sooner or later that you are on different pages.”

“How do *you* know what pages we are on? It isn’t like you know me!” she snapped at him defensively.

“I don’t have to have known you very long to know that *Ezra* thinks he needs to be the one who saves everyone,” Gideon spoke clearly. “And that you do not need saving.”

“Maybe I do,” she whispered, her fire slowly draining from her.

“No,” he said resolutely. “What you need is to realize what you are capable of. You may need help sometimes, but you do not need anyone to

rescue you. Fate does not choose the weak. Fate chooses the ready.”

“He just . . . makes me feel disoriented sometimes,” she whispered. “It’s like I can’t let go of who I thought he was. Or who I thought I was with him.”

“Sometimes we hold on to the past if we think someone might not be our future.”

Her breath caught as she stared back up at him. His silver eyes were soft, shining with understanding, and Calla knew what Ezra had meant about Gideon.

Much stronger people than you have fallen for him. . . .

She stepped away from him.

Gideon was like a beautiful poison. He was intriguing and intoxicating, but he was also inexplicably connected to her in their ambiguous fate, and it unsettled her. Calla had a feeling if she wasn’t careful with *this* prince, her heart would be more than trampled in the end.

“Where are Hannah and Delphine?” she finally asked, wanting to put the last ten minutes completely behind her.

He hooked his thumb over his shoulder and explained, “They paid one of the pixie children to braid flowers into their hair.”

She gave an affectionate roll of her eyes and gazed past him, watching as the girls’ figures finally came into view over his shoulder.

“Where did Ezra go?” Gideon asked, looking around in alarm.

Calla shrugged noncommittally and pointed toward the forest.

“Somewhere in that direction.”

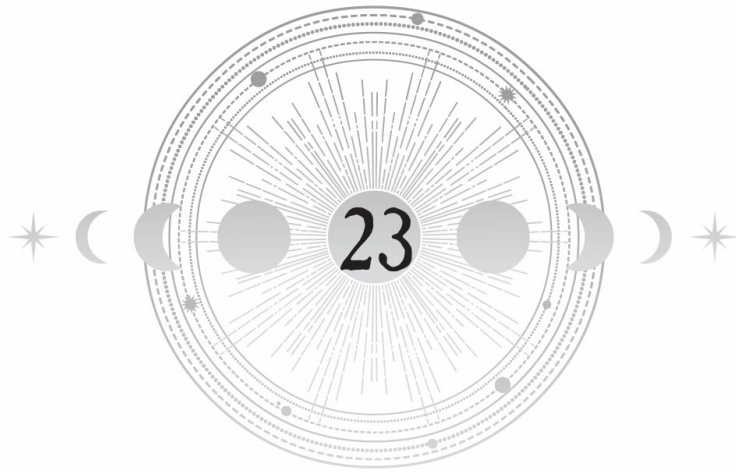
Gideon raised his brows. “He better not have gone into the forest without —”

“Aaghhhh!”

Calla whipped toward the scream. Gideon cursed colorfully.

Another cry echoed from the same direction, and Calla and Gideon sprang into action. They quickly grabbed their few remaining belongings and sprinted toward the Neverending Forest. The other two girls followed closely behind.

Calla just hoped they wouldn’t be too late.



Caspian let out another yell of pain as one of the demon oak's razor-sharp branches sliced through his shirt and into the skin of his bicep.

The viperidae was hot on their heels, its hisses slithering through the air around them as he and Kestrel flew through the forest. The commander was only a few yards away, maneuvering around the branches with such grace he made Cass seem like a young, untrained whelp. The other man's centuries of experience clearly gave him some nice advantages—ones Cass would kill for right about now.

Cass focused ahead of him again, reaching out an arm and blasting a current of air under his feet to launch himself over a particularly thick branch that had snaked its way into his path. He glanced behind him to gauge how much the viperidae was gaining on him, catching a glimpse of Kestrel's long white hair billowing in his periphery. When Caspian turned back around—he smacked directly into a tree.

A tree that had definitely *not* been there two seconds ago.

"Aaghhhh!" Caspian screamed as he ricocheted off the trunk of the tree, his nose spraying blood. A high-pitched cackling came from behind. He whipped around to find he was trapped by the viperidae. He heard Kestrel shout his name, but Caspian didn't look away from the monstrous creature licking its lips in anticipation for its next meal. Cass dropped his hand from his nose, blood running down his square chin as he bared his teeth at the

beast.

“Handssssome littleee witchhhh. You will be tasssssty,” the viperidae hissed at him.

“Try me!” Cass yelled at the creature before leaning back against the rock-hard trunk and propelling both legs into the viperidae’s stomach. The beast shrieked as it was thrown back—just far enough for Caspian to hit the ground again and move from in front of the tree. The beast quickly recovered, lurching forward and swiping a gray clawed hand across Caspian’s chest. The yellowish talons ripped through his shirt and into his skin, and he yelled in pain.

“Hey!” Kestrel called from somewhere behind the creature.

The viperidae whipped around with another hiss, the muscles in its serpent tail contracting as it pushed its body around to tower above Kestrel. While the beast was distracted, Caspian peered down to see the damage. Four slashes went right through his Harpy falcon tattoo, marring the image of the avian creature almost beyond recognition. The tattoo was a symbol of his rank in the Guild, a mark given to every beta by their commander. Kestrel had chosen the Harpy falcon for theirs—giant raptor-like birds with feathers black as ink and razor-like talons. The creatures were ancient and long believed to be extinct, but they represented freedom and strength.

Caspian frowned at the sight of his hard-earned rank sliced to shreds. He looked toward the creature, who was slithering away and toward his commander. The other witch’s white hair whipped in the wind as he summoned a twister, distracting the viperidae just long enough for Cass to unsheathe a blade from his belt. As Cass tried to sneak closer to the serpent-like beast, its tail whipped out and slammed straight into the beta’s stomach, knocking him back a few feet.

As the creature turned to Kestrel and whipped out its tail again, the commander dodged and pulled out his own blade. With an expert throw, Kestrel launched the knife and Caspian watched the blade sink to the hilt in the creature’s tail, eliciting a monstrous shrill from its mouth. Cass got to his feet, ready to assist, but just before he could take another step, his entire body grew heavy.

He looked down at himself, his vision blurring and his movements slow as everything became foggy. Someone yelled something in the distance, and Cass lifted his head, looking for the speaker.

“Caspian! *What are you . . . ?*” the familiar witch a few yards away was

shouting, but his voice was trailing off. It sounded as if the speaker were underwater, and Caspian couldn't quite make out the rest of the words. He tried taking another step forward, but his entire body listed to the side, and as he fell he heard his name being shouted once more.

He slumped to the ground, hitting the forest floor with a heavy *thump* as everything disappeared.



Gideon spotted him before the girls did, standing several yards from the edge of the forest, body taut with alertness.

"Ezra!" Gideon shouted.

Ezra glanced toward his brother and hurried them over with a wave of his hand.

"Did you hear that?" he questioned the group as they approached, cocking his head toward the forest.

"Where *is* it coming from?" Hannah asked curiously. "I feel like I could hear it from five different directions."

"Somewhere in there." Gideon lifted his chin toward the forest. "With the Neverending Forest, you never know if it's two feet in front of you or a mile away."

"How is it you know so much about the Neverending Forest?" Delphine asked.

Calla looked at him curiously. "You do always speak as if you've been in the forest before."

"Because I have. Once."

She waited for him to elaborate. When he didn't, she reluctantly dropped it and filed the information away for later.

Gideon was quick to change the subject, looking to Delphine. "Ready to get to work?"

Delphine dipped her chin at him. "I may be a little rusty, but I'm ready as I'll ever be."

Gideon nodded at her. "Let's just hope we can find Kestrel and Caspian and avoid whatever was causing that screaming."

The others agreed and the entire group moved to the edge of the forest, standing in a line shoulder to shoulder, Calla between Ezra and Gideon. She resisted the familiar urge to reach out and clasp on to Ezra's hand.

The forest in front of her seemed to buzz with electricity, causing a shiver to run down her spine. Though it looked like an ordinary forest, Calla knew enough of the stories to know it was anything but. Calla looked toward Delphine and Hannah, and the siren nodded back to her, but Hannah's eyes never left Delphine.

Gideon glanced down at Calla for a long second before finally announcing, "This is it."

The five of them stepped through.



Stepping into the forest was a disorienting experience.

It felt as if they passed through a thin curtain of gelatin. One moment Calla was staring at just another mundane forest, and the next they were plunged into pitch-black. It had taken a few moments for Calla's eyes to adjust, and she had clenched her hands into fists until they hurt, but when Calla could finally see again, she slowly turned, taking in her new surroundings.

The clearing they had just come from was nowhere to be seen, the small village they had camped near no longer in the distance. Instead, they were surrounded by hulking black trees, glistening with dark sap, their branches jutting out like razor-sharp needles. They all twisted together to create a haunting canopy that stretched high above them and blocked out any possible light from the sun.

"What are these?" Calla asked breathlessly, still hardly able to believe her eyes.

"I'm not sure. I've never seen trees like this," Gideon answered.

"I thought you said you've been here before?" she asked, her eyes following the sound of his voice to find his figure in the dark.

"I have, but the Neverending Forest is constantly changing. One moment you may be surrounded by a forest in the middle of spring and the next you could be freezing to death in a barren wasteland. That's why we must use magic to make our way through. If we left it up to the forest, it would lead us in circles until we starved to death, or worse—became something else's meal."

Hannah shivered and huddled closer to Delphine, who had donned the persona of being relatively unbothered, though Calla could tell something

about her friend was off. Calla herself was annoyed, crossing her arms as she said, “Then how are we supposed to find a way to the Witch Eater? I was under the impression you knew where we needed to go.”

“I do know where we need to go,” he told her patiently. “The Witch Eater’s cottage is between the Siren’s Sea and the Faery Valley. The forest may try to lead you in circles, but there *is* a beginning and end—no matter how hard the glamour tries to hide it. To you, we are walking for miles and miles with no end in sight, but to those who are able to see through glamour”—he tilted his head slightly at Delphine—“or to those with enchanted artifacts, there is a clear path to the places one needs to go. Everything in the forest is exactly where it has always been. Whether you can see it or not is the issue.”

“Does that mean Delphine isn’t seeing what we are seeing?” Hannah questioned.

“You mean, am I seeing the trees straight out of my nightmares?” Delphine asked rhetorically. “Yes, unfortunately, I do see them. But it’s almost as if they are transparent, like I could pass my hand right through them.”

“Perfect,” Gideon commended. “That means you can find where the trees don’t want us to go.”

“Do you know your way home from here?” Ezra asked Delphine nonchalantly.

Delphine’s silver eyes turned to molten steel for a moment as she spoke. “Yes.”

“Good,” Gideon commented. “Siren’s Sea is exactly the direction we need to head in.”

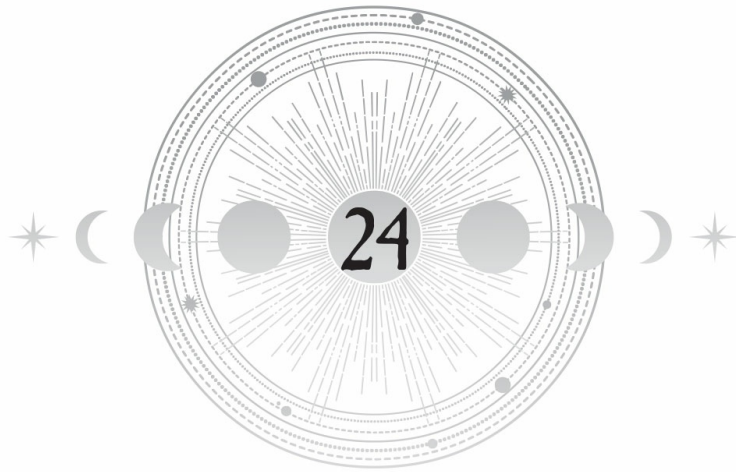
Delphine nodded nonchalantly as she slowly turned in a circle until she assessed the exact direction they needed to walk. She pointed in the distance off to Calla’s right, and the group followed, falling into the walking rhythm that was quickly becoming familiar.

Calla tugged a bit at the hem of her long-sleeved gray shirt as she walked. It was the only article of clothing Delphine had grabbed that was actually Calla’s, and as she moved, it slowly rode up in the back, showing off an uncomfortable amount of her bottom in the too-formfitting leather pants she was currently poured into. The pants were Delphine’s, and Calla was lucky she got them over her hips at all, hips that were much curvier than the siren’s and hadn’t allowed for the pants to be buttoned. She needed to remember to

scold Delph for this later.

Calla was still looking down and fidgeting with her hem when Delphine abruptly called out, “Calla! *Don’t step there—*”

Ezra and Gideon moved at the same time. Ezra lunged for her, trying to push her out of the way, but it was Gideon who made it to her first. He quickly wrapped an arm around her waist as she took another step forward and something snapped beneath her foot. Calla hardly had time to blink before she and the elder prince were suddenly scooped up and flung into the air.



Calla and Gideon were trapped in a net hanging from a tree.

“What just happened?” Calla’s stomach was still flipping a bit from being abruptly shot into the air, her limbs completely tangled up with Gideon’s. And her pants were still unbuttoned.

“Some sort of trap,” Gideon explained as he fumbled around in the net to get himself into a better position.

“Why would you get yourself caught up here with me?” Calla questioned, not ungratefully.

“Figured if we got stuck up here together at least you’d have someone to entertain you.” Gideon winced as he finally got himself settled. “But also, *I* have a knife,” he continued.

Ezra was cursing below and the girls were shouting at him to do something useful, but Gideon already had his dagger unsheathed from his belt. The elder prince poised himself to reach up and saw the knife through the rope, when a strange, husky voice suddenly called out to them.

“I wouldn’t cut that if I were you, handsome.”

Gideon froze.

Calla wiggled herself around to peer through one of the holes in the net to get a better look at whoever was speaking.

“This isn’t good,” Gideon muttered next to her.

It was a person, about Ezra’s height, and though Calla *could* make out

their silhouette, there was one striking detail to note—they were made completely of wind and leaves.

An air sylph.

“And why not?” Delphine’s tone was haughty.

“It seems your friends have gotten into an ogre trap, and cutting that rope would release the net’s tracking spores all over them. So, if you all would like to be hunted down until the ogre finds its meal—be my guest.”

The figure was continuously in motion, wind and leaves swirling through their body as they spoke. Their facial features were blank, but Calla could swear the sylph was grinning. She knew enough about sylphs to know they only ever showed themselves in situations when they had something to gain. Gideon was right, this wasn’t good.

“What do you want, ventus?” Delphine asked, calling the sylph by their name in her first language.

The sylph laughed. “I thought I might offer my help—for a simple trade.”

Calla glanced to Gideon, who shared a look of uncertainty. They had maneuvered into a sitting position side by side. Calla could feel the entire length of Gideon’s body along her own. She was trying hard to ignore how her heart was erratically beating in her chest, hoping he couldn’t somehow feel it thundering next to him.

“What kind of trade?” Delphine crossed her arms skeptically.

“Something shiny caught my eye when I was passing through.” The sylph turned toward Ezra and pointed at the dagger on the witch’s hip. “*That.*”

The blade of Ezra’s dagger was made of glittering steel, its gilded hilt encrusted with diamond and onyx jewels that circled a larger heart-shaped ruby in the middle. Calla had held that dagger in her hand once and knew the thrill of wielding its heavy weight. Knew how it felt when it seemed to pulse as if it had its own heartbeat. Heart Reaver.

“No,” Ezra said firmly.

Calla knew the dagger was special. Just like she knew her ire and the indignant sound that came from the back of her throat had more to do with their recent fight than him refusing to give up the knife. Still, she didn’t mind taking the opportunity to shout a curse at him, but just as she leaned forward, Gideon reached out and squeezed her knee. She looked to the elder prince, and he shook his head solemnly.

“That dagger is the only possession Ezra has ever cared for.”

“Gideon, I don’t mean to sound unreasonable,” Calla implored, “but we

are hanging from a tree, in a trap set by an *ogre*. If he doesn't give up that stupid knife, what are we going to do?"

"It's more than a stupid knife," Gideon corrected her. "And I guarantee the sylph sees that. They'll offer a more painful alternative, I'm sure."

"If you refuse to give up the item, I'd be willing to help if you played a game with me," the sylph offered.

Calla glanced back to Gideon, and he gave her a polite grin. She huffed.

Ezra crossed his arms in a stance that matched Delphine's. "What's the game?"

The sylph grinned, and Delphine turned to Ezra with a groan. "Are you insane? The first rule of dealing with any kind of being descended from the fae—don't play games with them!"

"What other choice do we have?" Ezra gritted back.

"They, quite literally, gave you another choice," Delphine deadpanned.

"Don't worry, siren, the game won't do any harm to anyone. Physically, at least." The sylph laughed. "You may want to decide soon, though, because every second that goes by, your friends get closer to being impaled."

"*What?*" all of them exclaimed at once.

To drive the sylph's threat home, a sharp black branch shot through the net at lightning speed just over Calla's left shoulder. She screamed.

"What the Hells?!" Ezra seethed, his tone hostile. Hannah took a small step closer to Delphine as she gaped up at the net.

"Well, what's your decision?" the sylph asked patiently.

"How do you play?" Ezra snarled just as Calla saw another needlelike branch rise on her right. She gave a half screech of warning as she yanked Gideon's head out of the way by the only thing she could think to grasp on to in time—his hair. A split second later, the spear shot through the net.

"Hells," Gideon cursed as he watched the branch shoot clean through the net's open weave.

"Sorry," Calla panted. "I just grabbed; I didn't mean to pull your hair—"

"I don't mind a little hair pulling." Gideon smirked a bit.

Calla's jaw dropped for a moment until she noticed another branch coming from her left.

"I mind *that*," he grunted as they both quickly squished together to dodge out of the branch's way.

"Here's how we play," the sylph explained from below. "If *he* answers all my questions"—the sylph pointed at Ezra—"with the absolute truth, I'll

remove the tracker spores so you can cut the net.”

“You have the ability to do that?” Hannah asked.

The sylph turned their head to the smallest witch and said, “Of course I do. I’m the one who put them there for the ogre in the first place.”

Delphine bared her teeth at the silhouette of wind in annoyance. Calla felt her own scowl creep onto her face. What kind of sadistic symbiotic relationship did this sylph and ogre have?

Another branch twisted toward the net from the tree.

“Start,” Ezra and Delphine demanded at the same time.

“First question,” the sylph began as ordered. “Who, from the five of you, would you rather be stranded in this forest with?”

Ezra swallowed. Hard. He knew he couldn’t lie, that sylphs had the ability to determine truths with their magic.

Calla glanced at Gideon, who only closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. Just as he shut his eyes, a branch over his right shoulder snuck up on them and sliced through the side of his arm. Gideon let out a bellowed curse.

“The siren is the logical answer, I suppose,” Ezra spoke grudgingly. As if he could barely make himself admit there was anything positive about Delphine’s presence. “Considering she’s the only one who could navigate our way out of here.”

The sylph tilted their head and didn’t speak for a moment, before finally nodding and confirming, “That answer works. Next question—who here do you trust the most?”

“Myself,” Ezra answered.

Calla moved to check Gideon’s wound, his breath catching slightly as she held his arm.

The sylph nodded in satisfaction. Calla and Gideon folded themselves out of the way of another sharp limb, her hand still firmly holding pressure over his cut to stop the bleeding until his magic could heal him.

“Only two more questions to go,” the sylph informed them, and Calla could swear there was something wicked seeping into their tone. Ezra shifted on his feet slightly, and Calla’s eyes tracked the movement carefully. She could see how uneasy he was feeling and a subconscious sweep of her Rouge magic confirmed his nerves.

“Who, besides yourself, do you wish wasn’t here?” the sylph smiled.

Ezra tensed, but he managed to grit out, “Calla.”

Calla's breath caught.

"He means as in *here*, in the forest. In *danger*," Gideon quietly murmured as he pulled her out of the way of another branch, a stream of blood slowly seeping through the long sleeve of his shirt. "He's playing their game."

"I don't need your comfort," Calla retorted as she shoved herself back into his body to avoid another spear. Gideon gave her a look that said *Doubtful*, but otherwise didn't respond. She knew Gideon was right, but it didn't ease the searing pain that shot through her.

"And, your final question," the sylph said slowly, as if to build anticipation.

Gideon snorted lightly. "Dramatic."

Calla made a noise of agreement, and Delphine snarled with impatience down below.

"Out of the two people in that net"—the sylph gestured to Calla and Gideon dangling in the air—"who do you love most?"

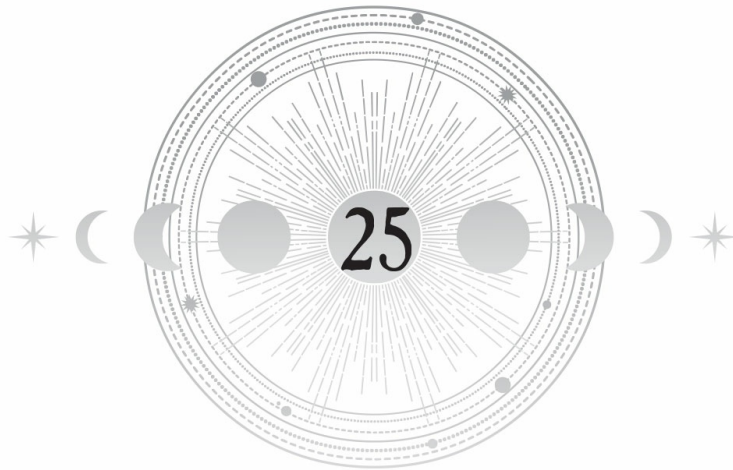
Calla's entire body tensed, and she looked to Gideon. The prince's jaw went slack. Ezra, on the other hand, had not moved an inch, had not blinked, as every ounce of breath rushed entirely from his lungs.

"Why are they doing this?" Calla whispered, so quietly she didn't think Gideon heard, but when the elder prince winced, she knew he had.

"Fae beings like sylphs get endless entertainment from exploiting the pain of others with their own irrevocable truths. There's never seemed to be rhyme or reason to it as far as I know," Gideon murmured.

Calla glanced back toward a still-immobile Ezra. All of them watched as he stood there, unsure of what he could possibly be thinking. It was another excruciating minute before he finally moved again—to unsheathe the dagger from his belt, flinging it so fast Calla could hardly follow the movement as it sliced directly through the sylph and embedded itself into a tree behind them. The sylph let out a low laugh before using their wind to summon the knife from where it was planted into the black bark. They then waved a transparent hand toward the net. Calla watched as a powdery substance seeped out of the rope and blew away into the distance.

"There. Your friends should be able to cut themselves free now." With that, the sylph evaporated into thin air, along with Heart Reaver, leaving behind only a few drifting leaves and a hollow chill.



What in the Hells just happened?” Delphine asked as Gideon worked his blade through the net.

Before anyone could answer the siren’s question—though Calla was pretty sure it was rhetorical—Gideon sawed through the last tendril of rope, and he and Calla went crashing to the ground in a tangled mess of limbs and netting. Gideon had managed to maneuver his body under Calla’s so he would take the brunt of the fall, and, with the help of his wind magic cushioning their landing, the blow wasn’t as hard as she thought it would be. That still didn’t stop the yelp that escaped her throat at the impact. At least the tree’s antics seemed to have disappeared along with the sylph. Which made Calla wonder if the being had been the one controlling the tree’s limbs.

“Ugh,” Calla groaned as she slowly pushed up from Gideon’s chest. She tried not to note how his own heart was beating a mile a minute beneath her palm.

The other girls rushed over to help untangle the rope from their bodies, and as soon as she and Gideon could stand and dust themselves off, Calla found herself searching for Ezra. Out of all of them, he had been dealt the worst hand in the situation. Gideon’s wound was already completely healed; the blood that still stained the sleeve of his shirt the only remnant of the cut. Ezra’s loss, however, couldn’t be healed with magic.

The younger prince was standing a few feet away, staring at the scar his

dagger had left in the tree. She quietly walked up behind him while the others busied themselves with talk of the sylph to give her and Ezra some privacy.

“Ezra,” Calla whispered. She could still feel the remnants of anger from their fight earlier running through her, but that didn’t mean she would ever wish for anything like *this* to happen.

“Don’t.” His voice was hard.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Calla sighed.

He turned his head toward her, his eyes blazing with emotion for a second before he carefully maneuvered his poker face back into place. “I don’t think you quite understand how detrimental it would have been to answer that last question.”

“Detrimental how? It isn’t like we didn’t all know the answer.”

He stared at her intensely for a moment but didn’t respond. He simply turned his back to her and said to the others, “Are we ready to keep moving now?” Everyone exchanged tense looks, but it was Gideon who nodded and motioned for Delphine to lead them forward.

“Watch your steps,” Ezra muttered darkly as he brushed past Calla.



After about an hour of walking—which didn’t include the three water and restroom breaks they all took—Calla was almost convinced Delphine was just pretending to know her way around. Not that she would have ever told her friend that, lest she wanted an apple thrown at her head. Luckily, Ezra could always be counted on to open his mouth.

“Are you lost, siren?” the prince tossed at Delphine as he fussed with his hair. They were all starting to look a bit disheveled.

“No. Though I wish I could lose *you*.” Delphine stuck her tongue out at the prince as soon as his back was turned.

“If you can see through the glamour where the false trees are, couldn’t we go *through* them, instead of around?” Calla asked sincerely.

“That wouldn’t be a great idea,” Delph answered. “Allow me to demonstrate.”

Calla watched as the siren walked over to one of the trunks and lifted her palm out to touch it. Sure enough, just as she was going to make contact, her slender hand slipped right through the bark.

Delphine yanked her arm back from the glamour and held it between

them all so they could see.

“Whoa.” Hannah lifted her brows.

To Calla, it looked as if Delphine’s hand had been dipped in black ink, a dark sap coating her skin. Calla reached out and smeared some of the liquid with her index finger. Pinching it between her finger and thumb, she looked at the sap with fascination.

“What is this stuff?” she asked no one in particular.

Hannah reached out and swiped her own finger through the sticky liquid, the black sap a stark contrast to her fair skin. “Yuck. Can you feel it?” the blond asked.

“Sort of,” Delphine answered. “Glamour is strange to explain. It’s as if wherever I touch it, my skin vibrates, but nothing feels solid. When my hand passes through the branch, it’s as if it goes numb. I haven’t ever seen this exact tree here before, but most of the trees the forest creates produce some sort of sap like this.”

“Have you ever seen this forest with the same setting twice?” Gideon asked from right behind them.

Calla startled, not having heard him or Ezra move in so close behind them. Now all four of them were huddled around Delphine and her sap-covered hand.

“Very, very rarely,” Delphine told him.

Gideon and Ezra looked thoughtful as they took in her words, the former moving to offer Delphine an article of clothing out of the sack he was carrying.

“Here, clean your hand on this.”

Delphine looked as if she wanted to argue about wiping her hand on someone’s article of clothing, but she clearly wanted to get the foreign substance off of her more. Gideon took the shirt back and swiftly turned it inside out before stuffing it into the bag.

“Thanks,” Delphine told him. “I guess we should continue moving, then?”

“Let’s start that way.” He pointed down a path that stretched into the distance. For now. “We can just see where it goes.”

They started walking in their chosen direction, Calla still taking in the towering trees skeptically. She wished they had walked into the spring version of the forest that Gideon had mentioned. She trailed behind the two men and Delphine, walking in step next to Hannah, who looked just as wary

as she did with their new surroundings.

"I hate this place," Hannah whispered to Calla.

"I do, too," she concurred. "I never thought I'd say this, but I hope we find the Witch Eater as soon as possible."

Hannah gave a small huff in agreement.

Calla focused ahead, watching as a giant root slithered itself into their path. The group paused for a minute, Hannah watching dumbfounded as the root finally came to a stop. *Sentient forests are awfully annoying*, Calla thought as she realized upon getting closer that the root in their way was much too tall for the girls to easily get over.

Ezra jumped up nimbly to grab a branch hanging above and hoisted himself over the large root. When he hit the ground on the other side, he looked at his hands in disgust before wiping them on his trousers.

"Gross," he muttered.

Delphine cleared her throat. "Can we get some assistance here?"

Ezra rolled his eyes and reached out a hand to help her over, not swaying an inch as the siren pulled herself over with some effort. Gideon waited to give assistance to Hannah, easily lifting her over to their companions. When Hannah was clear, he looked back to Calla.

He lifted his palm to her in offering.

Gideon had not indicated he would have any sort of trepidation with skin-to-skin contact since he found out she was a Siphon, but Calla still hesitated for a second.

"It's okay," he said softly, loud enough for only her to hear.

She lifted her chin a bit and reached out to grab his hand, and he quickly, and uneventfully, assisted her up. A small tug of power pulsed from where his skin touched hers, but she ignored it and shoved down the urge as far as she could. Once she made it over, she looked back to watch Gideon propel himself over with one hand. He wiped the sap onto his pants just as his brother had, only with much less fuss, and passed Calla to move to the head of the group without a second glance.

"That seemed rather unnecessary," Delphine told the tree root with annoyance.

She combed a hand through her silver tresses, continuing, "Why is this forest so *rude*. What did we ever do—"

Delphine came to a grinding halt.

"What's wrong?" Gideon asked.

“I’m not sure . . .” Delphine said, dropping her hand from her hair. “I suddenly feel . . . weird.”

Calla peered at her in concern, but before she could make a move toward the siren, Hannah fainted to the ground.

“Hannah!” Calla yelled, rushing to her friend.

The men crouched next to the witch. Gideon tilted her face toward him to examine her.

“Um . . .” Delphine muttered.

Calla looked away from Hannah and watched as Delphine slumped to the ground as well.

“What in the Gods’ names . . . ?” Ezra cursed.

He moved to go to Delphine, but as soon as he stood, he paled.

“Ezra?” Calla asked in alarm.

“*Shit*,” Ezra breathed.

She watched in horror as he stumbled back, his movements lagging. He didn’t go down as quickly as the girls—he dropped to his knees first before his body finally gave out.

Calla panicked, looking to Gideon.

“What’s happening?” she asked frantically.

Gideon’s eyes were solid black and wild, though his exterior demeanor was still calm as ever. He stood and she matched his movements. He looked down at his bag and reached in to pull something out; Calla tilted her head in confusion as she watched. He unfurled the shirt from earlier—the one Delphine had cleaned the sap off her hand with.

“I don’t think,” he said slowly, “that we should have touched the trees.”

Every alarm bell in Calla’s head went off at his words, and she took a step back, breathing much too fast. “What do we *do*?” she implored. “Are they dead? What’s going to happen?”

“Calliope, look at me.” His prince voice was back as he stepped easily over Hannah’s limp figure and placed himself in front of her. “They aren’t dead. Hannah is still breathing. I can’t believe I hadn’t realized it sooner, but I think these trees might be . . . demon’s oak.”

Calla let out a desperate sob and tried to take another step back. His words made no sense to her, but they still incited a full panic in her mind. Before she could get any farther away, though, he reached out and gently placed his hands on each side of her face, making her look directly at him. She was so stunned by the intimate contact, she completely froze.

“It’s going to be all right,” he insisted, despite the haunted look in his eyes contradicting his words. “I’m not going to let anything happen to us.”

“How can you stop— *Gideon?*”

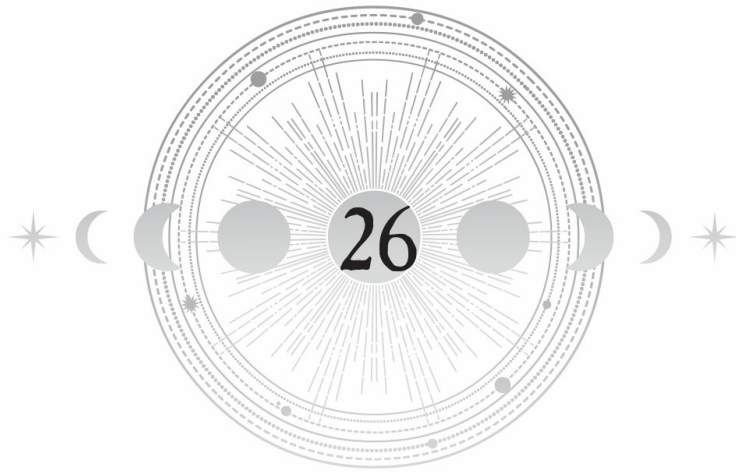
Gideon’s eyes were completely black, and he swayed a bit on his feet. She made to move closer to him, but as soon as she tried to lift a foot, she suddenly felt it, too. It was something hovering at the edge of her mind, slipping past her defenses, and creeping into her consciousness. It was like smoke filling her head. She rubbed her palms against her eyes in an attempt to make it go away, but it was no use. Her limbs were becoming numb, and she lifted her head to search for Gideon, but her vision was too blurry to see clearly.

This was the feeling Calla hated most in the entire world—the feeling of losing control over herself. It had happened one too many times in the last forty-eight hours, and she felt like something precious inside her was about to break. She let out another involuntary sob.

You will never be in complete control of yourself, something insidious whispered inside her head.

She felt her mind start to crumple in on itself at the words, but just before she hit the ground, before she lost all consciousness, she felt a pair of arms wrap around her.

And then there was nothing.



Caspian was running, his heart pounding so hard he thought his chest might crack open.

He looked around him.

He was in a large wide-open field, yellow-and-red witch hazel littering the horizon line he was racing toward. Something about the clearing felt familiar—as if he had undoubtedly been here before.

Caspian tried to stop his feet from moving, tried to slow down, but it was useless. He only kept running and running, his body moving with a purpose his mind couldn't remember.

“Cass!” someone yelled.

Caspian finally skidded to a stop.

He looked around wildly for the owner of the voice.

“Caspian! Here!”

A girl he had never seen before was running straight for him, her long dark hair whipping behind her.

“Caspian, hurry! Throw me the die!”

He was about to shout that he had no idea what she was talking about, but when he looked down, he saw his left hand clamped in a tight fist. He unfurled his hand.

A black-and-red die sat in the middle of his palm.

He cursed.

Caspian had already rolled five times, and for the past year, he had been incredibly careful to avoid his final one, but somehow, he knew this die was not meant for him.

He looked back to the girl who was still hurtling toward him with purpose.

“Stop them!” another voice screeched.

This voice he knew all too well.

His heart started pounding again, and Caspian was suddenly aware that he was surrounded by other people. Other witches.

This was a battlefield.

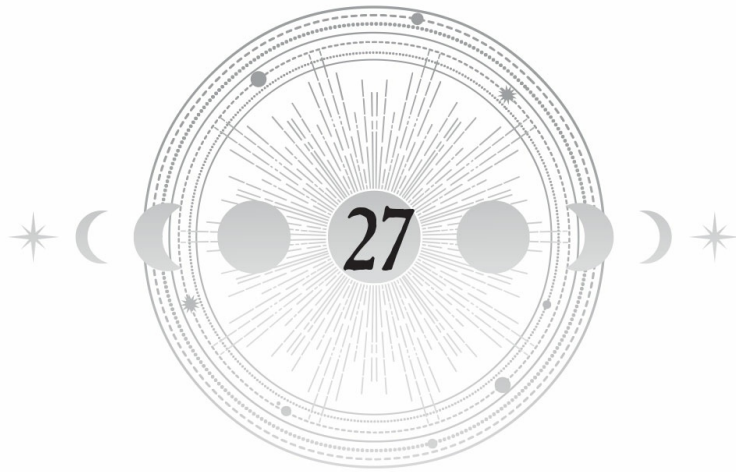
Without a second thought, he started running again, knowing he had to get to the girl before someone stopped him. He easily dodged two faceless figures and kept moving, the girl getting closer and closer.

Just as he was about to reach her a figure stepped in front of him, making Cass halt so suddenly he almost barreled to the ground.

Before he could think about it, Caspian lifted his left arm and flung the die over the shoulder of the man that was blocking him.

The girl lurched forward and snatched the die out of the air as someone else screeched his name behind him.

Then a sword went right through his heart.



Hannah stretched as she turned over in bed to snuggle into—nobody.

She sat up, groggy, looking at the empty spot beside her in the bed where she swore someone was supposed to be. She took in the white satin sheets she was lying on, the soft mattress dipping under her slight weight as she moved.

“Hey, gorgeous, it’s about time you woke up.” A musical voice laughed.

Hannah widened her eyes as she took in Delphine’s figure at the foot of her bed. The siren was brushing her hair, the silver strands past her shoulders. Hannah could hardly focus on Delphine’s sudden hair growth, however, when her friend was standing there in only undergarments.

Hannah’s face flamed.

Delphine looked at the witch’s blushing cheeks and giggled.

“How can you still be so shy after everything?”

“E-everything?” Hannah stuttered breathlessly, still hardly believing her eyes.

Delphine lifted a single starlight brow at her. She placed the gilded hairbrush she had been using onto the wooden dresser behind her and lifted one blue knee onto the bed. The siren had an almost-wicked smirk on her face as she lifted her other leg up and crawled onto the mattress at Hannah’s feet.

Hannah couldn’t breathe.

In her wildest dreams, she had never allowed herself to imagine this.

But here she was, staring dumbfounded as her best friend—the girl she

loved more than anything in the world—slinked up the bed and over her body, gently pushing her shoulders to lay her back down.

Delphine bent and gave Hannah a gentle kiss on her collarbone, causing the blond to shiver, goose bumps pricking up on her skin. She could feel Delphine's heartbeat as their chests pressed together, making Hannah's head swim.

"Well, maybe we haven't done everything," Delphine whispered softly, strands of her hair tickling Hannah's face. "But we will have plenty of time for that after all of this is over."

Hannah exhaled the breath she was holding, and when she inhaled again, she basked in Delphine's delicate scent of florals and ocean salt. She would have been content to just lie there forever, but Delphine's words suddenly brought her back to reality.

"Wait, until what is over?"

Delphine lifted her head to peer into Hannah's violet eyes, her face filled with confusion.

"What do you mean?"

"You said we will have plenty of time after all of this is over. What is 'this'?"

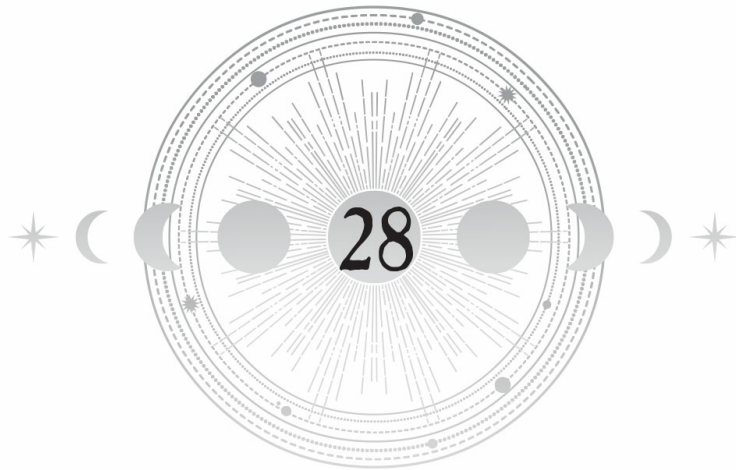
Delphine's expression was mixed with concern. "I meant," she said deliberately, "after tomorrow. When we finally get Calla back."

Hannah's eyebrows shot up, and, barely believing she was doing this, she scrambled to push Delphine off of her until they were both sitting up.

"What happened to Calla?"

Delphine looked at her friend as if she wasn't sure if Hannah was being serious or not, and that if Hannah was being serious, she was concerned that the witch had lost her mind.

Just as Delphine was about to answer Hannah's question, however, everything faded back to black.



Delphine was underwater.

Her lungs were burning; her gills had been too long out of practice to open up quickly enough when she had been dragged under the surface. Salt water burned her throat as she thrashed against the arms pulling her.

Down.

Down.

Down.

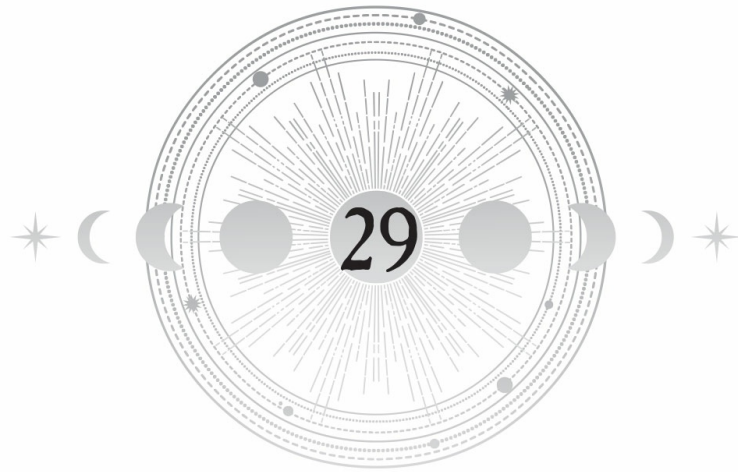
She opened her eyes; the pitch-black depths were disorienting for a moment as her vision adjusted. She pulled on the muscles of her neck, prying open her gills, trying desperately to get some air. She felt it the moment the three slits on each side of her throat ripped open, oxygen finally pumping back into her lungs.

Delphine thrashed against the arms, thrusting out her legs with as much force as she could in her position. Her back was to the figure, their arms wrapped around her front too tightly for her to wiggle out of their grasp. She felt the webbing between her fingers and toes weave together, assisting her movements slightly, but it still wasn't enough.

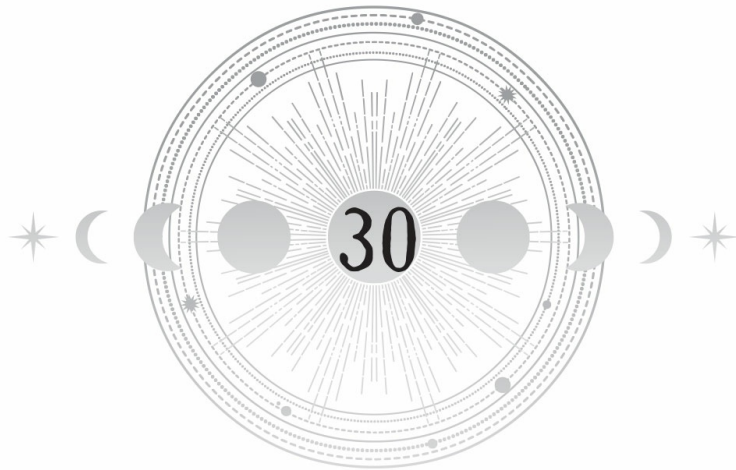
The figure finally stopped swimming as they reached a stone house covered in purple coral and seaweed. The person shoved her through the doorway, finally releasing her once they were both securely inside.

Delphine whipped around and finally saw the face of the person who had

brought her here.
“Celeste.”



*F*or Ezra there was blood. And her.



Calla was standing in front of someone she couldn't see, her back completely flush with their chest. The room around her was shrouded in shadow, the features blurred by the darkness. And whoever stood behind her had their hand clasped around her neck.

Calla had no idea where she was or why she was here. All she knew was that her skin was on fire and there was a pressure in her core that she had never felt.

"You are not the chosen one, Calliope Rosewood," the dark figure hissed in her ear. "You are the cursed one."

Calla tried to gulp a breath of air and the hand around her throat tightened.

"Calla," someone said desperately.

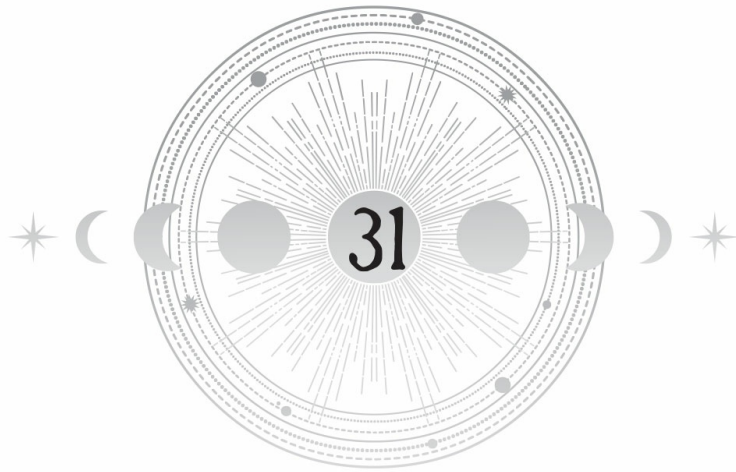
Calla's eyes widened at the sound of his voice. She looked around frantically, squinting in the darkness until she found him, his eyes almost as dark as the shadows.

"You have the power here. You know what you can do."

She felt the person behind her shake with laughter. "Please," they cackled cruelly. "She's a pathetic—"

Before they could finish their sentence, something inside of Calla snapped. She felt her Rouge magic lock on to every drop of blood in the being's veins, and a second later, her inner Siphon pulled with all its might.

Then all she saw was red.



Gideon, darling,” Queen Lysandra purred.

“Mother.”

“Come now, Gideon, why the hostility? Haven’t you missed me?”

Lysandra sat on her onyx throne in the middle of the white-marble room. Gideon stood in the middle of the dais, a few steps below. Not a single other soul around.

“Where is she?” he demanded.

Lysandra leaned her chin down to rest on her hand as a wicked smile unfurled on her face. “Who?”

Gideon practically snarled as he asked again, “Where is she?”

“Oh, does it truly matter, Gideon? You can’t save her. You can’t even save yourself. We both know how this story ends.”

“No. You don’t get to decide how this ends. You started this in the first place. This is your fault.”

Lysandra laughed darkly. “My dearest boy, you’ve gotten yourself into this mess. It was never supposed to be you. I had him to spare you from this. I tried to ensure your fate. You’re the one who undid all of my careful planning. For her.”

“Where. Is. She?”

“I’ll tell you what, Gideon.” The Onyx Queen sat up straight. “I’ll make you a trade.”

Gideon knew this was a trap. Knew he shouldn't agree to any sort of bargain with his mother. He also knew, however, that a part of him was currently missing and he'd trade anything to get it back.

So, he gritted out, "What do you want?"

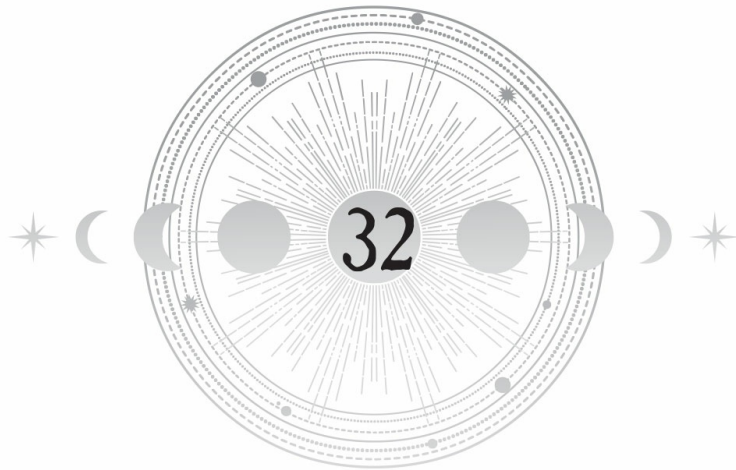
The queen's smile was the smile of a viper whose prey was caught in its coils. "Quite a loaded question, darling. I want a lot of things. But this conversation isn't about what we want, is it? It's about what we need."

He narrowed his eyes.

"Bring me Ezra's heart, and I'll give you the girl."

All the blood drained from Gideon's face.

Lysandra's grin was cruel. "Let's see where your loyalties truly lie."



The commander knew that the forest was about to change again as soon as the light began to filter through the trees. The black branches had slowly begun untangling themselves from each other, breaking up the woven canopy above.

Kestrel sheathed his knife as he prodded the viperidae with the toe of his silver boot, double-checking that he'd completed the job successfully. When the beast didn't budge, he gave a satisfied nod and wiped away the blood that coated his hands from when he'd disemboweled the creature moments ago. Since he didn't have his sword, he'd had to use his short hunting blade—which meant he had been a little too up close and personal with the viperidae's entrails.

He turned to look for his companion, the light that was now flooding through the forest helping him spot the man instantly.

Caspian was sprawled on his back, completely unconscious. Kestrel walked over and crouched down by his beta, wincing as he took in the man's torn-up chest and shirt. The Harpy falcon tattoo that sprawled over his friend's torso would have to be re-inked once the flesh healed back together.

If the ink will even take to the scars, Kestrel thought regretfully. Witches healed relatively fast, and while their magic was good for staving off infection, it was useless against preventing scars.

Kestrel leaned down and shouldered Caspian's passed-out form, being

Careful of the side of Cass's chest where he was hurt. He lifted his beta with little trouble—despite Caspian being well over six feet and corded with muscles.

Kestrel needed to find water, food, and a place for the witch to rest until he woke up from the venom's effects. He and Cass had both discarded their supplies as they fled from the viperidae in the hopes that dropping the awkward weight would be less hindering to their movements. Kestrel thought about going back to look for their items, but the straight pathway they had fled down was already gone, replaced by a curvy dirt trail as the forest continued its metamorphosis.

Kestrel sighed, readjusting Caspian's weight so he could dig in his pocket for the compass. Once out, he smoothed his thumb over the front of the gilded lid, to the sapphire-jeweled clasp, and pushed up until it clicked open. The golden needle spun around dizzyingly until finally slowing to a stop to his left. Kestrel looked up to the direction it was pointing in, shaking his long hair out of his face so he could see.

The compass was directing him off the dirt path, to where the forest was growing thick with ash woods. No longer black and gnarled, the trees were now slim and pale, their bark a speckled gray and the branches pluming with snow-white leaves. He much preferred the ash trees to the demon's oak, but while demon's oak attracted viperidae and the like, ash trees attracted overly friendly pixies and forest nymphs.

Kestrel couldn't decide which was worse.

He sighed again and adjusted Cass, the man's body wrinkling his precisely tailored black doublet. The delicate silver embroidery on his coat's shoulders was much too nice to be crushed by a bleeding fool, and Kestrel would have been annoyed had Cass not been as hurt as he was. Trying not to think about his coat, he started for the direction of the compass, praying to the Gods Cass would wake up soon.

It took less than twenty minutes for Kestrel to be done with carrying another person through the woods.

The ash trees had thin twigs on their branches that stuck out in all directions and easily snagged onto his and Caspian's clothing. He was careful not to walk too close to any of the trees, lest he have to pause with Caspian's dead weight to untangle themselves for the hundredth time. Furthering Kestrel's annoyance, the forest was currently inclining into a hill, making him grunt tiredly as he pushed himself up the slope. The extra weight was

slowing him down immensely. When he finally crowned the top a few minutes later, he decided he needed a break. Preparing to shift Caspian onto the ground, he took a deep breath to ready himself to hoist the witch back over his shoulder, but just before he lifted his friend, something in the distance caught his eye.

Down the hill, past a thicket of trees, in a small clearing was a pile of bodies on the ground. Sprawled out carelessly, they were clearly either dead or unconscious.

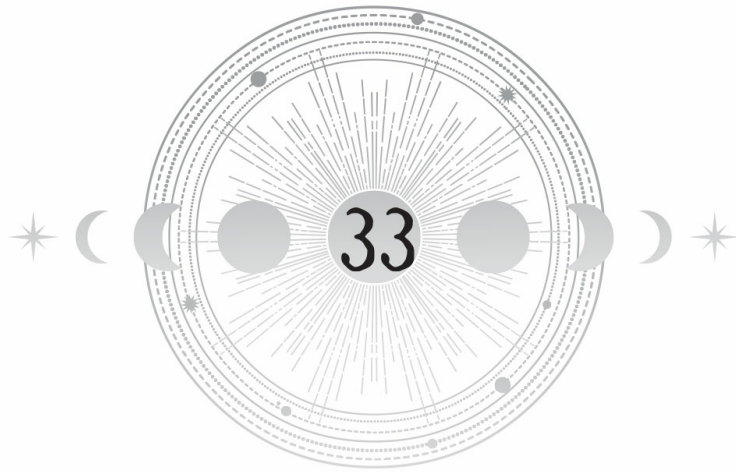
More victims of the demon's oak perhaps, he thought.

They were *just* too far for him to make out any real details, so Kestrel coaxed a gust of wind toward him, hoping he could sniff out their magic at least, or whether they were dead. A breeze kicked up, rustling Caspian's shredded shirt and whipping Kestrel's long hair behind him. Kestrel sniffed the wind delicately and almost dropped Caspian.

His entire body tensed with panic.

Because among the mixed smells of different witches and something else he couldn't quite place, there was the scent of cedar and citrus.

Gideon.



Calla woke first, her breathing rapid with fear from the nightmare, her forehead beaded with sweat.

Is that what true power felt like? She shuddered.

Never had a dream felt so real or . . . euphoric. For a moment, she swore she could still feel that magic rushing through her veins, power she didn't think she was capable of.

It wasn't real, she assured herself. *That wasn't me.*

It couldn't be.

Taking a couple of deep breaths, she worked to shake the vision from her mind, trying to focus on where she was instead. The fog from the sap still lingered, making it difficult for her to assess her surroundings. She quickly gathered that her head was pillowed on something hard, but comfortable. Something that was moving steadily up and down . . .

That's weird.

She squinted her eyes open; the pitch-black of the forest was gone, replaced by burning sunlight. She blinked a few times, her eyes slowly focusing on . . . Gideon. She was lying on Gideon's chest, his arms wrapped tightly around her as he slept. The sun gleamed off his disheveled blue hair and caught the metal of the hoops in his upper ear. He somehow looked more devilishly handsome as he slept.

Really? she scolded herself. *There are a lot more pressing things to be*

thinking about than Gideon's hair.

Calla's dream flashed in her mind. The vibrant color of crimson red burned into her memory. Blood. There had been so much blood.

That is not who you are. That is not something you're capable of, she swore to herself.

It was a trick the forest was playing on her mind. She could not use her Siphon magic like that. Becoming a monster was *not* going to be Calla's fate. She would make sure of it.

It wasn't real, it wasn't real, it wasn't real.

She tried to move away, laying her palms flat against Gideon's chest to push as hard as she could. Unfortunately, she was still a bit too groggy to put much force behind it and instead of getting him to budge, she woke him up.

"Calliope?" he murmured, turning his face to her.

"Um . . ." she said breathlessly, his face now inches from hers.

"Your eyes." He looked intrigued.

The glamour.

"Oh." She turned away, trying to focus on fixing the magic back over her amber iris.

"Don't," he said roughly as he blinked himself fully awake, never moving his arms from holding her in place. She held her breath as she watched him get his bearings, saw the understanding dawn in his eyes as he noted their position.

"Sorry," he said, immediately loosening his hold.

She only nodded and wiggled herself to sit beside him. She was not too familiar with people outside of Hannah and Delphine being open to touching her, and it was alarming how easily she felt like she could get used to the physical contact. She looked away from his face and tried not to think about how nice it felt to wake up in someone's arms.

"You don't have to hide your eyes here, you know," he said quietly.

She looked back to him and bit her lip, unsure. She only ever dropped her glamour around her friends. She cleared her throat, trying not to focus on the admiration in his expression. If only he knew what she had seen in her vision. What the color of her eyes actually symbolized—that she was a monster. She quickly focused instead on the new forest around them, looking at the trees in astonishment.

"Whoa," she said as Gideon slowly sat up beside her.

"Ash trees," Gideon noted. "Much better than demon's oak."

Calla had been through the Ashwoods, of course, since it was the barrier that separated Estrella and the Witch Realms. It was quite disorienting to go from the dark demonic forest to this calm white-and-gray clearing. She looked around at her friends, all still sprawled out on the ground. She moved toward the closest body, Hannah's, and shook the witch's shoulder. The blond's eyelids fluttered for a moment but didn't open.

Gideon had gone to his brother to do the same, and after a few rough shakes, Ezra finally came to.

"What the . . . Hells," Ezra said foggily.

"Demon's oak." Gideon sighed, standing up and turning to where Calla knelt by Hannah's form.

"Are we going to be okay?" she asked him, once again trying not to think of her nightmare as his bright silver eyes landed on hers.

"We'll be fine. It should be mostly out of our system now. Luckily, there are no lasting side effects except . . ." He trailed off. His eyes were swirling with a sudden intensity she didn't understand.

Maybe he knows what I saw, she worried. Maybe we all saw the same thing.

Calla prayed to the Gods that that wasn't the case. She cleared her throat to quickly change the subject. "What can we do to wake them up?" she asked. "We can't go anywhere without Delph."

"I don't think there's anything we can do except wait it out," Gideon answered as he fished out his canteen and took a drink of water. He offered the water to her, but she simply shook her head at the gesture and watched as he passed it off to Ezra instead. Ezra took several animated gulps, as if he was a man dying of thirst, before wiping a hand across his mouth and finally looking directly at Calla. His mouth fell open a bit as he took in her true gaze for the first time.

"Wow," Ezra admired softly. She felt her cheeks flush slightly. "Are you all right?" He sounded worried, leaning toward her a bit as his eyes roamed over her body as if he was checking for injuries.

"Besides the ogre traps and demon trees, you mean? I'm just fine," she told him.

He twisted his mouth before clearing his voice and suggesting, "We should look for food while we wait for the girls to wake up. I'm starving."

"I don't think *you* will be able to look for anything." Calla watched him as he tried, and failed, to stand by himself. He sat back down and bent his

knees up to rest his forehead against them, groaning in frustration as dizziness swept through him.

“He’s right, though.” Gideon walked over to Calla and offered her his hand. “You and I can go while he and the others recover.”

“Fine,” Calla allowed, taking Gideon’s hand and letting him hoist her up. He followed behind her as she headed for the nearest copse of trees, leaving a groggy Ezra to look after her unconscious friends. Now that she thought about it . . . leaving Ezra in charge may not have been the greatest idea. She peeked back at the group in concern, and Ezra was sitting up fully at least, so she would have to be satisfied with that.

She caught Gideon looking at her. “What?” she asked, her voice carrying an edge of nerves.

He cleared his throat smoothly. “Did you . . . see . . . anything? When you were asleep?” he asked, keeping his voice low and looking a bit hesitant. A look that Calla knew, even from her short time with him, was awfully uncharacteristic.

She bit her lip and turned away, her heart beginning to race. Without thinking, she picked up her pace, but of course Gideon could easily keep up. She walked deeper and deeper through the trees, and before she knew it, she was in the thick of the woods, unable to see Ezra and the girls anymore.

“Calliope.”

She felt herself panicking. He knew. He knew what she saw and he probably lured her away from the group, deeper into these sinister woods, so he could confront her about it. She needed to get back to her friends, but suddenly everything around her looked the same, the trees all blurring together. Neverending.

She spun around, trying to go back the way she came, but Gideon was there, stepping into her path. “Calliope, what’s wrong?”

She looked at him wildly. Her breathing was labored, her heart still racing too fast, but she spoke anyway. “Don’t come any closer.”

He looked at her, puzzled. “What?”

“I know what you saw, I saw it, too, but—”

“You think we had the same vision?” he said, clearly surprised.

“I don’t know,” she whispered. “Did we?”

“Well, what did you see?”

“Nothing good.” She swallowed.

“That makes two of us,” he admitted. “My vision . . . was with my

mother.”

“Okay . . .” She narrowed her eyes a bit.

He tugged on one of the hoops in his ears as he spoke again. “I think she was holding you captive.”

Her jaw dropped open. “*What?*”

Gideon winced a bit. “I’m assuming we did not see the same thing, then?”

“No!” she yelled, her shock causing her voice to go up an octave. “I saw . . .”

She bit down on her tongue to stop talking. There was no way she could tell him what she saw.

“You saw what?” he prompted.

She shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. What matters is that you’re claiming your mother was holding me captive!”

“It doesn’t have to happen like that,” he said seriously. “The future can never be guaranteed.”

She shook her head and backed away from him, a small hysterical laugh choking out of her as she lamented, “What are we doing here, Gideon? This mission, this spell? It’s never going to work.”

“Don’t let this forest get to you, Calliope. That’s what it wants. It wants to break your mind down until it can lead you in circles for eternity. Demon’s oak venom shows you a manifestation of one of many possible outcomes of the future. That doesn’t mean it’s going to come true.”

She looked at him uncertainly.

“I won’t let it come true,” he vowed.

“How can you possibly promise that? And why would you care what happens to me in the future? You don’t owe me anything.”

Before she could blink, he stepped forward, causing her to step back into a tree. Gideon loomed over her. “There’s a reason we met, Calliope. There’s a reason you and I both have only rolled sixes, that my brother of all people is the one who was tasked with finding you. I don’t know what my vision meant or how my mother got ahold of you but—”

“Has it occurred to you that maybe it’s because the spell doesn’t work? Or that we don’t accomplish it in the first place? Or the fact that I’m a Siphon witchling monstrosity?” She choked a bit on the last word as her own vision flashed through her mind.

“You are not a monster, Calliope.”

“You don’t know that,” she whispered.

“Why do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Act as if you’re a monster. Say that you’re not a *true witch*. The only reason you wouldn’t be a true witch is because you aren’t giving yourself a chance to be. Because you refuse to use your magic as it’s meant to be used. You are not two separate halves, Calliope. One part of you is no better or worse than the other.”

“You have no idea what it’s like,” she gritted out.

“The only person that doubts yourself is you. That should be evident by the fact that there are three other people in this forest here for *you*, and you alone.”

“Ezra is in this forest because you made him come along.” The words brimmed with more venom than she intended.

“First of all, if you think I can make Ezra do anything he doesn’t want to do, you haven’t spent *that* much time with him. And second, you’re correct when you said I have no idea what being you is like.” His voice softened as he said, “I have no idea what it is like to be anything other than a full-blooded witch. A full-blooded *prince*. But I do know what it’s like for people to have expectations of who you are before they even get to know you. And how those expectations make you think of yourself.”

She looked away, not wanting to show him how much his words rang true.

“Listen.” He sighed. “It’s against everything in my nature to want to trust someone so easily. It took me years to trust my commander, my friends. Then you show up and I don’t even question the urge to bring you along. I don’t know why the Fates brought us together—but I don’t want to fight it either.”

She looked at him fully. “I understand.”

His blue brows shot up. “You do?”

She nodded quietly. “I understand what you mean about wanting to trust you. Not at first. Back at the auction, I definitely didn’t. But I followed you into this forest, didn’t I? Even though I had every reason to run screaming from you after everything that happened with Ezra.”

The left corner of his mouth quirked up. “Yeah. I suppose you did.”

She swallowed. She wanted to say he shouldn’t trust her so easily. Wanted to tell him if he only knew what had been in her dream, he would not be looking at her with anything but fear.

Instead, she said, “Maybe Ezra *was* onto something.”

“Onto what?” Gideon questioned.

“When I spoke to him earlier, before we entered the forest . . . he was upset by how easily I trusted you. I told him it was just because you and I—we both need each other. We both have something to gain here. But the convenience of this situation came too easily. With the Fates involved, how much of this could be a coincidence?”

“Nothing with the Gods is ever a coincidence,” he said flatly.

For a moment, they both simply stood there, Gideon leaning over her in the quiet of the forest as they contemplated the tangled web they had gotten themselves into. He looked as if he wanted to say something more but thought better of it. She didn’t know why, but he suddenly seemed a bit more reckless to her than before, as if his vision, the one he claimed wasn’t going to be real, had changed something integral within him.

It certainly changed something in me.

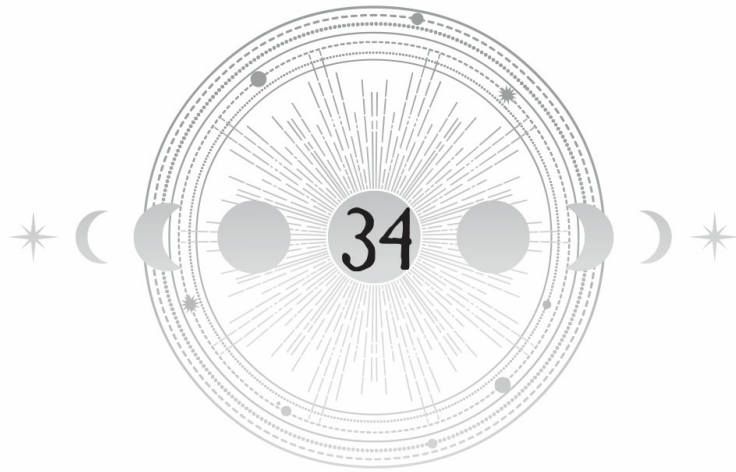
She didn’t know what to say to him now, but she didn’t have to worry about that, because something behind Gideon snapped and the prince whipped around, on guard. She peeked her head over his shoulder and watched as a tall, sharp man with long white hair came into view between the trees. The man was carrying a limp body over one of his shoulders, and his stunning features were pulled into an expression so cold it could rival the Onyx Queen’s.

“Am I interrupting something?” the witch spoke. His voice, as smooth as velvet, was laced with something dark.

Calla tensed up, ready to flee.

But Gideon suddenly relaxed and sighed.

“Kestrel.”



Kestrel and Gideon stared at each other for a moment before Gideon finally spoke again.

“Has Cass really gotten this lazy?” Gideon asked with a tilt of his lips.

Calla watched in silence as Kestrel waited a beat and finally matched the prince’s smirk.

“Demon’s oak,” Kestrel offered in explanation. “*And* he was attacked by a viperidae.”

Gideon’s brows lifted in concern. Kestrel gestured for Gideon to help him—not once ever looking at Calla—and Gideon stepped forward to assist in settling the man’s body gently on the ground.

Calla gasped in horror at the mess that was the man’s chest. Long gashes sliced through one of his pectorals, his shirt in bloody strips. The wounds had at least begun weaving back together, but the fresh scars in his deep brown skin marred a large tattoo that had once been there. She couldn’t make out what the ink was supposed to be.

“Is he going to be all right?” she asked.

Kestrel didn’t acknowledge her question. He either thought she had been talking specifically to Gideon or had just decided to ignore her in general.

Gideon, however, didn’t miss a beat as he answered, “Caspian’s strong. He should recover easily; the venom probably just set him back a bit.”

“He’ll need food and water when he wakes. I lost ours in the fight with

the viperidae,” Kestrel told Gideon.

“We have water and some food at the camp. We were actually out here looking for more food,” Calla inserted, ignoring the fact that he was ignoring her.

Kestrel finally looked at her. His expression clearly said he did not believe that was what they had been doing at all. He studied her from head to toe, slowly, in a way that made her feel utterly exposed. There was something haunting, almost too knowing, about his dark eyes. It made Calla want to shiver, though she fought off the urge.

Eventually, when he was finally done sizing her up, he spoke:

“And you are?”

“Kestrel . . .” Gideon warned.

Kestrel turned his angular face back in the prince’s direction and gave him a sardonic grin. His straight white hair elegantly fluttered in a passing breeze, the delicate visual such a contrast to the man’s attitude.

“What’s wrong, Prince? I only asked the girl a question.”

She forgot that Kestrel was technically Gideon’s superior back in the Guild, which explained his current tone. He certainly had an unquestionable air of authority, but so did Gideon. It was strange to see the prince back down to anyone, though that’s exactly what Gideon did as he clenched his jaw reluctantly.

Kestrel looked back to her expectantly.

“Calliope Rosewood,” she said with sarcastic flourish. “And *you* are?”

Gideon coughed, rubbing a hand across his mouth to muffle his laugh at her brashness. Kestrel’s ink-black eyes clouded at her audacity. She didn’t care. He wasn’t *her* commander.

“Kestrel Whitehollow. Commander of the first unit of the Onyx Queen’s Guild, Slayer of dragons, and feared by many.”

The last part sounded like a threat.

“That’s a lot of titles. It must take you forever to sign your name.”

Gideon didn’t hide his snicker so well this time.

Kestrel bared his teeth at her. That sobered Gideon up. He stepped in front of Calla and gave the other man a warning glare.

“She’s with me.”

“Yes, I clearly saw that,” Kestrel answered, his voice dropping dangerously low.

“You have no idea what you saw,” Gideon deadpanned.

“Perhaps you can enlighten me, then.”

Calla watched as the two witches stared each other down, feeling increasingly uncomfortable. She was just about to suggest to Gideon that they get back to their task so they could return to the others when she caught a movement out of the corner of her eye. The injured witch—*Caspian*—was beginning to stir from where he lay on the ground, a low moan escaping his throat. The other two didn’t seem to notice.

“Um, guys?” she started.

They ignored her.

Caspian groaned again, louder this time, but the two witches still failed to notice.

“*Hey*,” she said again to no reaction.

The newly conscious witch blinked, his eyelids fluttering slowly against the bright sun. She extracted herself from behind Gideon and circled around to check on his friend. She knelt next to the witch on the ground, leaning over his face to try and shield his eyes from the sun as much as she could. When he was finally able to peel his eyes open, his brown irises stared up at her in confusion for a moment before he let out a startled yelp. Calla scrambled back from him.

“What are you doing?” Kestrel asked her accusingly as he finally turned from his stare-down with Gideon.

“Nothing!” she insisted. “He was starting to wake up, and you two were too busy to notice so—”

“*You!*” Caspian exclaimed, pointing his finger at her. “You were in my dream! *How?*”

“Wait, what do you mean Calliope was in your dream?” Gideon asked, crouching down by his friend.

“I was on this battlefield, and I couldn’t figure out why. All I knew was I had to get to someone. Get to *her*.”

Calla’s eyes widened at his story. “*Why?*” she asked desperately.

“Because . . . I had something for you. Something you really needed.”

“Can you remember what that was?” Gideon asked seriously.

“A Witch’s Die . . . It was a Witch’s Die. But it didn’t look like a normal Witch’s Die. It was black and red.”

Calla went white.

“And then, *then*,” Caspian continued dramatically, not seeming to notice Calla’s reaction or how still Gideon had become, “someone stabbed me!

Right through the chest! Can you *believe*—” He cut off as he reached up to his chest and ran a hand over his wounds.

He looked down at his torn skin, confused at first, before letting out a deep bellow.

“What is happening? Was that all real?” Caspian panicked, smoothing his palm over his wounds. “*My beta mark!*”

“It wasn’t real,” Gideon assured him.

Calla bit her lip. She hoped to the Gods that Gideon was right about none of it being real. She didn’t know what it meant that she had been mentioned in every single one of their visions, and now she was afraid to find out what the others had seen.

“You weren’t stabbed on a battlefield, Cass. You were attacked by a viperidae.” Kestrel’s tone came out almost bored.

“Oh.” Caspian breathed in relief. “That’s right. Damn, a few hours in this forest and I’ve almost been killed twice already.”

“A few hours?” Calla asked in astonishment. “I thought you had arrived here a couple days ago?”

“Time moves different here,” Kestrel told her, looking at her with condescension. “Didn’t anyone tell you that?”

“I thought that just meant it *felt* different when you were in the forest,” she said defensively.

“Wait, wait, wait—is anyone going to explain to me who she is? Besides the mysterious beauty from my dreams, I mean.” Cass flashed her a bright smile, despite the fact that he just woke up from being attacked by a monster and dreamed that she got him stabbed on a battlefield. She couldn’t help but grin back. He had that effect.

“Calliope,” she answered. “But you can call me Calla if you’d like.”

“You must be special,” Kestrel said dryly to Cass. “She didn’t tell *me* she had a nickname.”

Calla made a face. “You didn’t seem to care if I had a name at all.”

Caspian looked from her to Kestrel and back, trying to puzzle out what he could have possibly missed. He seemed to decide that the behavior from Kestrel’s end wasn’t too out of the ordinary, because he simply shrugged and nodded as if to say *That seems about right*.

“Don’t let him bother you too much.” Cass grinned at her conspiratorially. “He’s this grumpy to everyone.”

Kestrel let out a low grunt. Caspian’s grin only grew wider.

“So, would someone mind, uh, helping me up?” he asked.

“Oh!” Calla exclaimed, scrambling to climb to her feet and going to offer him one of her hands before she thought twice.

What are you doing? You can’t touch him. Have a few pretty words from the prince already made you forget what you are? a nagging voice in her head said.

She snapped her hand back to her chest, her cheeks warming.

“What’s wrong?” Caspian asked her, his face puzzled.

“Um, I shouldn’t touch—”

“I got you.” Gideon stepped in quickly before she had to explain.

Clasping on to his friend’s hand he hoisted the injured witch to his feet, Caspian’s full height being almost as tall as his counterpart’s. He stretched his muscles, his biceps and shoulders rippling as he moaned in relief. He made a whole show out of stretching every limb, all the way down to his fingertips, and Calla huffed a laugh. He gave her an appreciative grin.

“So where to now?” Cass asked, clapping his hands together as he spoke.

“Have you found the Valkyrie’s nest by chance?” Gideon asked.

Both witches shook their heads.

“We ran into a viperidae instead. And before that, the cherry blossoms tried to kill us,” Cass explained.

Gideon cocked an eyebrow at the last part and sighed, “Well, since we’re all together, there’s no use splitting up again. I was hoping I wouldn’t have to subject Ezra or the girls to the Valkyrie, but I don’t think we have a choice at this point.”

Calla tried hard not to make a face. She wasn’t too fond at the thought of spending any more time around Kestrel *or* running into a Valkyrie. It was difficult to decide which one she preferred less.

“Girls? Plural? Any other cute beings?” Cass asked curiously at the same time that Kestrel questioned, with exasperation, “How many others *are* there?”

Gideon rolled his eyes at both of them and reached an open palm toward the commander. “My compass?”

Kestrel yanked a small golden box out of his tailored trousers and tossed it over to Gideon, who caught it easily. This was the first time Calla noticed how impeccably dressed the commander was—his coat and pants clearly custom-made. Even back when she was with her coven, Calla didn’t think she had ever owned something so nice. When Kestrel caught her staring, he

gave her a cold look and she quickly shifted focus to whatever Gideon was doing with the jewel-encrusted compass. He clicked the lid open with the pad of his thumb, and she watched in fascination as the needle swirled in circles as it tried to find where it wanted to land. After a few seconds, it stopped just past Gideon's shoulder.

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"It means that our friends should still be in the same spot." He gestured to a path between the trees in the direction the needle was pointing. "The compass is enchanted to lead anyone who uses it out of the forest. The Valkyrie's nest was supposed to be on that path out, so we figured it was better for Kestrel and Cass to use it than have nothing. For me, however, the compass will lead directly where I want to go most inside the forest."

Calla was intrigued. She had never seen such a valuable magic artifact before.

"Enough standing around, then. Let's go," Kestrel ordered, not waiting to see if anyone followed as he turned for the path and began walking away. Caspian rolled his eyes at Gideon good-naturedly before clapping him on the shoulder and following after the stoic, white-haired witch.

Calla didn't budge an inch, waiting for Gideon to make the first move. Gideon stared after his comrades and ran a hand over his jaw in contemplation. He finally looked back at her.

"Kestrel is complicated."

"Okay."

He looked away from her again, his hand snaking up to his ear and tugging one of the hoops there. Her eyes traced the small movement.

"Calliope—"

"*Gideon*," she said his name with equal emphasis—a hint of humor in her voice. "It's your business."

He dropped his hand from his ear and crossed his arms over his chest. His silver eyes were hard. "Okay," he said slowly. "But a bit of advice? Don't push Kestrel's buttons too much. He and I have unfinished business, and I don't want him to take it out on you."

With that he turned from her and walked away. She didn't know how to take his warning. She wasn't sure if he was trying to protect her from Kestrel's misplaced wrath or if he simply didn't want to deal with it.

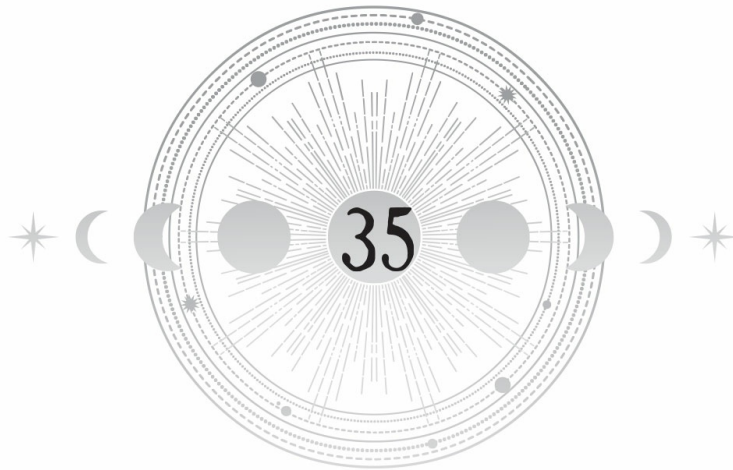
Ezra's words echoed in her mind once again.

Much stronger people than you have fallen for him and gotten trampled

in the process.

“Are you coming, girl?” Kestrel called over his shoulder, his voice carrying impatiently from a few yards away.

She took a deep breath and stamped down her thoughts, squaring her shoulders. Worrying about things that weren’t happening in the present didn’t matter. All that mattered right now was completing this spell so she and the other girls could slip back into their normal lives and forget the last few days had ever happened.



What in the Hells happened to *you*?” Ezra exclaimed from where he was lounging next to the finally awake girls.

“Viperidae.” Caspian sighed mournfully as he looked down at his chest. “It’s going to take forever to re-ink this mess.”

Ezra let out a low whistle as Cass stopped in front of him to show off the damage, though his skin was already in the process of slowly weaving itself back together. Calla turned from the men’s reunion and broke away to rush over and launch herself onto her girls. Her entire body sighed in relief as she wrapped her arms around them.

“I was so worried,” Calla told them as she pulled back.

“This is what we get for following men into a demonic forest.” Delphine flicked a strand of hair out of her face, her tone exasperated.

“Did you both have . . . dreams?” Hannah whispered.

“I would call mine more of a nightmare,” Calla muttered.

The three of them all gazed at each other warily.

Gideon cleared his throat and everyone turned their attention to him. Well, everyone except Kestrel. Calla didn’t think his attention had ever left the elder prince. “We need to find the Valkyrie,” he declared. “I think we have all had quite enough of this forest.”

Delphine perked up a bit at the mention of *Valkyrie*. “Finally, someone in this forest who might be fun.”

Kestrel gave her a look of disdain. Calla smiled to herself at the commander's annoyance. Calla knew she was supposed to firmly believe that Valkyries were dreadful, considering the Valkyries' centuries-long rivalry with the entirety of the Witch Realms. Delphine, however, had always been fond of the beings. So much so, that it gave Calla the opinion that she herself would probably get along with a Valkyrie—if the Valkyrie didn't want to kill her on sight, that is. She wasn't sure of the full scope of details that had started the rivalry so long ago, but she knew from her studies that the Valkyrie Queen liked to encourage her citizens to take witches' souls even before they were separated from their bodies.

Since being in Estrella and meeting Delphine, one thing Calla *did* know was that the death toll on both sides was damn near equivalent, since both witches and Valkyries were pretty evenly matched in power. Which meant no one was likely to get the upper hand anytime soon. Until the witches went to war among themselves at least. Perhaps being on the Valkyries' good side might be a necessary card to hold in the Fates' War.

Delphine turned to Gideon. "Calla said you had some sort of compass that can lead us? I want to get this over with as soon as possible."

He nodded, confirming her words. "The compass will be able to get us to the Valkyrie's nest a lot quicker, yes. After we get what we need, we can seek out the Witch Eater."

"You're taking them to the Witch Eater?" Kestrel asked in gruff disbelief. "Have you lost your damn mind, Gideon?"

"Why did you think they were here?" Gideon asked while Delphine questioned, "Who in the Hells are you?"

Kestrel turned his head to look at the siren, lifting his sharp nose at her in the process. "Kestrel Whitehollow, commander of the first unit of the Onyx Queen's Guild—"

"This goes on for another three minutes, by the way," Calla huffed to her friends as they all stood up.

Overhearing this, Cass gave a quiet laugh, his bright eyes lighting up with humor. "*You*," he said softly to Calla, his straight white teeth gleaming as his lips stretched into a pleased grin. "I like you."

"—and who in the Hells are *you*?" Kestrel demanded after he wrapped up his introduction.

Delphine, who hadn't been paying any attention whatsoever to the commander's ranting, flicked her hair over her shoulder and said, "Do all

Onyx witches like the sound of their own voices or is it just the ones we happen to know?"

Kestrel's gaze narrowed.

"Okay, I like *her*, too," Cass mused. Turning to the two princes, he asked, "Where in Illustros did you find them?"

"And can you return them there?" Kestrel muttered with irritation.

"What in the Hells is up his—" Delphine started.

"Calliope," Gideon said, interrupting Delphine's sentiment before a war could break out, "is the witch Ezra has been spending time with the past few months." He threw a deliberate look at the new arrivals, and Cass put two and two together.

"Oh, you're *her*," Cass mused.

Calla lifted her brows at Cass. "Why did you say it like that?"

"Because—"

"Enough, Caspian," Ezra threatened.

Cass gave an innocent look. "I was only going to say she's the one that's been draining your pockets. He never mentioned you were a Siphon, though. Which is rude, because that's way cooler than all the other crap he ever mentions to us." Calla's brows shot up in surprise and she found herself wanting to laugh.

The younger prince rolled his eyes in annoyance and muttered, "Can we go already?"

Calla and Caspian stared at Ezra with barely concealed grins as the younger prince stalked toward where Gideon was now inspecting the magic compass.

Delphine knocked against Calla's shoulder as the siren wedged herself between her two friends and whispered, "So what's with tall and serious over there? If he continues to glower at Calla like that, I'm afraid she might burst into flames."

"That would be *Kestrel*," Calla emphasized back.

"Why does that sound familiar?" Delphine tilted her head to the side.

"Remember when Ezra mentioned Gideon and his—"

Delphine's eyes widened. "*Oh.*"

"Kestrel is always wary of new people. Don't take it too personally." Cass leaned in next to their group, as if he were unable to stop himself from joining their gossip.

"Let's start moving," Gideon told the group.

“I’m Caspian by the way,” the Onyx witch said, introducing himself to the other girls as they began forward, but Calla’s eyes were zeroed in on Kestrel, noting how his steps never made a sound as he moved.

Kestrel’s lethal grace had affected her much more than she’d ever let on, but she was determined not to let his abrasive attitude get to her. She wanted to believe Caspian’s words—that Kestrel was this way toward all strangers—but she had a distinct intuition that it was much more personal than that.

“So, Caspian, tell me,” Delphine began, “what made a handsome witch like you want to be friends with Prince Broody and Broodier?”

“I guess after you spend the better part of a decade training with and beating the crap out of someone—you bond. Ezra just came with the deal.”

Ezra made an offended noise as Gideon finally looked up from reading his compass and shot his friend a smirk. “Now, Caspian, I think that nice little scar I gave you says enough about who actually got the crap beat out of them.”

Caspian’s smile stretched wider, completely unperturbed, at the reminder. Calla tried to give the witch a subtle once-over, to see if the scar Gideon spoke of was visible. Caspian caught her perusal and gave an exaggerated tilt of his head to expose his neck and jawline. She squinted closer, and there, just under the square of his jaw, was a light pinkish-brown line about two inches long.

“We were doing our final demonstration, the one that would determine which ranks we could apply for, and Gideon, the bastard, sliced me open with a wind cut!”

“My bad for thinking you would at least *try* to move out of the way.” Gideon laughed lightly.

“You know I prefer offense to defense.”

“And that’s precisely why Lysandra didn’t allow you to heal that scar,” Kestrel inserted seriously.

Cass rolled his eyes at his commander. “It looks cool anyway,” he said ruefully. “All of my partners have loved it.” He winked and they laughed.

“It’s hot,” Delphine confirmed flirtatiously.

Cass wiggled his brows at the siren, and Hannah suddenly looked quite put-out.

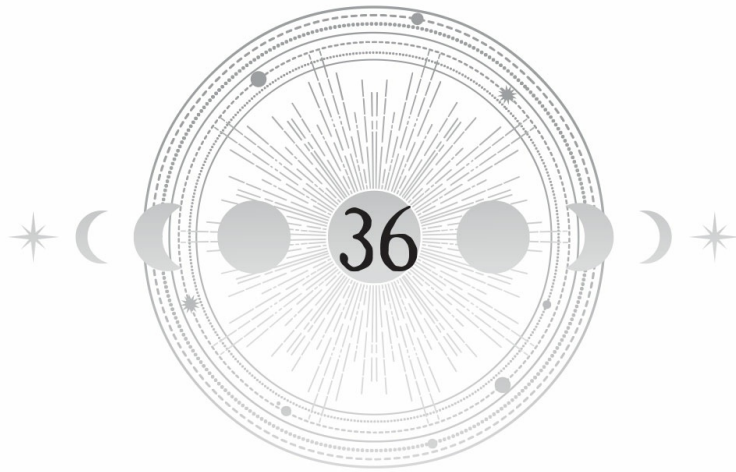
Calla stamped down her laughter and managed to question, “How long until we find the nest, do you think?”

Gideon shrugged as he peered back down at his compass. “It’s hard to

tell, but hopefully not too much longer.”

“I’m sure we will be there in no time,” Cass threw in rather optimistically.

Gideon hoped so.



Not too much longer turned out to be very much longer.

They were still walking three hours later, a point punctuated by the fact that Delphine's sighs of annoyance were growing louder and louder with each passing minute.

"I am officially over being on my feet," Delphine huffed in frustration. "Hey, prince boy, are you sure your little magic compass is working correctly?"

"Yes," Gideon grunted, sounding equally as frustrated.

"Well, I don't think—" Delph began, but Calla quickly cut the siren off. She knew her friend well enough to know a death threat was coming if the girl had to walk any longer. Calla wasn't too far behind, to be honest.

"Maybe we could rest for the night? It's dark, we *still* haven't eaten, and I think we all have had enough after today's events," Calla inserted.

"Today's events? You all had more than the one incident with the demon's oak?" Cass asked absentmindedly as he stretched a bit.

"Calla and Gideon got caught in an ogre's net, and there was this bastard sylph—it's a whole long thing," Delphine explained.

"Sylphs *are* bastards," Cass agreed, though the large grin that was stretched across his face didn't exactly back up his words. "Excellent kissers, though."

Ezra steered them back on topic. "I agree with Calla. We need rest." Calla

threw him a rare look of gratefulness.

Gideon nodded. "All right, then, we can make camp here."

They were currently passing through a thicket of trees, but there was plenty of space on the ground between them that they could all easily find a spot to sleep for the night. Gideon threw the bag he was carrying against the base of one of the trunks, and Caspian, who had been carrying the girls' bag, followed suit.

"Who wants to help me find food?" Gideon looked around the group.

"I'll go," Hannah volunteered.

"Cass and I can help as well," Kestrel added. "Siren? Witch?"

"I don't forage for food. The princes and I have already been over this." Delphine shot Ezra a deathly look before the witch could make a snarky remark.

Kestrel didn't deign to acknowledge them a second longer and turned back to Gideon and the others, saying, "Let's go."

"That guy is working to beat Ezra as my least favorite Onyx witch." Delph made a face as the four of them left.

Ezra scoffed, "Giving up on me so easily, Delphine?"

Calla smiled to herself as they exchanged insults behind her, sorting through the bag for something to sleep in. She fished out a pair of frilly, rose-colored linen pants she knew were Delphine's, but at least these wouldn't be as skin-tight as the current leather ones sticking to her legs with sweat. Her relief quickly dissipated, however, when she noticed there wasn't a single shirt big enough for her to sleep in.

"What's wrong?" Delph turned to Calla as she made a frustrated noise.

"There aren't any of my shirts left," Calla told her as she stood with the linen pants still in her hand.

"Why don't you just wear one of theirs?" Ezra tilted his head toward her friend.

"Does it look we're the same size?" Delphine rolled her eyes at him.

"There's no way we can share tops. I can't sleep in something so . . . constricting."

"Oh." He cleared his throat, rubbing a hand against his jaw in awkwardness as if he had only just realized Calla's figure was fuller, her curves prominent in everything she wore.

"What's wrong, Ezra? Just now realizing Calla has—"

"Not helping, Delph." Calla's ears heated slightly.

Delphine threw her hands up as if to say *No one ever lets me have any fun around here*, and the siren moved to grab her own change of clothes from their bag.

“I’ll just stay in this.” Calla sighed as she looked down at the black top she was still in. It was rumpled from the entire ordeal with the ogre trap and slightly sweaty from traveling all day, but it would have to do. “I’ll be right back.” She made to leave and go find a private spot to change when Ezra suddenly stepped in her way and halted her steps.

“You can have one of my spare shirts—if you want. Gideon bought plenty extra back at that village.”

She looked up at him, her breath almost catching at how close they were. She knew if she squinted a bit, she would be able to make out the faint smattering of freckles he had on the bridge of his nose. She could make out the slightest hint of his spicy scent through the smell of sweat and exhaustion they were all currently sporting.

“I . . .” She hesitated.

Wearing his clothing felt intimate.

“Just grab the shirt and let’s go.” Delphine broke them apart as she sidled up to Calla. “I’m ready to lie down.”

Ezra watched Calla for a split second more before following Delph’s directions. He procured a black short-sleeved shirt from his bag. Calla took it from him without thanks before grabbing Delph’s hand and hauling the siren into the woods.

As the girls began to change, Delphine demanded, bluntly, “Is everything settled with you and Ezra?”

“I don’t know.” Calla shook her head as she crossed her arms over her waist and pulled her top over her head. Calla let it drop to the ground and quickly slipped on Ezra’s shirt. It was just roomy enough for her liking and the hem hit right at the top of her thighs.

When they returned to their chosen camping spot, Ezra was leaning against the trunk of a tree in a fresh pair of trousers and shirt, brandishing one of the last pieces of fruit they had.

“Think I can find a source of water somewhere nearby?” Delphine asked Calla.

“Shouldn’t that be, like, a sixth sense for you?” Ezra asked between bites.

Delphine gave him a lazy vulgar gesture before turning away and picking a different direction than the one they had just come from and heading off.

“I’ll be right back,” she told Calla. “Unless you want to tag along?”

Calla shook her head, “Go ahead—I need to get these shoes off. I’m pretty sure my feet are just two big blisters at this point.”

Delphine shrugged, narrowing her eyes at Ezra before disappearing between the trees. Calla took a seat against a tree across from Ezra’s and crossed her legs in front of her. The ground was cold, and it felt good against the aching muscles in her legs. She slowly pried the lavender shoes off her feet, one at a time, and when they both revealed raw blisters underneath, she hissed.

“Shit.” Ezra sucked in a breath as he saw how bad it was. “Why have you not complained this entire time?” He carefully placed his piece of fruit on the corner of one of the bags and moved toward her.

“What’s the point of that? They were going to hurt either way,” she said as she lightly prodded one of the sores and winced. “My magic is healing them as quickly as it can, but with all the walking, they just keep coming back and healing over again.”

“Why did those assholes even make you wear those? It’s not like you could see them under that other outfit.”

“I don’t know,” she said tiredly. “Why do they auction people off in the first place?”

“Point made,” he murmured as he turned to reach for the canteen that was on the ground next to the other supplies.

“What are you doing?” she asked wearily as he twisted the top off the canteen.

“This might make them feel better, at least for a second,” he explained as he gently took one of her feet, careful not to cause her too much pain, and began pouring the water over the wounds.

She hissed at the initial shock of the cool water as it hit the angry red sores, but after a moment, she only wanted to cry in relief. He moved to the other foot, and once he was done, he looked up at her in sympathy.

“I’m—”

“Don’t apologize for this,” she gritted between her teeth as the momentary respite quickly wore off. “Apologize for the fact that we just wasted most of the water we had left.”

He rolled his eyes. “Gideon’s right.”

“Gideon’s right about *what*?”

“You have an unbelievable ability to miss the point of things.”

“He said that about the both of us,” she retorted.

He gave her a small smile, and she only stared back at him. He reached forward and lightly grabbed a strand of her hair between his fingers and moved it away. Calla watched as his eyes darkened and he tilted his head closer.

“I’m still not used to how lovely your real eyes are.” He spoke the words softly, barely more audible than the light wind that was dancing through the trees.

“I’m sorry about your dagger,” she blurted. “I never knew it was so important to you. I mean I had a feeling it was special but—”

“Don’t apologize for that,” he said, echoing her sentiment.

“Why didn’t you just answer the last question?” she whispered.

“Obviously, you would choose Gideon—”

“Is that what you think?” he murmured. “That it’s that easy?”

She tilted her head to the side, her mouth falling open slightly. Ezra brushed his thumb over her bottom lip, his eyes dipping down to her mouth for a moment.

“I don’t want it to end.” He looked pleadingly back up into her eyes.

She opened her mouth to respond when the sound of footsteps grew closer. Calla pulled back from him and turned her head toward their approaching friends. Ezra slowly eased himself back to his previous spot and grabbed up his half-eaten fruit. His eyes never left her face.

When their companions finally broke through the woods, Hannah skipped over to Calla and plopped herself down, slipping an arm around Calla’s in the familiar way she usually did. “We found a pear tree!” her friend exclaimed excitedly, and, sure enough, Gideon approached them both with an armful of the green fruit.

Calla took two in thanks and as she wiped one on her shirt, she risked a glance sideways at Ezra. He was looking directly back at her.

I don’t want it to end.

Calla looked away from him quickly. She had no idea what she was feeling. Or at least that’s what she wanted to believe.

“Where’s the siren?” Caspian asked as he munched on his dinner.

“Looking for water,” Calla said around a bite of the juicy pear.

“Good.” Kestrel nodded. “Now all we need is a fire.” His arms were full of thin ash-tree branches, and he set them down in a neat pile. The next several minutes were spent watching Kestrel start a fire. Soon after, Delphine

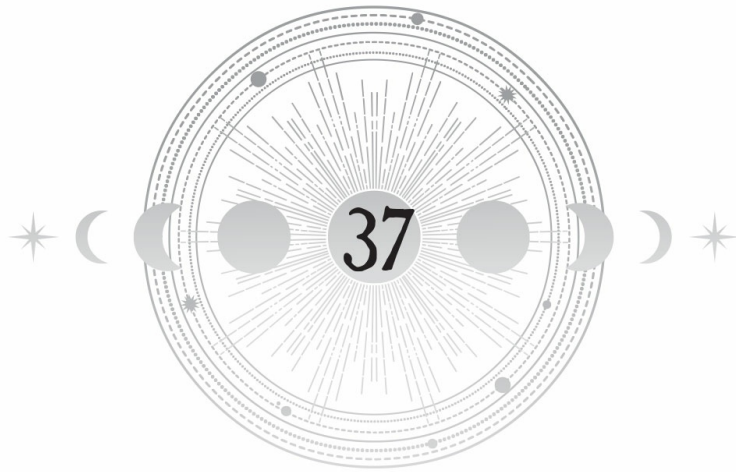
reappeared with directions to a nearby spring with fresh water, and Gideon left with all their containers to help her replenish their supply. Somewhere in between all the commotion, Calla had started drifting off, and when Hannah tapped her shoulder gently, she groggily blinked her eyes open.

“Hmm?” she asked.

“You can sleep on this,” Hannah said softly as she offered Calla’s purple ensemble, balled up into a makeshift pillow.

“Thanks, Han,” she said as she tucked it under her head and stretched out on her side in front of the warm flames.

Everyone else continued to whisper to each other, and at some point, Gideon and Delphine returned with the water. But Calla was already being dragged into the pitch-black depths of her mind. Hoping that whatever dreams she had this time were more pleasant than the last.



When's the last time you faced a Valkyrie?" Ezra asked Caspian as the group wove between the gray trees in sync.

It was a couple hours past dawn. Kestrel had made sure they didn't sleep much longer after the sun had come up, and Ezra and Cass were currently embroiled in a debate over who would beat who in a fight.

"I'm the Valkyrie whisperer, Ez," Cass leveled at his friend with a grin. "One conversation with me and I don't even need to take them out—they leave happily on their own."

"Please," Ezra said in disbelief. "More like they see Gideon and Kestrel standing behind you and run away from *them*."

"Well, if you don't believe me, let's put it to the test," Cass offered with a deviant grin.

"There will be no beating the shit out of each other until we get back home," Gideon declared to the two of them.

"Oh, come on, Gid, just one little spar—"

"What's that?" Hannah pointed ahead of them, effectively cutting Caspian off.

The group came up short as a glittering expanse of sea appeared in the distance, the water's surface shining like glass.

"Wow," Hannah breathed.

All of them rushed forward, heading toward the bank a few yards away.

Calla followed until she noticed out of the corner of her eye that Delphine was not moving.

In fact, Delphine was not breathing.

“Delph?” she questioned.

Delphine swung her starlight eyes to Calla, the panic in them palpable.

“What—”

“Siren’s Sea,” Delphine choked out.

Calla sucked in a breath. She turned for the group to tell them to stop when a sudden vibration snaked through the ground beneath them. Calla wobbled slightly but kept her balance, reaching out toward her friend as the tremors continued. Delphine lifted a hand to point in the direction of the water and Calla let out a strangled sound as she grasped on to her friend’s hand.

The previously calm glass-like sea was now a swirling mass of navy-and-black water. When the ground beneath them finally stopped trembling, Calla had to forcibly tug Delphine forward to catch up with the others.

“What on earth was *that*?” Hannah asked as Calla pulled Delphine up to the group.

Calla made eye contact with Gideon, her concern reflected in his eyes.

“I have no id—” Gideon started just as the shaking resumed.

This time the earth began to crack.

A long fault line made its way through the ground between them and Calla took a hurried step back into Delphine to avoid the growing rift that was pushing them toward the sea. Ezra leaped over the quickly forming crevice to grab for the girls before they both toppled over into the water. Calla let out a yelp as she slipped on the edge of a crumbling bank.

“Calla!” Ezra called out as he tried to grasp on to her, but she was too tangled up with Delphine for him to catch them both.

As she and Delph slid over the ledge onto the angled bank, they dug their fingers into the ground, trying to hold on. They were at least fifteen feet above the water, and Calla could barely see over the edge as the other half of the earth that the rest of their companions were standing on broke farther away. Hannah tried to reach out for Delphine, but Gideon wrapped an arm around her middle and yanked her back before she could fall into the large gap.

Calla looked at Delphine to her left as the earth kept shifting down, as if it was specifically trying to dump them into the water.

No, not them.

Delphine.

There was no way the girls could pull themselves up with the earth working against them like this, but *Ezra*, who was crouched on the ground above them trying to work his way over, could easily pull one of them up before the side of the bank crumbled away completely. Delphine's eyes widened as she realized what Calla was about to do.

"Calla, *no*—" Delphine began as Calla yelled, "Ezra, pull her up! Pull her up *now*!"

"But—"

"Pull Delphine up now!"

Ezra stared at her for barely a beat before reaching out to haul Delphine up and over toward more solid ground. As soon as the siren was in the clear, Ezra turned for Calla, but the movement of yanking Delph up had caused the ground she was clinging on to break away further. She tried not to scream as she slid down the ledge and plunged into the water below.

The first thing she noticed as she sank beneath the inky surface was that the water was cold. Too cold. She started kicking her feet out around her, trying to gather her bearings, but she couldn't see anything in the dark water, and the tumultuous currents were making it hard for her to move in any singular direction. It was then that she noticed the second thing that was wrong about this water—she was not the only one in it.

Something rough brushed against her legs, and Calla panicked, accidentally letting out the last bit of her air as she did. She kicked harder and propelled herself up and up and up, but she could not find the surface.

That's when a hand grasped on to her arm.

A webbed hand.

Calla clawed at where it gripped her, but the hand only tightened as it dragged her through the sea. She was starting to think this was how she was going to die when her head finally broke out of the water. She gulped for air, hacking dark blue liquid out of her lungs as she tried to stay above the surface.

"It's me, Calla," Delphine reassured her as she began wiping away the hair and water from Calla's eyes.

Calla sputtered a moment more, but with her hair out of her vision, she could finally see Delphine's face right in front of her. The siren's silver hair was slicked back, and Calla noticed where her friend's gills had involuntarily

split open on both sides of her neck.

“I thought I felt something,” Calla worried in a raspy voice. “This is not good.”

Delphine nodded in agreement. She moved behind Calla and hooked her arms beneath Calla’s underarms in order to help her swim through the rough waters.

When they reached the edge, Calla looked back to her friend. “How do we get up?”

“Here!” Ezra called above them, a black cloak dangling down to them.

“You first,” Delphine said.

Calla didn’t argue this time, she merely reached up to grab on to Ezra’s cloak and—

It was inches out of her grasp.

“Ezra, I can’t reach!”

Ezra grunted as he leaned forward more. Calla propelled herself up, with Delph’s assistance, and just barely grabbed on—until Ezra lost his balance and came tumbling down, too.

Calla shielded herself from the spray of water as Ezra plummeted beneath the surface and Delphine let out a frustrated sigh as she dove back beneath the waves to fish out the prince. Calla waited for a few worrying moments, the raging waters making it hard for her to tread, before both their heads finally popped back up.

“You stupid witch! I swear to the *Gods*—”

“How is this my fault?” Ezra sputtered. “I was trying to help!”

“Yeah, well—”

“Hey!” Calla interrupted, her teeth chattering a bit from the cold. “Can we please—”

A wave suddenly came crashing directly into them. The midnight water almost seemed to wrap around Calla’s waist like twisted limbs as she kicked wildly, but then she felt two arms wrap around her torso and yank her back above the surface. She sputtered for a moment, her sinuses burning from the water that had shot up her nose, but the muscular arms held her in place the entire time she tried to catch her breath.

Ezra.

“Are you all right?” His breathing was labored—from swallowing too much water or having to keep them both from sinking under the tumultuous waves, she couldn’t tell.

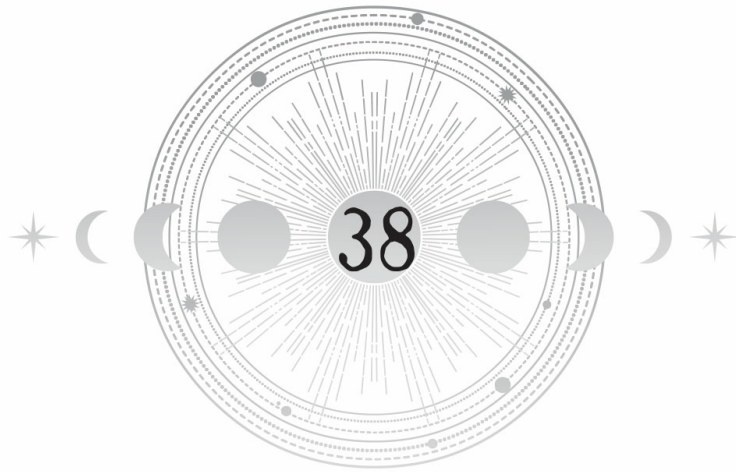
“I think that’s a question you should wait to ask until we get out of here.” She coughed a bit of water out of her lungs between words and violently shivered against the chill melting into her bones. He pulled her tighter into his chest, and she could feel every muscle in his body through their soaking-wet clothes, which were molded to their bodies like a second skin. Luckily, she was already too distracted to be focused on the way his body fit perfectly against hers, though somewhere in the back of her mind she noted that, aside from being in imminent danger, this proximity to him was not at all uncomfortable.

Calla searched for Delphine in the dark water. Droplets of water were dripping from her eyelashes, blurring her vision, and she quickly blinked them away as she asked, “What happened to Delph?”

“Somewhere below,” he spoke, his mouth right next to her ear, his warm breath making her shudder again.

She was about to say that they should try and swim to the bank and wait for Delph, but before she could open her mouth again, she felt something wrap around her ankle. Something that did not feel like Delphine’s hand.

“*Ezra!*” she screeched, clawing his chest in panic, but it was too late.



In a split second, Calla was pulled harshly back into the depth of the sea, right out of Ezra's arms.

The roar in her ears was just as much Ezra's voice calling her name as it was the sound of water rushing in around her. Her eyes were still wide open, and she could see him diving down after her, a black blade cutting through the currents as he tried desperately to reach her. The currents were too hard to swim against without fins or a tail, and for every foot he propelled himself down, the waves pulled him in a different direction.

There was a moment when she thought his shadow-covered face would be the last thing she ever saw, but in the next instant, it was Delphine's peering down at her. The siren's blue complexion almost completely camouflaged her in the sea's depths—a watery apparition. Delph swam as blithely as a serpent as she dove down to break the hold on Calla's ankle and Calla began frantically swimming up again. Delphine fluidly slinked past her, gripping Calla's wrist firmly on her way upward and assisting her friend back to the top.

The minute Calla's head broke the surface, she wanted to burst into tears.

"*What in the Hells was that?*" Ezra demanded as he came up beside them, swimming over to Calla and slicking her hair back from her face, wiping water out of her eyes as she greedily clung to his shoulders.

She was surprised at her boldness to cling to the prince so readily, but

Ezra was familiar, and warm, and safe, and she didn't care in this moment about any of the tension that was still between them. If they drowned, none of that would matter anyway.

"Water sylphs," Delphine said, showing zero signs of exertion. "But they aren't the problem."

Ezra's laugh was laced with malice. "They almost *drowned* her. I officially hate sylphs."

"You and me both," Delphine retorted. "We need to give them something —" She stopped speaking, eyeing Ezra with a suspicious look.

"*What?*" he demanded.

"I need your shirt."

"We are about to drown, and you want me to *strip?*"

"*Give me your shirt!*" Delphine waved her hands at him frantically, her words urgent. Calla was pretty sure she was hallucinating from the deprivation of oxygen. Never in her life did she think she would hear Delphine demand for Ezra to take off his clothes. But here they were.

Ezra didn't bother arguing this time; he simply moved Calla's arms to clasp around his neck and reached down to peel off the layer of clothing that was glued to his body. The already-difficult task was made more awkward with Calla clinging on to him for dear life, but no way was she letting go of him. If she was dragged down again, he was going to the Hells with her.

Ezra slung the sopping-wet shirt at Delphine, who easily caught it before it slapped her in the face, and they watched as the siren disappeared into the waves. Calla's entire body was shaking and Ezra ran his hands over her arms to try and create some heat as they waited for the siren to come back. Calla tucked her face into the crook of his neck and squeezed her eyes shut, trying to keep herself from hyperventilating.

"We're going to be okay," he reassured her. "We didn't come all this way to be drowned by a bunch of overgrown water sprites."

Calla let out a shaky laugh at his attempt at a joke but otherwise didn't respond. Neither of them quite believed his words, if they were honest with themselves.

A few excruciating moments later and Delphine's head popped back up on their left.

"All right, that will hold them for a few minutes—maybe. Ezra's shirt isn't exactly the prize a rare dagger is. Now, I'm going to get us out."

"How?" Ezra demanded.

Delphine drew in a deep breath.

The siren closed her eyes and, just before Ezra could annoy her with another question, they were suddenly moving. The water shot them straight into the air like a spring before depositing them all the way onto the other side of the gap in the earth, where their friends waited.

“Oh, thank the Gods!” Hannah sobbed as the water around them melted away and slid back into the sea. The blond witch rushed forward and threw herself on the ground to wrap her arms around Delphine. Calla was still stunned, clinging to Ezra’s bare chest so tightly he had to gently pry her hands away.

“Are you okay?” He looked over her face, smoothing her hair away like he had in the water.

She wanted to say no, she was very much *not* okay, but she managed somewhat of a nod before moving to lift herself off of him. Caspian came over and reached down to clasp Ezra’s hand and haul him up, the prince also looking disoriented from the entire ordeal as he balanced himself on his feet. Gideon crouched down in front of Calla.

“Need a hand?” he asked. She nodded weakly and he gently helped her to her feet. As she shakily reached up to wring out her hair, Gideon added, “Here, I can help with that, too.” He stepped back slightly and lifted a hand toward her. In the next moment, a tornado of warm air enveloped her, effectively drying her off within a few moments.

“Useful,” she breathed, nodding slightly in thanks and combing her fingers through her long waves.

“What in the Hells was that?” Caspian finally asked after a few minutes of shaken silence. “And why is Ez shirtless?”

Delphine let Hannah help her up, and Calla noticed the siren’s gills were already starting to close, the webs on her friend’s hands and feet slowly absorbing back into her body. Delph’s waterproof skin was covered in little beads of liquid that rolled right off as she shook them away. The only thing still wet on her entire body was her hair and clothes, which Gideon quickly remedied. As Delphine’s hair blew around her face, Calla caught a glimpse of the glimmering tattoo on the back of the siren’s neck. Calla had seen the special marking many times before, but Delphine was always very careful not to show it off to strangers. Which was apparent in the way the girl was now quickly smoothing her silver hair back down on her nape before the others noticed it as well.

“There were sylphs in the water, and Ezra’s shirt was an easy token to give them,” Delphine told everyone.

“It almost seemed like it wanted you to fall in,” Ezra accused the sea with a dark look. Calla looked away from his abs as quickly as possible, banishing the thoughts of how she had just been clinging to them as if her existence depended on it.

“That is precisely what it wanted,” Delphine confirmed, her voice taking on a peculiar hollow edge. “And no thanks to *you* I had to use my magic to get us out, which means we need to get the Hells away from here immediately.”

“I didn’t mean to fall in—”

“Do you *mean* to do anything?”

“Delph,” Calla admonished lightly.

“You’re taking his side?” Delphine flicked an annoyed look over to her friend.

“He was only trying to help. It was an accident,” Calla reasoned.

“Well, he didn’t help. And now—” Delph’s voice broke, and Hannah stepped next to her and wrapped an arm round her waist in comfort. Calla was stunned. Not once had she ever seen Delphine so visibly shaken. She knew enough about her friend’s past to know that seeing the place where she was born, where so many terrible things had happened, must have been traumatic. Still, she was shocked that Delphine was displaying this much emotion in front of strangers.

“We need to get her away from here,” Calla said, still slightly out of breath. She wasn’t sure what the full repercussions would be for Delphine after this, but her friend was clearly upset and she wasn’t going to stand around and question her any longer.

“Why would a siren need to get away from Siren’s Sea so badly?” Kestrel questioned suspiciously.

“None of your business,” all three girls snapped at the same time.

“I think it’s our business when—”

“Shut it, Kestrel,” Ezra growled.

The girls glanced back to Ezra, shocked.

Kestrel looked murderous. “Remember who you’re talking to,” he said.

“I’m your prince. And unlike my brother, you aren’t *my* commander,” Ezra shot back at him. “And technically Gideon outranks you since he’s the heir. So, remember who *you’re* talking to.”

Ezra's cheeks turned slightly pink, but he didn't stand down, and Calla was impressed considering how intimidating Kestrel was. Delphine looked slightly grateful.

"Not to upset anyone anymore," Cass inserted cautiously, "but I do think Kestrel has a point. How are we supposed to assess the danger we are in if we don't know what's going on?"

"That's the problem with all of you." Ezra rolled his eyes. "You think like warriors first. They clearly don't want to talk about it, and we need to move on. Unless you want to wait for this stupid forest to dump us back into the water again? I do not volunteer for the second round, and I am done with sylphs taking my things."

As soon as Ezra finished his sentence, as if on cue, a haunting melody called out from the watery grave behind them. Delphine's ice-blue face went white.

"Let's go *now*!" she choked out.

"What in the Hells—" Cass stared toward the sea in confusion.

"Siren's song. That's why the little water beauty wants to get away so bad," Kestrel said with accusation as he gave Delphine a once-over. "You used your magic in the water, and now they know you're here."

Calla shot a worried glance at her friend.

"Yes."

"And they don't sound happy," Kestrel continued.

"No." Delphine's jaw tightened.

Kestrel looked at her for a second longer. "Then we should've been running minutes ago."

Delphine stared him square in the eyes as she answered one final time: "Yes."

Before any of them could register the implications of Kestrel's question or Delphine's answer, a strand of water suddenly lashed out between them.

The tentacle-like stream wrapped itself around Ezra's middle and hauled the witch into the air. Caspian swore as Kestrel threw a hand out in front of himself and blasted the stream. The water froze solid, and Ezra quickly pulled a small knife out of a small hidden pocket in his pants and slammed the hilt against the ice until it shattered and dropped him to the forest floor.

Calla rushed over to him. "Are you okay?"

He groaned as he hauled himself back to his feet. "What in the *Hells*?"

Another stream of water shot up and loomed over them, and Gideon

yelled, “Move!” Their entire group turned on their heels as a unit and ran.

Calla kept pace at Ezra’s side as they bolted away, glancing back to make sure the girls were keeping up. Just before she turned forward, she caught a glimpse of another stream shooting up behind Hannah and Delphine.

“*Delph!*”

Delphine spun just in time to dodge the water. She threw up both hands in front of her, palms out, before waving them both and using her magic to split the giant water-tentacle in half. The water rained down on them, and Delphine grabbed Hannah’s sleeve and hauled her forward as Calla and Ezra paused long enough for them to catch up.

“Do you think it’s going to give up?” Hannah breathed hard as she pushed herself to run faster.

“No,” Delphine said, her voice barely audible over the rush of air in Calla’s ears.

They finally reached a thicket of ash trees, the others on their heels, and they hurriedly wove their way through to the other side, scraping up their clothing and arms as they did.

Ahead of them stood a large tree, the only spot of color in the middle of the currently gray-and-white forest. Calla did not think much of the monstrous growth except that its large branches drooped so low they almost touched the ground, and getting around them was going to slow them down tremendously.

Ezra cursed at the sight.

Just as they moved forward, a disturbing rustle sounded from behind them, accompanied by a symphony of sharp snaps as yet another tendril of water blasted through the mess of trees. The jet speared right for Delphine, who flattened herself to the ground. The water shot past her, blasting through a branch of the large tree in the distance and sending shards of bark flying.

That’s one way to clear a path, Calla thought.

As that stream disappeared, the group moved forward—just as another stream shot toward Delphine, indeed refusing to give up. Gideon quickly lunged to yank the siren out of the way of the water, but this time when it missed, it did not crash into the tree.

No, this time something *caught* it.

Calla couldn’t see exactly who, or what, had the water in its grasp, but she could suddenly make out a shadowy figure sitting up in one of the tree’s branches. The figure whipped the water, causing a ripple of waves to travel

down its form before it burst into droplets in the air. The group sidestepped the falling rain as Kestrel stepped forward to get a better look at whatever had just saved them from having to deal with another strand of the demonic water.

“Show yourself,” the commander demanded. Calla wasn’t sure she wanted whatever it was to show itself. Not after it had wiped away the tendril of magic water like it was a wisp of smoke.

Cass stepped up beside his commander and grinned. “Come out, come out, whoever you are!”

“Are you sure that’s what you’d like?” a rich voice purred from the shadows of the tree.

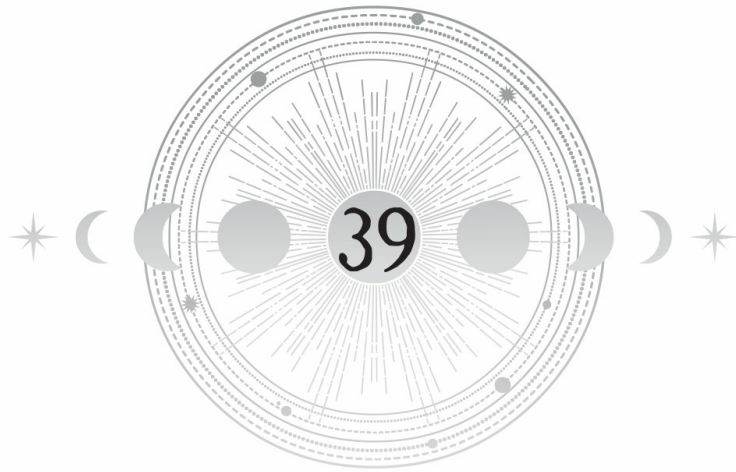
A shiver ran down Calla’s spine, and she watched as Kestrel’s already-pale skin went ghost white. The commander wrenched himself back, but Cass didn’t seem to get the memo as he stood where he was and crossed his arms.

“Don’t tell me we’ve run into an angel in this demonic forest?” Cass quipped as the rest of them looked at him as if he had lost his mind.

“Caspian,” Gideon whispered to his friend in warning. Calla looked at the Onyx Prince, and as he met her eyes she could see how much fear was in them. She didn’t understand why, but she was also suddenly afraid. As if her body knew a secret her brain had not yet realized.

That secret was quickly revealed, however, when the light in the forest became much too bright, as if someone had just lit a fire, illuminating every inch of the clearing. And there, sitting on a branch in the tree, looking every bit as glorious as an angel would, sat the being they had been searching for.

They had found the Valkyrie.



The woman elegantly unfurled herself from the branch she was lounging on, almost floating down to the ground as if gravity did not affect her like the rest of them. She gracefully pulled herself up to her full height, her lustrous mane of black curls gliding over her shoulders and down her back as she looked upon on the group of intruders. She was wearing a deep scarlet dress made of shiny satin that elegantly dropped to the floor, and a bronze amulet that hung around her neck and rested against her clavicle. When she walked forward, her long, graceful legs peeked through the two slits in the material that traveled all the way up to the tops of her thighs.

Calla tried not to gawk at her beauty; her warm brown skin almost seemed opalescent in the filtered light of the forest, and her deep brown irises sparkled with a wicked glint. She was exactly the portrait of beauty that had always been Calla's weakness in the women she was attracted to. And to be honest—even the men. Ethereal in a way that was lethal.

"You have quite a mouth on you, witch," the Valkyrie said, a grin stretching across her face.

Calla watched as the Valkyrie reached out a sharp nail to stroke Caspian's face, and there was some part of her that was almost jealous that Cass was the one receiving her attention. The sane part of Calla, the part that liked that her heart was still securely in her chest, knew that notion was absolutely ludicrous.

Cass simply stood in awe—a bird caught in a snake’s trap just like the rest of them. Everyone was collectively holding their breaths.

“Who do you think you are,” the Valkyrie began slowly, “to talk that way to a Valkyrie? Do you not fear that I will carve out your beating heart?”

Every one of Calla’s senses told her that this was their warning to *run*, but none of them could seem to make their feet work. Cass, however, didn’t flinch.

“My name is Caspian,” he answered carefully, his silver eyes bright with mischief.

“Caspian,” the Valkyrie said, trying the sound out on her own tongue. “Tell me, *Caspian*, do you like danger?”

Caspian’s cheeks darkened but still he made no move to get away.

“Because I think you and your friends must if you’re here in this forest,” the Valkyrie continued.

“And if I said yes?” Cass retorted in a way that made Calla think at least some of his confidence was merely bravado.

The Valkyrie lifted her delicate brows in surprise, as if she didn’t think he’d dare have the gall to bite back. Calla peeked over at Gideon, who looked as if he had never been more worried than he was now, watching his friend play with fire right in front of them all.

“I think,” the Valkyrie hummed at the witch, “under different circumstances we might have been friends.”

Caspian tilted his head at her, his signature smile lighting up his face once again. “What is your name?”

“Amina.”

“Well, *Amina*, you happen to be exactly who we were looking for.”

Amina pulled back. “Why would anyone with a soul come looking for a Valkyrie in the Neverending Forest? Are you in need of someone to take yours?”

“Unfortunately, none of us are willing to part with our souls just yet,” Caspian told her.

“Oh, please.” Her laugh echoed through the forest like haunting bells. “You wouldn’t have much of a choice if I desired them.”

“We did not come here to offer our souls, but we do need to ask a favor.”

“A favor from a Valkyrie comes at a steep price, witch.”

“I would expect nothing less.”

Watching the two of them volley back and forth was making Calla more

unsettled by the second. She had no clue how Cass was managing to keep himself together in the Valkyrie's presence, but Caspian *had* joked earlier about being a Valkyrie whisperer. Maybe there was more to that claim than she had thought.

Amina peered at Cass carefully for a moment longer. As if trying to decide if she were curious enough to listen to his terms or if it would be more worth her time to carve out all their hearts and move on with her business instead.

"What is it that you dare ask me for, witch? After I have already graciously helped you out with your little siren problem." She narrowed her eyes toward Delphine.

Hannah bravely took a step toward Delphine in protection, but the siren didn't look nearly as unsettled about the encounter as everyone else. Though the blond witch was shorter than Delphine, and her body so much softer compared to the siren's athletic build, Calla believed Hannah would absolutely attempt to take on the Valkyrie if she thought the siren was being threatened.

"We require a single Valkyrie feather," Gideon inserted. "And we are willing to bargain for it, of course."

Amina laughed. "As if I would give that to you for free. You witches are always much too cocky. Especially *you*." She directed this at Cass.

"Considering you were almost taken out by a tree."

They all snapped their heads to Cass, Delphine trying not to laugh at the Valkyrie's words. Caspian's ears warmed, but there was no other sign of embarrassment on his amused face.

"You saw that, did you?" he said sheepishly.

"I see a lot of things."

"What is your price, then?" Gideon moved on.

"A Valkyrie feather is a rare and priceless thing." Amina smiled at them, beginning a slow pace in front the group as she contemplated their request.

"The power to bring back a soul is highly coveted, you know."

Their entire group, besides Kestrel, looked at her with a mixture of shock and confusion. The Valkyrie looked as if that's precisely the reaction she was hoping for.

"I have a feeling you aren't collecting the feather for yourselves, though."

Amina stopped her pacing right in front of Gideon. Calla was entranced as she stared at the two of them together, both radiating their own brand of

danger. An airy breeze kicked up at that moment, caressing its way through the group, making the Valkyrie's curls billow out behind her and rustling Gideon's midnight tresses over his forehead.

"Tell me, *Prince*, are you sure you know what you need?"

Her question was soft, almost as if she were whispering it intimately to him and the rest of them were not meant to hear it. Gideon stayed silent, simply watching Amina as if she would strike at any moment.

Calla was starting to think he wouldn't answer her at all, when he finally said, "Yes."

"And you're willing to offer anything for it?" She tilted her head.

Gideon hesitated, and Calla caught how his silver eyes flashed black just before he answered, "Yes."

"And you," Amina said, turning her head to address Kestrel. "You are ancient compared to these fledglings. Do you not think, in all your experiences, that this is a bad idea? Bargaining with a Valkyrie, even an exiled one, playing with magic and fate as if you know anything about it?"

Kestrel looked as if he wanted to say something, but one glance at Gideon and he clenched his jaw shut instead.

"Fine, then I have decided my price," she said in her deep melodious voice.

Calla felt Hannah nudge the back of her hand in anticipation, and she turned her palm toward the other girl, letting the witch grasp on to her in comfort as they waited for the Valkyrie to continue.

"I will trade you a feather for your heart." Amina ran one of her black talons over Gideon's chest.

"*What?*" Calla gasped involuntarily, gripping on to Hannah tighter.

Amina didn't so much as glance in Calla's direction, keeping her eyes firmly on Gideon's. The six of them watched as the elder prince and the Valkyrie stared each other down for what felt like an eternity.

Surely Gideon was not considering her price—

"Fine."

This time it was Ezra who was horrified. "*What?* Gideon, have you lost your damn mind?" he demanded.

Gideon ignored his brother, never wavering his gaze from the woman. "But you cannot have it yet."

"Two days."

Gideon nodded. "We have a deal."

“Gideon, what in the *Hells*?” Ezra’s fury bled into his words.

Before Ezra could finish scolding his brother, however, Amina let out a huff of laughter before stepping back from their group and lifting her arms out from her body. She seemed to glow for a brief moment, her russet-brown skin shimmering as two large, powerful wings sprouted out behind her.

The wings were enormous, and Calla had to wonder how the Valkyrie’s angular frame could hold them up. Covered in marbled white-and-brown feathers, the tapered tips on each wing gave way to a single sharp talon, a talon that was hooked and black as night, and Calla cringed at the thought of being on the receiving end of that particular weapon.

Amina reached over to her left and quickly plucked out a single brown feather before both wings evaporated like smoke behind her. It was as if they were never there in the first place.

Calla blinked.

Amina delicately held out the feather she had plucked between two clawed fingers, inspecting it carefully.

“I have to say,” she said matter-of-factly, “I wasn’t expecting to ever get to meet one of the infamous Blood Warriors in my lifetime.”

Calla glanced to Gideon in surprise before opening her mouth to ask, “How—”

“Don’t waste your time asking questions that don’t matter, lovely.” The Valkyrie spoke to Calla as if they were old friends, a familiarity in her voice that was not earned, but somehow fit. “All of you have made irrevocable decisions by coming here—by searching me out. My suggestion is that you start asking yourself *why*.”

Calla wanted to explain—explain that she knew exactly why she was here—but she never got the chance because the woman was already holding the feather out to Gideon in offering.

“Once you take this, we have a bargain.”

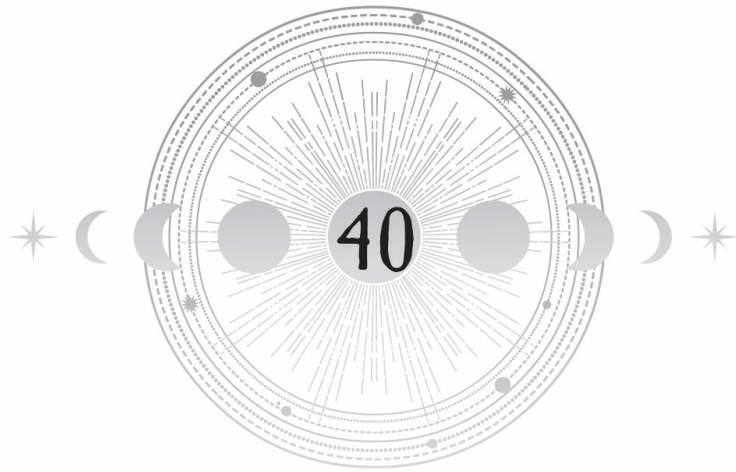
Gideon stared at the offering for a beat before finally, with excruciating slowness, taking it from her fingertips.

“Two days, *Prince*,” Amina reminded him.

The way she said the word *prince* had Gideon narrowing his eyes, and Calla watched carefully to see what his next move would be. Gideon didn’t bother responding; he merely tucked the feather into his bag and dipped his chin in a nod—their cue to leave.

Kestrel gave the Valkyrie one last look of disdain before he followed.

They maneuvered around the tree, and Calla couldn't help herself as she glanced back to see where Amina was speaking to Cass. They all watched as the woman leaned forward to whisper something into Caspian's ear before quickly stepping away and launching herself into the tops of the trees. Her ethereal wings reappeared and sent down a powerful gust of wind as she completely disappeared in the newly darkening sky.



What did she say to you?” Kestrel asked as Cass walked to them.

Caspian’s silver eyes swung to Gideon, and the witch crossed his arms over his still-healing chest as he spoke. “All right, Gid. When were you planning on telling us *you* were the Heartbreak Prince?”

Kestrel and Ezra looked at the blue-haired witch in astonishment while the three girls looked at each other in confusion.

“What in the Hells did she say, Caspian?” Kestrel demanded.

“She said she hopes when she comes back for the heart of the Heartbreak Prince, she’ll get to see me again.”

“None of this makes sense anymore,” Hannah complained.

“Do you have any idea what she meant by that?” Calla cut her eyes to Gideon with suspicion, ignoring Hannah.

“It meant nothing,” Gideon said deliberately as he made eye contact with Calla. “The Heartbreak Prince is an old legend, a story.”

“The Heartbreak Prince is a Gods’ legend, Gideon. The Valkyrie’s accusation isn’t to be taken lightly!” Kestrel scolded him, his eyes blazing with anger at how flippantly the prince was disregarding the situation.

“Well, are you going to tell us this story or not?” Delphine huffed.

“We don’t have the time—” Gideon began to protest before Ezra cut his brother off.

“We need to stop and rest, Gid. I don’t know about you all, but almost

drowning took a lot out of me today.” Ezra laughed bitterly. “Then you will have plenty of time to fill them in. Unless you want to continue keeping secrets from everyone?”

“We all have our secrets,” Gideon spoke clearly, and though he said *all*, Calla knew he was really talking to Ezra. “I promise you—the Heartbreak Prince is the last curse you need to be worried about at the moment.”

Ezra stared at his brother with a sardonic smirk, shaking his head in disbelief, his shoulder-length hair bouncing with the movement. “You always have to do everything alone, don’t you, Gideon?”

“You’re here with me, aren’t you?”

Ezra dragged his eyes over to Calla, and she was taken aback by how intense his gaze was as he answered, never looking away from her. “No, I don’t think I’m here with *you* at all.”

Ezra didn’t say anything else as he turned on his heels and stalked away, and Calla did something that a few days ago she would have never believed. She followed him.



Ezra disappeared into the forest faster than the Valkyrie had, and Calla could barely keep up with him the farther and farther away they got from the group. He didn’t stop when the voices of the others became dim whispers, and he didn’t stop when eventually the only thing that could be heard was their breathing tangled with sounds of twigs snapping beneath their feet.

“Ezra,” she said to him.

She picked up her pace and rushed ahead of him, stepping directly in front of him and causing him to come to a grinding halt.

“Ezra.”

His name on her lips was so familiar a sound that, for a moment, she could easily picture a scene of them not in the middle of the gray forest, but in the dingy gray basement of the inn. She could see him glancing over to her behind his hand of cards and giving her a wink, letting her know his hand was good and that she could go ahead and inflate the bid. She could feel his lips on her cheek as he congratulated her on another good night, right after walking her back to her apartment.

“What did you mean by that?” she asked before she imploded.

“I meant,” he said slowly, “that the moment I decided to come along, the

decision had nothing to do with helping Gideon.”

Her heart started beating faster. “Then why are you so angry at him?”

“Because he always does this!” he exclaimed. “He thinks he has to take on everything by himself and he doesn’t care how that makes anyone else feel.”

“How *do* you feel?” She wrinkled her forehead at him. “Why does it matter that he might be this Heartbreak Prince if you just said that . . . ?”

“That what?” he questioned, his voice dipping low, laced with heat.

“That you didn’t come here to help *him*,” she finished.

“Because I’m afraid the two of you are going to make that damn curse come true.”

“Ezra, I don’t know what the Heartbreak Prince curse even *does*.” She reared her head back a little. “Why are you so concerned with me and your brother?”

“Because everyone chooses him. Everyone *always* chooses him. And I can deal with that, Calla. I can take it from my mother, and my friends—the few I have anyway. But you?” He rubbed a hand over his chiseled jaw as he looked away from her.

“I wasn’t under the impression that I was choosing *anyone*.”

“You’re telling me you didn’t trust him the moment you met him?”

She thought back to the auction, and how she had tried to go with anyone *except* Gideon, and laughed lightly, “I assure you I did *not*. And you made it seem as if you didn’t want to be here anyway, Ezra. You were planning on returning to the Witch Realms before Gideon told you that you didn’t have a choice, were you not?”

“That’s because I didn’t think you’d want me around after everything I did. Everything I *said*,” he spoke solemnly. “All I’ve wanted this entire time is for my brother to be back home, safe. And you . . .”

“And I, *what*? What do you *want* from me, Ezra?”

He dropped his usual mask as he said, “I just want you to look at me how you used to.”

Her breath caught in her throat.

“I want . . .” He hesitated, taking a deep breath. “I want you to trust me again. I want you to not let the Fates con you into another curse.”

“And what about for yourself, Ezra? If we all make it out of here alive, are you going to go back to the Witch Realms and act as if you don’t have all the potential in the world, too?”

“I have nothing under my mother’s thumb or in Gideon’s shadow.”

“Don’t do that.” She shook her head in frustration. “The entire time we have known each other, long before I knew Gideon existed, I have seen how you have courted darkness. Because, for some ungodly reason, you think that’s where you belong. You’ve put *yourself* in Gideon’s shadow.”

“Maybe that’s because I’m afraid I have no light of my own.” His mask slipped firmly back into place once more and Calla wanted to scream.

“If I didn’t think you were capable of any kind of good,” Calla pointed out, “I would have never gone back to the inn the other night. After I found your note. After everything you said.”

Ezra watched her for a moment, his eyes flicking between hers, the heat in his own extinguishing. “Why did you follow me, Calla?” he finally asked, exhaustion in his voice.

The words were out of her mouth before she could think twice about them.

“I was choosing you.”

His breathing hitched. She tilted her chin up so she could look him more directly in the eye, remembering those words he had said to her all those nights ago, and knowing what she said next meant she forgave them. Forgave him.

“I’m ready to stop fighting this,” she whispered to him.

One second everything in the forest around them was utterly frozen. And the next everything was on fire.

Ezra moved forward, a groan slipping from his throat as he grabbed her up by the waist and pushed her back, gently, against a tree. His lips came crushing down to hers in a consuming kiss, and Calla’s entire body almost sighed with relief. She had never been kissed like this before, hardly been touched before, but it was almost as if her body knew exactly how to respond to Ezra. She could feel her magic waking up, the Siphon inside of her coming to life as her skin made contact with his. She stamped that part of herself down, down, down, until all she could feel was the natural buzz of adrenaline coursing through her veins.

Her hands reached up into his hair and tangled themselves in the soft tendrils, a few of the long pieces tickling her face as he leaned down to deepen the kiss further. His arms moved around her back to lift her to him a little more as she tentatively pushed the tip of her tongue against his. He followed her lead, tilting his head to give her better access and lifted one of

the hands he had on her waist to lean it against the tree behind her. She could tell by the strain of his muscles as she dragged her hands from his hair and down his neck and shoulders that he was barely maintaining his control.

They stayed like that for a long, intoxicating moment until Calla's head was swimming so bad she knew she had to stop and come up for breath. She slowly moved her hands down to his chest, his *bare* chest, and gently pushed. He lifted his head from her, his lips looking just as swollen as hers felt. Calla couldn't tell where his pupils ended and his irises began, the depthless black of them sparkling with something akin to wonder and disbelief.

She was still catching her breath as he slowly unwrapped himself from her, and beneath her hands she could feel the irregular rise and fall of his own breathing. Then Ezra did one of the most shocking things she had ever seen him do.

He gave her a full-blown, dazzling smile.

The oxygen rushed out of her lungs.

"I've wanted— *Hells!*"

"What's wrong?" Calla asked as he jumped away from her.

"A pixie," he explained, lifting his left arm to inspect, sure enough, two little bite marks swelling with blood.

"This is not how I thought this was going to end," she noted.

He looked at her with a devilish grin. "How did you think it was going to end?"

"Behave," she told him, though her own smirk was trying to break free. "Or *I'll* bite you next."

"That isn't the threat you think it is, Calla." His smile grew wider.

"There's going to be no living with you after this," she muttered, pushing herself off the trunk of the tree. "We should head back. . . ."

Her words trailed off as she noticed the puzzled look on his face. He wasn't looking at her, but at the tree behind her. She spun around, and at first, she couldn't make sense of what she was seeing. Because there, on the bark she had been leaning against as Ezra kissed her, were blooming flowers. Their dark violet buds emerged from the tree's surface, before blossoming into larger flowers, petals unfurling and releasing a perfumed aroma around them.

"How?" she asked in confusion, glancing around the rest of the forest. Everywhere else she looked was gray and brown, not a single spot of color besides the black-and-purple blossoms covering where she had rested.

“This forest is strange,” Ezra noted.

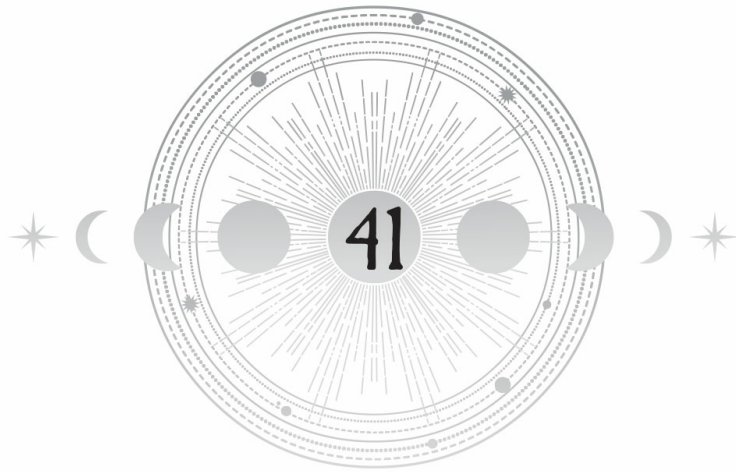
Calla nodded and turned back to him, repeating, “We should go back to the others before they begin to worry. Or worse—before Delphine comes after us.”

Ezra reached out and gently pulled on a tendril of her hair that had fallen into her face. “We still have a lot to talk about.”

“Yes,” she breathed. “But now . . .”

“I know,” he murmured. He looked at her confidently and promised, “This isn’t the end.”

Calla lifted her chin as she declared, “It never was.”



Caspian was trying to talk with a mouthful of fruit.

"I disagree. I think maybe they just want to be alone. Who's going to bother someone named the Witch Eater? They're probably just an introvert who likes privacy."

Ezra rolled his eyes. "I volunteer Cass to go in first once we get there."

Cass smiled. "I faced the Valkyrie first today and walked away, didn't I?"

"By the skin of your teeth," Ezra deadpanned.

"Nah, I like to think it's my charm." Cass took another rueful bite of his apple.

"Yeah, your charm is why she's already promised to see you again after she rips out your friend's heart. I wouldn't thank the Gods too soon for that one," Ezra shot back at Cass with a grin.

"You're in good spirits, Ezra," Gideon noted suspiciously.

Ezra glanced at Calla, but she avoided his gaze, not wanting to make a scene in front of everyone. When Delphine found out what they really did in the forest, it *would* be a scene.

"Is it finally time for the grumpy one to bore us with his spooky Heartache Prince story, or what?" Delphine asked in a bored voice from where she lay on the ground, her head cushioned in Hannah's lap.

"Heartbreak Prince, Delph," Calla corrected.

"Whatever." The siren waved a hand in the air.



The blond witch was carefully running her hands through her friend's hair, detangling it, while Calla sat next to them grooming her own dark waves. They had walked for almost another hour before Gideon had finally let them take a break. They all settled in for a quick snack before they had to begin bathing rotations in the stream that ran nearby.

"Which one is the grumpy one?" Cass questioned. "Ezra or Kestrel?"

"Ezra's not always grumpy," Hannah offered. "He's just moody."

Calla laughed at the exasperated expression Ezra made at the small witch.

"I'm not sure that's a fair statement based on just the last few days," he grumbled.

"Sure, it is," Gideon chimed in. "You've always been moody."

"Gideon's the levelheaded one," Caspian agreed. "It's why the two of them balance out so well." The witch waved a hand between Gideon and the commander.

"I thought that was because they both liked stabbing their friends and ordering people around," Ezra reasoned. The fact that Ezra and Gideon were currently exchanging good-natured jabs as if Ezra had never stormed off was mind-boggling to Calla. She had expected another confrontation when she and Ezra had returned to the others, but both men were acting like nothing had ever happened. She knew it wasn't her place to find it frustrating, but she did.

"I don't order people around," Gideon said defensively. Ezra and Cass both scoffed.

"But you *do* like stabbing your friends?" Delphine asked nonchalantly.

"Maybe that part just applies to me," Cass allowed.

Gideon turned to Ezra and Calla, searching for any help he could get. Ezra simply lifted one of the canteens to his mouth to take a swig, a smirk on his face.

"Don't look at me." Calla raised her hands. "The first time we spoke you were ordering me to go home with you."

Ezra choked on the water he was drinking. Delphine lifted her head out of Hannah's lap a bit to shoot a glare at the elder prince, who was rolling his eyes.

"That is not the entire story—"

Kestrel, who had been silently watching their banter until now, quipped,

“Are you all going to shut up long enough for me to tell the story?”

Calla twisted her mouth at his rude interruption and Cass pointed to the commander, “You’re right, Ez, you aren’t *that* grumpy.”

“Appreciated.” Ezra nodded.

“Well?” Calla prodded Kestrel as she crossed her arms over her chest in annoyance. “If you’re going to interrupt everyone, your story better be good.”

“If what the Valkyrie said was true,” the commander began, “then Gideon has a lot more issues than erasing his Rolls of Fate.”

Calla raised her brows in concern.

“A long time ago, there was an immortal prince who broke a mortal’s heart. The heartbroken mortal made an ill-advised deal with the Fates to place a curse on the immortal prince. But the mortal didn’t choose their words carefully enough, and as all deals with the Gods go, the curse got a bit . . . out of hand. They had only wanted to spurn their lover but ended up creating a permanent mess for every immortal prince after him.”

Cass took a noisy bite of his fruit, and everyone shot him a look. He smiled sheepishly and waved for Kestrel to continue.

“There’s only ever one Heartbreak Prince at a time, and each time that prince dies the very next immortal prince born is one unlucky bastard. The issue is that if a prince is born with the curse, he wouldn’t know it until he had already lost his heart. Because the curse can only kill him if he falls in love.”

“That’s a horrible curse,” Hannah said mournfully, dropping the strands of Delph’s hair she had been playing with.

“Are any curses *good*?” Kestrel asked dryly, and Delphine shot the commander a murderous look.

“The Gods have a sick sense of humor,” Cass mumbled around his next bite.

“What does that do for anyone?” Calla asked in disgust. “And how many immortal princes could there really be?”

Cass shrugged and swallowed. “Entertainment? Pure spite? Who knows with the Gods. And there’s a lot more princes and other ranks of royalty than you think. The Valkyries’ have their own kingdoms and hierarchies, as do all of the rankings of fae.”

“A curse that only affects entitled men and rips out their hearts?” Delphine sat up from Hannah’s lap. “Sounds more like a blessing to me.”

Kestrel curled his lip at her in disgust. “What in the Hells is your

problem?”

Delphine gave the Onyx witch a sinister smile, nothing but incisors, as she said, “Nothing, I just simply couldn’t care less about what happens to lovesick princes.”

Before Kestrel could retort, Gideon stood and said, “Cass, why don’t you and Kestrel go find some firewood for tonight?”

“Stay out of it, Gideon.” Kestrel narrowed his eyes pointedly.

Gideon turned to his commander. Though he was the witch’s beta, it was clear Gideon did not adhere to the normal social dynamic. “There’s no reason to pick any more fights tonight, Kestrel.”

Kestrel didn’t look at his friend, only continued his stare-down with Delphine, who seemed to be just as willing to sit there and bicker as he was. Calla wouldn’t have bet on it, but Delphine was the one to break first.

“Let’s go wash up, Han,” Delphine suggested, standing from where she was lying on the ground and walking in the direction of the babbling stream nearby. Hannah scrambled to her feet to follow her, throwing a hard glance in Kestrel’s direction as she went.

“What is with you?” Calla asked. “Cass said you were this way with everyone, but I don’t buy it.”

“I’m here for one thing, and it isn’t to make friends.” Kestrel leveled her with a bored look.

“Believe me, no one’s jumping to be your friend, *Commander*,” Calla said sarcastically. “If you have an actual problem, you could at least have the guts to say it.”

“My problem is Gideon’s tendency to pick up strays and break his neck helping them for no reason.”

“That sounds like a problem between you and Gideon, not us.”

“If the three of you weren’t here, it wouldn’t be a problem at all,” Kestrel said matter-of-factly.

“*Kestrel*,” Gideon warned.

“Why are you so keen on defending her?” Kestrel huffed as he turned to the blue-haired prince. “You barely know her, Gideon. Don’t you see what is happening already?”

“What are you talking about?” Gideon demanded.

“I’m talking about the two of you walking right into the Fates’ trap! You think it’s a coincidence how everything is falling into place? How a Valkyrie claimed you were the Heartbreak Prince moments after you promised to give

her your *heart*?”

“Is *that* what you think is happening? Are you *mad*?” The prince’s voice was saturated in disbelief.

Kestrel laughed bitterly. “Well, you sure aren’t in love with *me*.”

“And that’s our cue to leave,” Caspian whispered to Calla and Ezra, both still staring in utter shock at the entire exchange.

“No need,” Kestrel said darkly. “I think I’ll go get that firewood now. Don’t wait up.”

With that the commander stalked off, Gideon staring after him with a shocked look on his face for only a moment before he sprang into action and ran after the witch.

“I’m starting to get jealous there are no princes here to chase after *me*,” Caspian said dryly.

“I’m going to meet the girls.” Calla sighed, shaking her head a bit.

“Be careful,” Ezra advised her.

Calla gave him a small nod. She wasn’t quite sure how she was feeling. She was taking the commander’s words personally, but deep down she knew it truly had nothing to do with her and everything to do with whatever was left unfinished between him and Gideon. Before she could get more than a yard away, she felt a light touch on her shoulder and turned to see Ezra looking at her with concern.

“I’m sorry about Kestrel—”

“It’s not for you to apologize for.”

“I know that, but I also know when I accused you and Gideon of the same thing, it must have sounded just as . . .”

“Ridiculous?” she supplied.

He winced slightly and nodded.

“That’s because it *is*,” she managed to say, though for some reason the words were sticky in her throat.

“I’m sorry you’ve been dragged into this entire mess,” he said seriously.

“It hasn’t exactly been fun,” she admitted. “But I also wouldn’t have the opportunity to control my fate if I weren’t here either.”

Ezra looked at her as he considered her words. “Perhaps you’re right.” He paused for a moment. “Does that mean you should thank me for getting you into this in the first place?”

“Now you’re pushing it, Black.” She rolled her eyes at his sly grin.

His smile softened as he let her go.

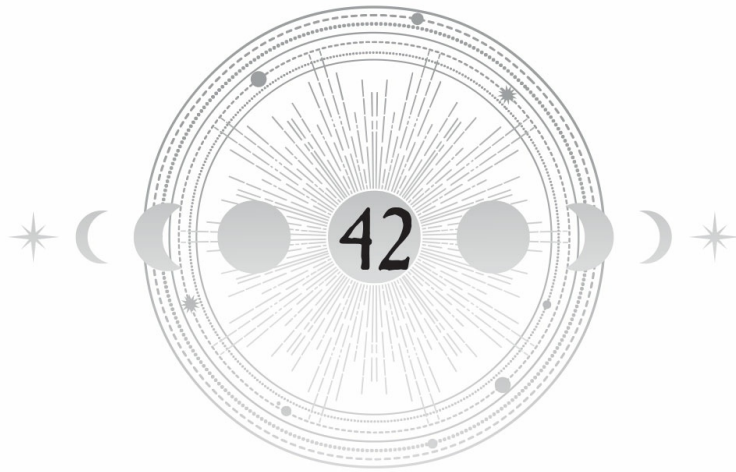
Calla turned her back on him and walked into the woods to find Delphine and Hannah. The light in the forest was incredibly dim, and she had to navigate her way almost entirely by the sound of the streaming water. When she could finally make out the stream ahead of her, she saw the girls' clothes strewn haphazardly on the ground as the two of them floated around peacefully in their undergarments. Calla noted that the siren looked much more comfortable in this water than she had in the sea earlier.

In the shadow of the trees, Calla stripped off her own garments as a cool breeze kissed her bare shoulders and something—a branch—snapped behind her. She whipped around toward the noise.

“Who’s there?” she called out before she accidentally gave one of the men a show.

For a moment, there was nothing but silence.

And then, a giggle.



Kestrel, wait,” Gideon spoke as soon as they were far enough away from the others.

Kestrel turned on his heel so quickly that Gideon almost crashed into the witch’s chest.

“Just tell me one thing, Gideon. Do you really not believe in the curse? Or are you just not worried about it because you’ve never been in love?”

“Kestrel . . .” Gideon ran a frustrated hand through his thick blue hair. This was not the time or place he wanted to deal with this conversation, but he should’ve known Kestrel wouldn’t care about the timing.

“Answer me,” Kestrel challenged, his eyes searching the prince’s face. Gideon stared at him guiltily. Regretfully.

Kestrel rocked back on his feet, his silver eyes sharp as he scrubbed his hand over his mouth in disbelief.

“Kestrel—” Gideon reached out, his fingertips barely brushing the other man’s cheek before his hand was swatted away.

“*Don’t*,” Kestrel said harshly. “Don’t sugarcoat it.”

“I’m not,” Gideon assured softly. “I just want you to know it wasn’t all a lie.”

Kestrel laughed bitterly, the grim smile on his lips making his already angular face seem sharper.

“I never thought you expected *love* from me. I never once considered that

you thought of us as anything *more*. It's why I didn't understand why you were so upset at my promotion. I thought you had always known that was my end goal."

Kestrel stared at his former lover for a long moment. Gideon could feel the threads of distance weaving themselves together between the two of them, but he didn't know how to stop it. What he said was the entire truth—he never once thought Kestrel assumed they were serious. Perhaps that was Gideon's fault, but it wasn't as if Kestrel was one to bare his heart and soul to someone.

"And the girl?" Kestrel finally asked.

"Calliope is complicated. She has a history with Ezra and—"

"So, there *is* something there?"

"Not like *that*," Gideon insisted, though as he found himself reaching up to tug at one of his piercings, he realized just how uncertain his voice sounded to his own ears. He dropped his hand and shook his head, lacing his tone with more conviction this time as he assured, "Your jealousy is completely unnecessary."

Kestrel laughed darkly, flicking a strand of his long white hair over his shoulder, Gideon's eyes following the familiar movement. "You think this is all over petty jealousy?"

Gideon lifted a blue brow. "Isn't it?"

"You have no idea what I've sacrificed to come here, and she just shows up and all of sudden you *need* her—"

"Yes, I do. I need her like I need the rest of you. Like we have all needed one another to get through this forest. It isn't my or Calliope's fault that she may just happen to be an important piece to the Witch Eater's puzzle. Believe me, I'm sure she wishes otherwise."

Kestrel clenched his jaw and looked away.

"Are you really going to be this stubborn?" Gideon drawled, reaching out with the intention to tip the commander's chin back to him but immediately thinking better of it. "We have much more important things going on than a lovers' quarrel, Kestrel."

"You're right," Kestrel conceded begrudgingly. "Let's just get out of here with everyone in one piece and we can work this out later."

A flash of guilt washed over Gideon as he nodded in agreement. He knew there was nothing more to work out, but he didn't have the heart to tell Kestrel that in this moment. Instead, he said, "I know you'd much rather be

back home watching over your unit, but I want you to know I am very grateful for your help here. Without you I wouldn't know about the Witch Eater, or this spell."

Kestrel dipped his chin in acknowledgment, still refusing to look the prince fully in the eyes. Gideon reached out to clap his friend's shoulder in gratitude, and Kestrel grabbed his wrist with lightning speed to hold it in place. Gideon held his breath, his skin heating as their skin made contact.

"Just assure me one thing, Gideon."

"Anything," he vowed, his eyes watching the commander's mouth as he spoke.

"Promise me you truly don't believe the Heartbreak Prince curse is real. That you have a plan to get out of that bargain with the Valkyrie. That it won't affect you at all."

Looking deep into his friend's bright steel eyes, his own never wavering, Gideon lied.

"It won't affect me at all."



"Who knew Kestrel had a jealous streak?" Caspian wondered aloud to Ezra as they organized their little camping spot to set up a fire.

Ezra gave a low laugh as he gathered some of the girls' discarded belongings in his arms to make room for the firewood.

"Who knew for all his preaching about not letting disputes linger, my brother is just as awfully dense about his own relationships."

"Do you think what Kestrel said about Gideon and Calla was true, then?"

"No," Ezra answered quickly. "They just both have the same stroke of bad luck."

"Ah, yes, who would've thought the girl you've been so infatuated with would also have a date with the Fates?"

"An unfortunate coincidence," Ezra muttered, though he opted not to comment on the first part of Caspian's observation lest it only spur the other witch on.

Cass gave him a look that said *Yeah, right*. "Nothing is ever a coincidence."

Ezra grimaced for a moment, then dropped the items in his arms on the edge of the circle they had made. Cass began collecting small ash-tree twigs

for their fire, and after a few moments of silence, the witch opened his mouth to speak, causing an exasperated sigh to escape Ezra.

“Are you worried?” Cass questioned, completely ignoring Ezra’s agitation.

“About?”

“About what the Valkyrie said . . . about Gideon?”

“Gideon isn’t worried, so why should we be? Besides, he’s right.” Ezra snapped a thin twig between his fingers. “No one has claimed to be the Heartbreak Prince in a century. It’s probably an old fae tale. That’s what our mother always made it seem like when she read it to us.”

Caspian nodded.

“It’s just . . . what Kestrel said—”

“Kestrel’s claims about Gideon lost most of their credibility as soon as Gideon’s side of the bed went cold. We have worse things to worry about.”

“Such as?” Cass lifted his eyebrows in question.

“Making sure Calla and Gideon can erase their rolls and are safe from the Witch Queens.”

“If you’re worried about Calla’s rolls, why did you—”

“It was a mistake,” Ezra cut him off. “I didn’t know about her rolls.”

“You mean you never saw them before—”

“No.”

“Does that mean you two never—” Cass raised his brows.

“No. Now, will you go back to minding your own business? No wonder you and Delphine get along.” Ezra muttered the latter to himself.

Cass smiled in good humor and shrugged. “Sorry, I just assumed . . .”

Ezra brought the small amount of kindling he’d gathered to the center of their circle and dropped them to the ground. “I hurt her in a way that I shouldn’t have, and now I just have to hope she will let me make it up to her.”

Cass was just about to say something else when Gideon and Kestrel came stomping out of the trees, Gideon’s arms loaded down with several large branches.

“Are the girls still gone?” he asked.

Ezra nodded and Gideon went over to place all the wood atop the small pile of sticks, dusting off his hands when he was done.

“Hopefully, they aren’t gone too much longer, I need to wash the viperidae smell off my body,” Cass said as he took a whiff of his shirt and

made a face. “I’ve been sleeping in this stench for way too long.”

“Maybe I should go check and make sure they aren’t lost,” Gideon announced as he slid the compass out of his pocket and started in the direction the girls had disappeared earlier.

It took all of Ezra’s effort to keep himself rooted in place as Gideon left. Kestrel crouched down over the firewood and reached into one of his jacket’s many tailored folds and brought out an oddly shaped dagger. The hilt had rough silver scales, and the witch began striking it across a stone he had found, throwing sparks onto the kindling. A few moments later and Kestrel was nursing a substantial little flame.

The three of them gathered around the makeshift camp and stretched out in front of the warmth, finally getting a moment to relax after the nightmarish day. Just as Caspian opened his mouth to break the silence—because the Gods knew Caspian could not exist in silence—a surprised shriek sounded from the forest.

Ezra was immediately alert, jumping to his feet, the others quickly following suit.

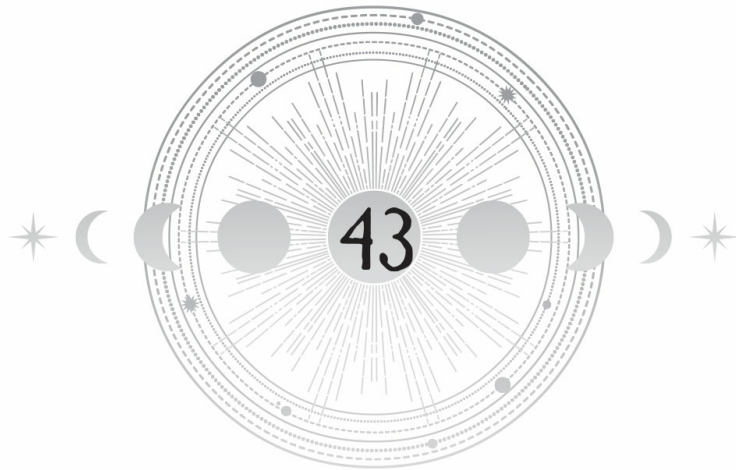
“That was Calla,” he recognized. “I’m going—”

Before he could move, something fluttered in the trees in front of them. Something with long flowing hair and a piercing giggle.

Something almost worse than a viperidae.

Ezra cursed.

“Gods help us all,” Kestrel spoke. “Nymphs.”



Gabi, look at what I’ve found!” the nymph called as she circled in front of Calla curiously.

The nymph’s large magenta eyes widened in excitement as she peered closer at Calla’s face, her petite stature causing her to stand on her tippy-toes to reach Calla’s eye level. The girl’s pink skin and hair stood out like a sore thumb in the mostly gray-and-white forest. Calla had let out quite the screech when the rosy girl surprised her from behind.

Calla moved back a step as the fae creature tried to reach out and touch her hair, and that’s when she saw another flutter of movement out of the corner of her eye. A second nymph, Gabi, she presumed, came flitting toward them, a trail of soft white petals floating to the ground behind her as she walked.

“Oh, Darci, she’s *gorgeous*.”

As much as Darci was pink, Gabi was *green*. Dark forest-green hair, sage-green skin, and bright emerald irises. Calla knew nymphs were made to lure victims in and entrap them in a never-ending game of lust—a fact made apparent by their ethereal beauty and the way Calla’s entire body was suddenly completely relaxed. The way she wanted to lean into them both and see if they smelled as pretty as they looked . . .

“Get away from her.”

The gruff voice snapped her out of the nymphs’ spell, and she quickly

jumped back from them—and right into Gideon’s chest.

“Oh my.” Darci sighed as she looked over Calla’s head to Gideon.

“Two pretty things to play with.” Gabi giggled and clapped her hands. “It must be our lucky day!”

“Leave us alone.” Gideon swatted the pink-haired nymph’s hand away from his bicep.

“We just want to play,” she said, pouting.

“Well, we don’t,” Gideon said firmly as he tried to coerce Calla to move away from them.

They didn’t make it more than two steps before the nymphs glided back into their path.

“Are you sure you don’t want to play a game?” Gabi asked.

“There’s a prize if you win!” Darci exclaimed.

“Prize?” Calla questioned.

“Don’t—” Gideon warned.

“Yes! If you win our little game,” the pink one chimed in, “we will grant you a favor.”

“What’s the game?” she wondered hazily. Calla was pretty sure Gideon protested again, but she could hardly pay attention to anything other than the nymphs’ sparkling eyes and the way their skin and hair glistened in the light.

“The game is called Smoke and Mirrors, and here’s how we play.” Darci clapped her hands in excitement, a sly grin spreading across her delicate face. “The pretty one will have to close their eyes—”

“Which one?” Gideon and Calla both asked at the same time, causing Calla to release a giggling sound she had never heard herself make before.

“*Her* of course.” Darci giggled back. “What’s your name again, lovely?”

“Calla,” she responded dreamily.

“Well, *Calla*, while your eyes are closed, Gabi and I will transform ourselves to look like your handsome friend.”

“All you’ll have to do to win a favor is kiss the right witch,” Gabi finished. “Sound easy enough?”

Calla found herself nodding her head slowly, despite a voice in the back of her mind warning her that this was a bad idea. It was hard to listen to that voice when her entire body was feeling more relaxed than it had in . . . *years*. She tried to turn her head to look at Gideon, but she couldn’t seem to pry her eyes away from the girls’ hypnotizing gazes.

“What’s the catch?” Gideon demanded gruffly, his voice sounding as if

he, too, were locked in the nymphs' trance.

"Nothing major." Darci smiled sweetly. "If she kisses the wrong person, we'll just take one small memory."

Calla became alarmed by this information, but her trepidation only lasted for a moment before she suddenly felt that carefree feeling come over her once again.

"Just one memory?" Calla wondered absentmindedly.

"Just one little memory," the nymphs' voices confirmed, their melodic tones weaving together in a spoken lullaby. "You wouldn't miss it."

Calla thought she heard one of them say something to the other, but she couldn't be quite sure.

Calla nodded. "All right, let's play."

"We shouldn't . . ." Gideon's tone held a weak warning, but his own eyelids were half closed.

"Shut your eyes," one of the nymphs whispered to her, and gently spun her in the opposite direction. She obeyed. There was a moment of rustling behind her as she waited, eyes squeezed shut, until one of the nymphs finally called out, "Ready!"

Calla slowly turned back around, her eyes fluttering open. As she took in the sight before her, she gasped.

Standing a few feet away from her were three identical Gideons.

"Whoa." She exhaled in a daze as she stumbled closer to the three of them to get a better look. Every detail, down to the piercings and the single arched eyebrow, was perfect. Which meant Calla was in trouble.

The Gideon in the middle rolled his eyes and said, "It's me, Ca—"

"And to think I was going to avoid such an obvious strategy," the Gideon to the left cut in with an eye roll of his own.

The Gideon all the way to the right sighed and suggested, "Why don't you ask us a question? A question only the real one of us would know the answer to."

The other two Gideons seemed to acquiesce, and Calla nodded as she hummed. "Let's see. . . ."

As she thought about what question she should ask, she leaned in to peer into each Gideon's face, to see if the nymphs may have messed up on his peculiar swirling irises. Unfortunately, even that detail hadn't been missed.

"What's your brother's name?" she finally questioned.

"Ezra," the Gideon to the right answered.

Calla turned toward him and smiled.

Well, that was easy—

“I’m the Onyx Prince,” the one in the middle said in exasperation. “Of course they know who Ezra and I are.”

So much for that, she thought.

“Okay . . . where did we first meet?” she tried again.

“These questions are too easy, Calla,” the Gideon to the right advised her. “You have to ask something they wouldn’t have heard through the gossip mill.”

Calla crossed her arms over her chest, ready to complain about how hard this was, when she suddenly realized what he just said.

“Okay, let’s do this—on the count of three I want all of you to say my name.” She smiled wryly. “Ready? One, two, *three*.”

The Gideons to the right and in the middle both answered, perfectly in sync, “Calla.”

“*Calliope*,” the Gideon on the left spoke confidently, her name rolling off his tongue in a way she had never heard before.

Even through the haze in her mind, Calla saw him perfectly in that moment.

“Clever little witch,” he murmured, his gaze simmering.

“Gideon,” she responded breathily, her body relaxing with relief.

The other two Gideons pouted for a moment, the expression so out of place on their stolen faces before they suddenly dissolved back into their own forms with swirls of green and pink smoke.

Calla stepped closer to the real Gideon and gave him a triumphant smile. “I won!”

“Uh-uh, not so fast,” Darci said, a hand going to her hip. “You still have to kiss.”

Calla exchanged a charged look with Gideon before looking back at the nymphs and protesting, “But—”

“That was the bargain.” Gabi crossed her arms.

Calla was going to protest again when another wave of bliss rolled through her. She looked back to Gideon, dazed, biting down on her lip uncertainly.

“Calliope, we shouldn’t . . .” he cautioned, but he was already taking a step toward her despite his words.

“It’s just one kiss . . . right?” she whispered back as she tilted her face up

to his.

“Calliope,” he breathed.

“You can always say no,” she whispered. “They said that only I would lose a memory. You’d be okay—”

She felt his hands come up to her waist, his fingers tightening into her sides as he leaned down and kissed her, cutting off the rest of her sentence. She gave a small surprised gasp, and he took the opportunity to deepen the kiss further, his kiss stronger than she had imagined it would be.

“I thought the younger prince would have come by now,” someone murmured, and the words sliced through the haze in Calla’s mind.

Calla leaned back from Gideon a bit and tried to blink against the fog in her mind, unsure of what was going on anymore.

“Get the Hells away from them,” a silvery voice demanded.

The words instantly sobered her—as effective as if she had been plunged into ice-cold water. She looked up, Gideon’s face right in front of hers, and jerked back.

“What?” she asked in confusion as she looked around.

There, a few yards away, was a soaking wet, pissed-off siren.

Delphine.

“Delph?” Calla looked at her friend, puzzled, as the siren stalked forward wagging a finger.

Then someone else broke out from the trees. Ezra. The usual blazing fire in his eyes burned bright with pain.

“Ezra?” She looked at him in confusion.

He looked back and forth between her and Gideon for a moment. Calla glanced to Gideon in panic, but the elder prince was watching his brother with an expression full of regret. Calla moved forward to go to Ezra, but he held up a hand and she halted.

Delphine on the other hand, was approaching the two nymphs, who were now cowering back in the shadows of the trees.

The nymphs.

Oh Gods. What did I do?

“You annoying, overgrown pixies. Go find someone else to play your twisted games with,” Delphine ordered them.

The green-haired one—Calla’s mind suddenly refused to remember her name—looked ready to dart back to wherever they appeared from. The pink one, however, looked indignantly at where Calla and Gideon were

awkwardly standing.

“Don’t look at them; look at *me*,” Delphine snapped. “If I ever see your faces again, I’m going to sing a song that will make you lose your sanity. Do we understand each other?”

The green-haired girl nodded her head vehemently as she took her friend’s hand and tried to lead her away.

“But,” the pink nymph insisted, “they completed our game. We owe them a favor!”

Calla swallowed and side-eyed Gideon, who muttered, “Fantastic.”

Delphine bared her teeth in a terrifying smile. “We all know how much the fae like to owe people favors,” she said sarcastically. “But that’s too bad. I said *go*.”

The pink nymph crossed her arms in annoyance but seemed to finally realize Delphine’s threats were serious and that it would be a lot less painful to get out of there and live with the unfulfilled favor than to see if the siren was going to make good on her own promises. The two nymphs skittered away, disappearing into the trees just as fast as they appeared. Delphine rushed over to Calla, who had only just noticed Hannah standing on the edge of the small clearing as well, looking incredibly concerned.

“Are you two all right?” Delph asked.

“I think so,” Calla mumbled. “How were you not affected by them, Delph? It was like they *hypnotized* me.”

“That’s what nymphs do,” Gideon said gruffly. “They put you in a trance and trick you into doing things. If it weren’t for the berries, it probably would have escalated much quicker.”

Calla looked down, surprised to just now remember the berries she still had wrapped around her wrist, and lightly ran a finger over them.

“Don’t beat around the bush, though, Gideon,” Ezra finally spoke from where he stood. “Nymphs may trick you into doing things, but they will only trick you into doing things you would already *want* to do.”

Gideon tensed, but Calla felt like every muscle in her own body had just turned to water. “That cannot be true,” she insisted, looking to Gideon for help, but the prince would not return her gaze.

Calla looked to Delphine next, but the siren only stared at her apologetically. Ezra lifted a brow at her in challenge. “I’m *over* this,” she gritted out. “What do you want me to tell you? I didn’t know what was happening!”

“You’re over what, Calla?” Ezra gave her a hard look. “Denying that I’ve been right this entire time?”

“Get over yourself, Ezra,” Delphine told the prince. “Barely anything happened. Also, who are you to be upset anyway? *You’re* the one who chose to mess things up with Calla in the first place.”

Calla knew Delphine’s words were true and that she technically had nothing to be sorry for. But she also knew the devastation in Ezra’s eyes was as potent as the memory of the kiss they had shared no more than an hour ago.

“You’re right,” he agreed solemnly. “I’m the one who screwed up first, so I suppose we’re even now. Couldn’t let it end without making sure you got the last move, right, Calla?”

“*Ezra*,” Calla gasped.

Delphine looked at her friend like she had grown another head. “Glad we are all on the same page, then.” She slid her eyes to Calla. “Right, Cal?”

Calla tightened her lips as she and Ezra stared at each other.

One last poker face. She had to give him one last poker face.

“Right,” she agreed, smoothing her features out into a perfect mask, hoping he wouldn’t see the heartbreak that was burning through her veins like stolen magic.

The light in his eyes dimmed slightly, and he backed up a step and whipped around, stalking off back in the direction he came from.

How could you doubt anything after our kiss? she wanted to scream at him.

Maybe this will be what it takes to convince you it’s not meant to be, that insidious voice in her head whispered. But this time it was surely right. This was not going to be her path. Ezra was never going to be her destiny.

Delphine whipped around to face Calla. “What in the Hells aren’t you telling us, Calla?”

Calla’s poker face never slipped as she claimed, “Nothing. Ezra finally just realized what I’ve known this entire time. It’s done.”

Hannah and the siren exchanged a loaded look, but if either of them wanted to call her on her bullshit, they didn’t. She decided to change the subject before her armor cracked any more.

“I knew nymphs were tricky creatures, I just never thought I would be affected so easily.”

“The only reason they can’t control me is because I’m pretty much

immune to their glamour,” Delphine explained as she continued to watch Calla.

“Is that why they were so terrified of you?” Calla forced out a laugh.

The siren played along and grinned widely. “Nymphs hate anyone who is impervious to their beauty and charms.” Delphine wrapped an arm around Calla’s shoulders. “Come on. Why don’t you get a bath?”

Calla looked down miserably at herself. “Yes, I really do need one.”

“I’ll look out for her,” Delphine told Gideon. “We’ll be quick. You and Hannah go make sure the others haven’t run into any trouble themselves.”

“Oh Gods,” Hannah exclaimed as she nudged herself from the periphery, where she had been standing, dead-silent, during the entire exchange. “Do you think there are more?”

Delphine and Gideon shared an equal look of concern.

“We need to go,” the prince concurred.

“Gideon—” Calla began, remembering suddenly there was something else from their exchange with the nymphs that she *needed* to talk to him about.

He seemed to know exactly what she wanted because he nodded his head and promised “Later” before he and Hannah quickly headed back toward the camp after Ezra.

Once they were out of sight, Calla turned to go to the stream, and Delphine grabbed her arm. “Are you okay?”

Calla hesitated as she looked back at her friend. “No.”

“Nymphs are awful creatures.” Delphine’s eyes softened sympathetically.

“Yes, they are, but it isn’t that.” Calla suddenly wanted to cry. “Things with Ezra . . . We . . .”

Delphine’s eyes widened. “Oh, Calla . . . you didn’t.”

“I kissed him, and now, *ugh*.” She lifted her hands and scrubbed them over her face. “And Kestrel had to open his mouth earlier, too, and plant that doubt even more—”

“I wouldn’t worry too much about Kestrel. His jealousy runs just as deep as Ezra’s.”

“And this just made it so much worse.”

“Maybe.” Delphine shrugged. “If you ask me, you should’ve just enjoyed that kiss with Gideon. The other two are miserable to be around.”

“*Delph*,” Calla scolded. “Don’t start.”

“What? Gideon’s hot *and* secure.”

“You’re not helping at *all*. Also, must I remind you that he and Ezra are brothers? Ezra, whom you hate?”

“Ugh, I know,” Delphine said as she hooked her arm through Calla’s and marched her friend toward the water. “And I don’t necessarily hate Ezra.”

Calla threw her friend a doubtful look.

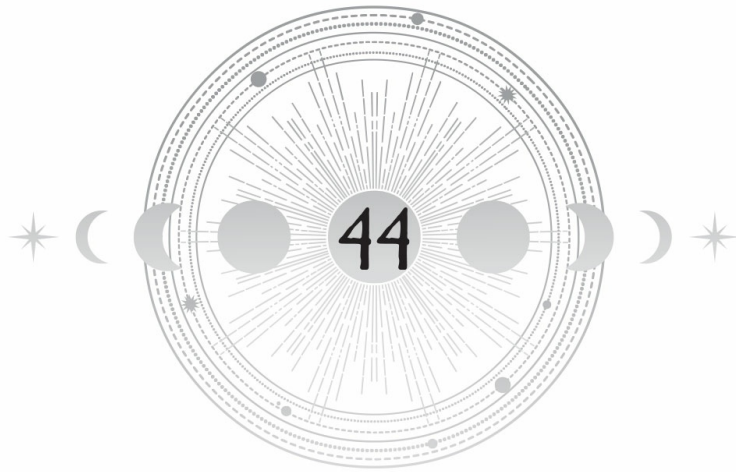
“What?” Delphine protested. “I don’t *hate* him. Much. Anymore. I just think if everyone here were drowning, it’d be a hard toss-up on who I’d save last—him or that stuffy commander.”

Calla snorted.

“You know I just want you to be happy, right?” Delphine tilted her head.

Calla squeezed her friend’s arm in answer.

“Good. Now.” Delphine paused at the edge of the water, dropping Calla’s arm so she could prop her hands on her hips. “Tell me about your kiss with Ezra.”



By the time Calla was clean and she and Delphine made it back to their friends, the forest had completely transformed again.

Gone were the ash trees and the sharp twigs that littered the ground; there was now plush green grass beneath their feet. When the two girls had made their walk back to camp, Calla procrastinating their return as long as she possibly could, a trail of wildflowers sprouted behind them in the grass. Calla smiled down behind her at the sprigs of lavender and daisies that popped up with every step she took. The branches of the trees around them dripped with long tresses of moss and leaves, hanging like curtains to the forest floor. The pieces of sky that were visible above them were a calming gray-blue color that meant dusk was about to fall over them, and Calla suddenly missed the canopy of stars she used to stay up gazing at in Estrella.

This new version of the forest was a welcome change.

What was not a welcome change was the sudden heat wave rolling through the forest. The campfire had been disposed of long before the girls had arrived back, and everyone was wearing as little as they possibly could while still remaining covered—though as Delphine dramatically fanned herself with her hand, she looked just about ready to throw all caution to the wind and strip down even more. The men on the other hand were all shirtless, a fact that mostly thrilled Delphine as much as it displeased Calla and Hannah. Though Hannah was probably displeased for much different reasons

than Calla.

Calla was currently using all the effort she could muster to not blatantly stare at the three Guild members' tattoos—large, inky birdlike creatures that stretched across each of their chests and made them more attractive than should've been allowed by the laws of nature. She was especially making sure not to gawk at the little black hoop that was pierced through Gideon's left nipple that perfectly matched all the other piercings in his ear and brow.

Delphine was making no such effort.

"I still cannot believe you missed *Kestrel*, of all people, telling a nymph they could grope him." Caspian chuckled for the hundredth time as Delphine worked on getting a closer peek at Gideon's pectorals. Gideon lifted an amused brow at the siren's ogling.

"If you bring it up one more time, Caspian, I'm going to demote you," Kestrel threatened with a glower.

"I'm just glad Ezra came back in time to scare the nymph off. That was not a show I wanted to watch." Cass laughed again, despite Kestrel's threat. "I just can't stop replaying the look on your face when you realized that you told the nymph she could put her hands on your—"

Thud.

Kestrel's half-eaten apple ricocheted off the witch's head and dropped to the ground. Delphine finally stopped her blatant perusal of Gideon's chest to giggle at the look on Kestrel's face as Cass chucked his own fruit back at the commander. The beta missed horribly, but still somehow managed to fling quite a bit of juice across his friend's face.

Kestrel pushed back his left sleeve and wiped the back of his bare arm over his cheek in disgust, throwing Cass a look of disdain in the process.

"Question," Hannah suddenly inserted, and everyone turned their head to her. The small witch blushed, but she lifted her chin and pointed to where Kestrel had just rolled up his sleeve. "I've heard that the Onyx Witch Queen makes all the witches who join the Guild finish all six of their Rolls of Fate. But you only have four?"

Kestrel looked down at his rolls as he nodded. "New Guild members *are* usually forced to complete their rolls after their initiation," he confirmed. "But I did not train to join the Guild as Gideon and Cass did. I was specifically sought out for my commander position and as part of my negotiation to accept the responsibility, Lysandra postponed my last two rolls. Caspian hasn't had to finish his rolls either, but I assume he has His

Royal Highness to thank for that.”

Gideon didn’t look appreciative of Kestrel’s use of his formal title, but Cass broke out into a bright smile. “I wouldn’t usually ask such a favor from my friends, but I have to admit nepotism came in handy with that particular situation.”

Hannah was about to say something else, when Ezra suddenly stood in the middle of the fray and interrupted. “Enough wasting time. What’s next? We’ve been through sylphs, demon’s oak, angry sirens, and groping nymphs. I think we need to get moving by dawn before we get kidnapped by kelpies—or worse.”

Calla tried her hardest not to look at Ezra with pity as he hastily changed the subject. The fact that Lysandra had been willing to grant such a boon with Caspian’s rolls but hadn’t had the same consideration for her own son must be excruciating. She almost understood why Ezra thought he needed to shut down at any sign of rejection. She just wished he hadn’t shut down on her.

“I must agree with Prince Broodier,” Delphine inserted.

Ezra lifted his brows at her.

“Don’t look so shocked. You were bound to have a decent thought sometime.”

“Do you think we can make it to the Witch Eater by tomorrow night?” Calla asked Gideon. Ezra shifted his gaze to Calla momentarily when she spoke, before going back to ignoring her completely. She clenched her hands together in her lap.

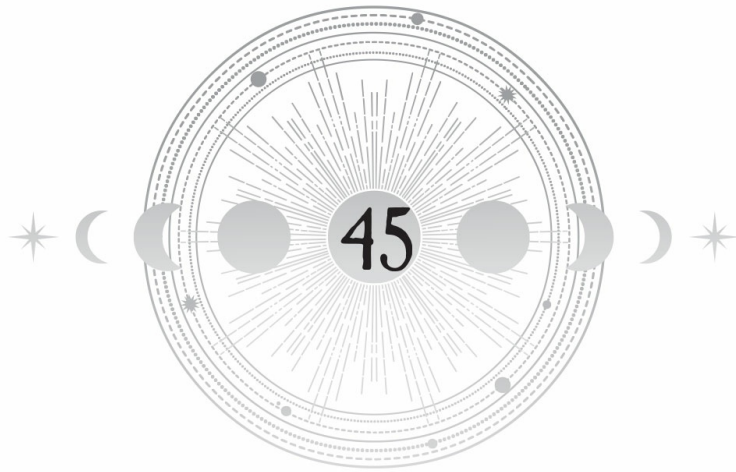
“Yes, I think if we get a few more hours of rest, it is likely we can reach our destination relatively soon,” Gideon answered.

“Bold of us all to assume something else isn’t going to delay us more.” Hannah sighed.

“I say we get a few hours of rest in, then head out before dawn. Make the most of the daylight tomorrow,” Ezra spoke directly to Gideon, because if they were all honest, Gideon’s was the only opinion that mattered here.

“Agreed.” Gideon nodded.

With that, Cass volunteered for first watch and they all settled in for the night. Calla glanced to Ezra as she nestled into her spot next to the other girls. He didn’t so much as glance in her direction. She lay back and turned away from him, snuggling into Hannah’s side as she tried not to think of how close she had been to Ezra only hours ago—and how wide the chasm between them was now.



The next morning, the group woke up before the sun, and Ezra was unusually quiet as they trekked all morning, keeping pace at Hannah's side behind the rest of them. Every once in a while, Calla would glance back and catch Ezra's dark gaze and look away, trying to ignore the sadness she saw there. She knew he made an effort to disguise it, but ever since he and Calla had disappeared for those few minutes alone in the forest, he hadn't been nearly as good at keeping up the mask.

Delphine and Cass on the other hand were flirting as if they weren't possibly strolling right toward their deaths. Calla smirked as the siren tipped her head back and let out a musical laugh in response to something Caspian was saying.

"Just wondering, but how much longer do you think it will be?" Hannah lifted her voice so everyone could hear her from the back, an edge to her tone that Calla would bet had something to do with the way Delphine was currently placing a hand on Caspian's bicep.

"Shouldn't be too much farther. We're well north by now and sooner or later we'll end up reaching the Faery Valley. So, I'm assuming we could run into the Witch Eater any time," Gideon answered from the head of the group, where he and Calla had been silently trekking side by side.

"Maybe we can rest for a moment, then?" Hannah asked sheepishly. "My feet could use a tiny break."

Calla turned and watched as the blond shuffled her balance between each foot to try and relieve the pain.

Then Hannah froze.

Everyone looked at the witch in concern as she raised her hand for them to pause, and the entire group stopped walking as she lifted her nose and sniffed at the air. Calla gave a small sniff herself before wrinkling her nose.

The air smelled strongly of salt.

“What is it, Han?” Delphine took a step toward her.

Salt. What an unusual smell, Calla thought as she continued to sniff. It reminded her of the way Delphine had always smelled when they used to swim in the ocean.

Calla’s eyes bugged in horror. “*Delphine—*” she choked out, but it was too late.

Ezra cursed loudly as four other sirens suddenly appeared from behind the trees ahead of them. They were surrounded. Calla looked to Delphine, but her friend was frozen in absolute horror. She was just about to move to Delph when *Ezra* boldly stepped in front of Delph to shield her from the others.

“What do you want?” Gideon called out from the front of their group.

“This is no business of yours, *Prince,*” the siren closest to them said.

He was tall, impossibly tall, and his frame was lean, if not a bit gangly. The siren’s silver hair shone as bright as Delphine’s, though his skin was more of a pastel shade of periwinkle rather than an icy blue.

“I don’t remember asking if it was any of my business,” Gideon offered. “Answer my question.”

“Give us the siren and we will leave the rest of you alone,” another one of the beautiful strangers said.

Calla looked at the girl in awe. All sirens were naturally beautiful, of course, but this woman was a diamond among coal. Her thick, coiled hair was woven with just as much starlight as the others’, and her midnight-blue skin was freckled as if with constellations.

“You can’t have her,” Hannah inserted as strongly as she could from behind Ezra. “You’re going to have to go through me.”

“And me,” Calla added.

“Is this something you really want to try?” the first siren asked again. “You won’t win.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Caspian said with a grin. “I think we may have a pretty good chance.”

“Fools—” the man began, but before he could finish his sentence, a knife had already left Caspian’s hand—

And embedded itself in the siren’s chest.

“*Eros!*” one of the other sirens yelled. It was a woman with cerulean hair brighter than Gideon’s.

The man, Eros, gaped down at his chest, blue-black blood flowing over his pectorals as he reached up to pull out the dagger.

“*Move!*” Ezra yelled to everyone as he sent a raging gust of wind toward the four sirens—managing to make the woman that had been gunning for Eros lose her balance.

Caspian and Kestrel sent their own gusts of wind right behind Ezra’s, and Calla finally started moving her feet to get to Delphine.

“Leave it, Mariana! Grab *her!*” Eros seethed at the woman with the bright blue hair.

Mariana twisted away from where she had been fussing over his wound and narrowed in on where Delphine was frozen in place.

“Delph, we have to *move*,” Hannah pleaded to her friend.

Delphine’s eyes were glazed over as she looked back at Calla, who was grabbing the siren’s face and trying to shake her out of her stupor.

“We are going to get out of here. I promise,” Calla assured her friend, wholeheartedly. “But you have to come with us *now*, Delphine.”

And that’s all it took for Delphine to wake up. Their friend blinked her eyes a few times as she nodded and grabbed each of their hands.

“Into the forest!” Gideon yelled to the girls. “We’ll keep them busy!”

They didn’t stop to think twice, only ran for the tree line, hand in hand. Calla took one last glance back at the Onyx witches, who were moving around one another with the natural gracefulness of a unit who was familiar working together. Ezra dodged into Mariana’s path before the siren could give chase to the three of them. Hannah and Calla dragged Delph deeper and deeper into the forest, Hannah nearly smacking into several trees as they whipped past. Then, suddenly, Delphine skidded to a stop, her chest heaving rapidly as she frantically looked around, trying to decipher where to go next.

“Here,” Delph said as she pulled her friends into a run once more. They only got a few more feet before a new siren appeared.

“It’s about time,” the masculine voice said from somewhere above them.

Calla choked down a scream as something, *someone*, dropped down from a tree branch overhead and landed with a thud in front of them.

“You have been one difficult girl to track down, moonlight.”

Delphine made a strangled noise. “Don’t ever call me that,” she half snarled, half sobbed.

The man gave her a wicked grin. He circled the three girls slowly as he inspected them both. He was about six feet tall, and his hair was pitch-black, more inky than Ezra’s. His skin was only a shade bluer than Delphine’s and his eyes—his eyes.

They were pure white.

Hannah and Calla stared, mouths open, but the man only continued to grin back. “Tell me, Delphine, where have you run off to all these years? Slumming it with the witch rejects?”

“Leave us alone, Zephyr,” the siren spat, and Calla could tell it was taking all of her friend’s effort to make sure her words didn’t come out shaky.

“You know, I don’t think I will.”

A blinding gush of water suddenly shot Hannah off her feet and out of Delphine’s grip as she flew back to the ground. A twin tendril whipped out toward Calla in the next moment, and she let out a painful grunt as it pinned her back to a tree.

“*Stop!*” Delphine yelled.

“You’re coming with me whether you like it or not,” Zephyr said as he seized Delphine by her arm.

“No, I’m *not*,” she grunted, and twisted to swing her leg back in a perfect arc—and kicked him so hard between his legs that *Calla* winced.

Delphine rushed to Hannah and helped her off the ground just before another rush of water sent them both flying. Calla yelled as she struggled against her watery bonds.

“I don’t think you understand,” Zephyr said as he stalked toward the others, a murderous look on his face. He leaned over where they lay, and Calla watched Hannah gulp. “It wasn’t a question.”

Zephyr reached out and yanked Delphine up roughly by her bicep. As Delphine tried to fight off the other siren, Hannah glanced around for something she could find, anything she could use as a weapon.

“Hannah! There!” Calla shouted jutting her chin toward a large, sharp rock.

Hannah searched where Calla gestured as Delphine landed a punch to the other siren’s face. Hannah spotted the stone and lunged for it, Calla watching tensely as the witch slowly got to her feet, trying not to draw any attention to

what she was doing as she snuck around behind the siren holding their friend.

“You little—” Zephyr was growling into Delphine’s ear, but Calla didn’t catch the end of his insult.

Squelch.

Hannah had rammed the rock as far into the man’s neck as she could, leaping back as a decent amount of blood squirted out of his neck and onto her hands.

“Aaahh!” he yelled, releasing his grip on Delphine.

“Help, Calla, Hannah!” Delphine yelled as she crouched down to sweep a leg under the other siren, causing him to fall onto his back on the ground with another curse and a grunt.

Hannah stood frozen for a moment as she watched Zephyr begin to recover and struggle against Delphine. Quicker than Calla would have thought possible the man had wrestled Delph back onto the ground and pinned her down by her shoulders.

“Run, Hannah!” Delphine cried.

Calla could only watch as Hannah looked down at her hands, covered in the siren’s blue-black blood. Calla struggled against her bonds once again, desperately trying to break free. She tried to reach her Rouge magic out toward the siren, but right before she could make contact, her restraints constricted tighter around her body.

Calla let out a groan of rage as she kicked wildly back against the tree. She was their only hope at the moment. Delphine was pinned to the ground and Hannah couldn’t use her magic—

Just as Calla had that thought, she watched as the blond closed her eyes and balled her hands into fists. Calla gaped, aghast, at what her friend was doing. She was trying to summon her magic.

“Hannah!” Calla cried. “Hannah, *don’t!*”

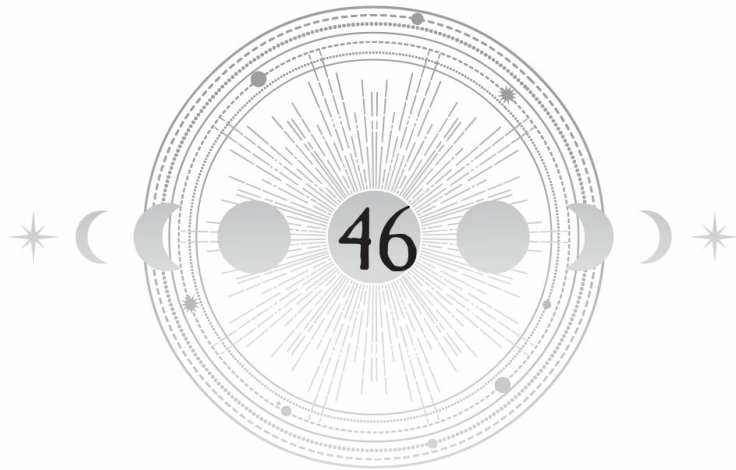
But it was already too late. Hannah was somewhere far away.

Calla screamed again as Hannah’s knees hit the ground a moment later and the witch heaved onto the grass. The girl retched and retched until her entire body could take it no more. A few feet away, Zephyr had finally gotten Delphine to stand, and she was thrashing against the other siren as she tried to get to Hannah.

I can’t let this happen, Calla screamed at herself, her rage building once again. I can’t fail them again.

One second, Calla was thrashing against the tendrils of water with all her

might, something deep in her core roaring to life as she let out another grunt of fury, and the next—she broke free from her bonds.



As the watery restraints rained down at Calla's feet, she blinked. She had siphoned every ounce of magic out of the streams of water. She didn't exactly have time to understand what just happened, however, because she was already lunging for where Hannah was crumpled on the ground.

"Help *her*," Hannah sobbed weakly. "Help *her*!"

Calla looked toward where Zephyr held Delphine in his webbed grip and unfurled herself from where she hovered over Hannah until she was her full height. She had a decision to make.

You are not the chosen one, Calliope Rosewood, the dark figure in her dream had told her. You are the cursed one.

The words sent a shudder down her spine and she tightened her fists. She didn't want to be scared anymore. She didn't want to keep letting her friends down because of her fear.

Calla looked directly into the siren's haunting eyes and let Zephyr see the full effect of her stare. Confusion flickered over his expression as Calla planted her feet shoulder width apart and raised her hands in front of her, blasting out every ounce of magic she had in her body to take hold of the blood pumping through the siren's veins. His body went taut, black veins popping out all over his arms and face, and his hold on Delphine immediately released. Calla felt a bead of sweat form at her temple with the exertion of holding the siren so firmly in place, but she didn't relax her grip on him as

she stalked forward. The anticipation of this new power sparked a feeling of glee deep in her bones.

As Calla came closer, Delphine scrambled out of the way and over to Hannah. Calla stepped in her friend's place so that she was nose to nose with Zephyr.

His eyes were filled with terror. "You're a Siphon."

Calla clenched her jaw.

"Killing me won't save her. They will never stop searching for her, not when she owes them a life—" The siren's words were choked off as Calla shot her hand out and grabbed him by the throat.

The pressure in Calla's chest amplified as a rush of magic flexed through her veins, making her heart feel like it was about to burst. One wrong move and all her shaky control would melt away. Yet she had never felt so motivated to get this right, desperately willing herself to not mess this up. She was enraged from having to watch as Delphine was attacked. Infuriated from having to see Hannah get sick trying to use magic. As she held on to that rage, she squeezed the fiend's neck, her breath hitching in suspense as she felt *it* happen—the thing her dream had shown her she could do.

Her Siphon latched on to every drop of blood in the siren's body.

Calla completely froze. Her breathing hitched as she flexed her magic, just a bit, and watched as it sent a black pulse through the veins under Zephyr's skin. Calla knew in her bones that it would take only twenty seconds to drain every drop of blood out of his body.

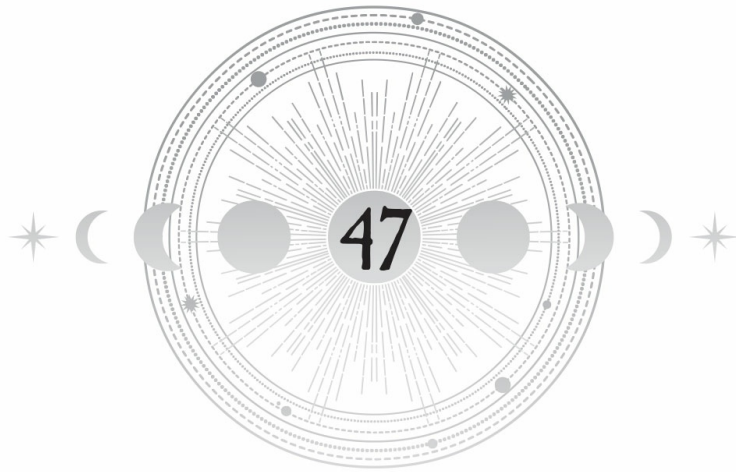
So do it, that voice in her head whispered.

"Killing you won't help Delphine," Calla admitted, her voice low. "But it wouldn't hurt her either. I could drain every ounce of life out of your body right now. I could let you beg me to stop."

Sounds of alarm gurgled out of the siren's mouth. She could end him right now. Make him pay. She knew she could do it. Yet her magic didn't budge. Something stopped her from crossing over that line.

Calla whispered, "But that would make me the same as all of you."

Calla went to say something else, when suddenly there was a haunting chorus of notes sounding off from behind her and her entire body went slack. Her hand loosened from the siren's throat, and she could only stand there and watch, entranced, as the other sirens emerged from the trees.



The Onyx witches were nowhere in sight, and Hannah was scared.

Delphine was fighting wildly as Eros, the man Caspian had stabbed earlier, tied her hands behind her back. The sirens he was with before had just reappeared and began speaking animatedly to him and Zephyr. Hannah tried to push herself off the ground, but her arms buckled, too shaky to hold up her weight.

Hannah couldn't get past the roaring of her panicked heartbeat in her ears to understand what they were saying. Calla was still standing a few feet away, ramrod straight and eyes glazed over, trapped by the song they had used on her. Zephyr was visibly shaken up by whatever Calla had just done to him, black veins still spiderwebbing all over his skin as he pointed to where Hannah was bent over on the ground. He said something to one of the girls—the one that had nearly stolen Hannah's breath away earlier—and she shook her head, her lovely coils bouncing over her shoulders with the movement.

They all seemed to reach some sort of decision at the same moment and two of the women set off into the woods, including the siren with the blue hair. Zephyr turned Delphine around roughly until her back was to Hannah. The beautiful girl, the diamond, was the last to linger behind with the men. She leaned in close to whisper something to Zephyr and Eros before turning to head off with the others. Zephyr watched intently as she left, waiting for Eros, who was clearly the leader, to signal that he was ready to take Delphine

and go. Calla still couldn't move.

Hannah pleaded to them, or at least what she thought were pleas, but the two men barely paid her any attention as they helped each other tie yet another rope around Delphine's arms. Delphine managed to turn her head around enough to make eye contact with Hannah one last time and Hannah utterly lost it. Something was building in her core and she was ready to burst.

"I love you," she sobbed raggedly.

The sirens turned to her, watching with curiosity as Hannah shouted out to her friend. No, not her friend. Her heart.

"I will never stop looking for you. Never. I will search the entire world until I find you again. Delphine. Delphine, please. I love you."

Delphine opened her mouth to answer, but before she could manage to make a sound, the hilt of a dagger rammed into her temple.

Hannah let out an earth-shattering screech as she watched Delphine fall to the ground, unconscious. The pain building inside Hannah finally reached a crescendo and burst out of her mouth in scream after scream after scream, but Zephyr and Eros didn't pay her a backward glance as they hauled Delphine's limp body off into the woods.

Hannah screamed until she could no longer see the last three sirens in the distance. Until they were just two specks of dust carrying away a beacon of starlight.

And she didn't know how long she screamed once Delphine was completely out of her sight.

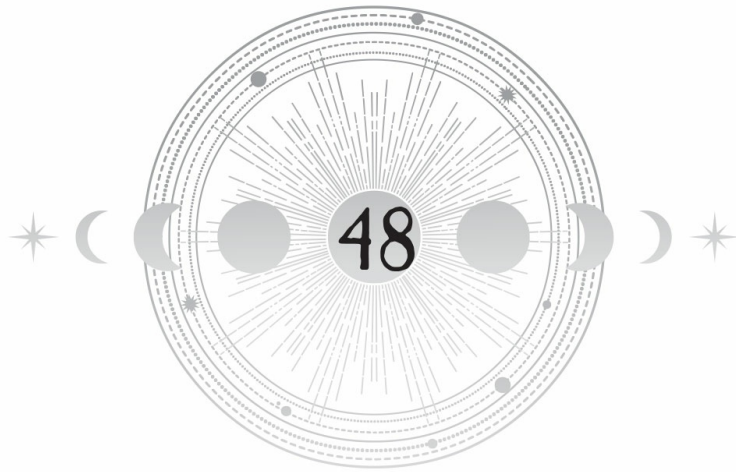
She screamed until her throat was raw and bloody, and crimson splattered onto the ground from her mouth.

She screamed until the rest of her friends finally came back to find her and Calla, all four Onyx witches looking worse for wear themselves.

She screamed as the group closed in around her in panicked concern.

She screamed until every piece of her soul was utterly shattered.

And then she was silent.



*M*other, it hurts,” Hannah whispered as her mother fastened the bindings that tied her wrists together behind her back, the same as she did every full moon.

“Hush,” Mother said as she worked the knots tighter, and Hannah pressed her lips together at the command.

Hannah knew well by now that begging did not help; it only made it last longer.

Tonight’s full moon was special, Mother had told her the week before. There was someone important that Mother wanted to bring back this time, and she said if Hannah succeeded, she would get a special treat. Even without the incentive, Hannah was determined to make her mother proud this time. Especially after her failure the previous month.

She looked over the boneyard. Two of her mother’s other wards had already been strung up above the circles of remains that lay in the three heaps on the ground. Her mother and aunt had been extra careful where all the chalk runes had been drawn tonight—taking the entire afternoon to perfect them instead of the usual half hour it took them on any regular old moon cycle.

Hannah took a deep breath.

What Hannah could do was a gift, her mother had always said. Not just any Rouge witch was powerful enough to bring back the dead, and it took

years of practice. Hannah had been trained since she could walk, forced by Mother to study the bone brothel's previous wards before Hannah had received her own magic.

"There," Mother said with satisfaction as she finished Hannah's restraints. "Now. Into the vat."

Hannah hated this part more than anything. With her arms fastened behind her she struggled to swim, and Mother always took her sweet time hauling her back out. Still, Hannah did as she was told. She slowly climbed up the wobbly plank steps of the giant wooden vat of witch-hazel water and lifted herself onto the first rise, her breath hitching at the creak it made.

"Do not make me force you in again," Mother hissed.

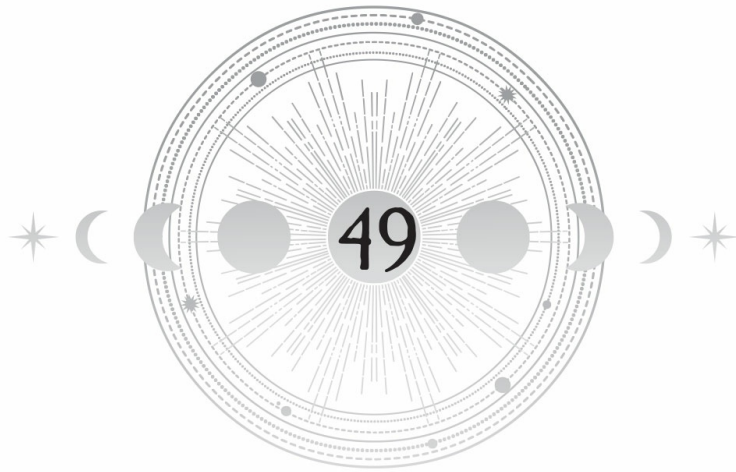
Hannah took another step up. Once she was at the top, she looked down into the depthless bath. The surface was shiny enough for her to see her reflection.

She didn't want to go in. She hated how the stench of iron and witch hazel would not leave her nose for a week afterward and how she would feel the sting from the poisonous plant on her skin no matter how much she scrubbed herself later.

"Mother—"

"Now," her mother ordered before forcing her over the edge.

All Hannah saw was darkness.



Delphine was underwater.

And she had been here before.

Her lungs were burning, her gills sore and aching from so much overuse in the last two days after being dormant for months. Salt water burned her throat as she thrashed against the arms pulling her—arms she knew.

Down.

Down.

Down.

She already knew what she was going to see when she opened her eyes—the pitch-black depths of the Siren’s Sea staring back at her. She pushed on the muscles of her neck, prying open her gills. She felt it the moment the three slits on each side of her throat ripped open, oxygen finally pumping back into her lungs.

Delphine thrashed against the arms, thrusting out her legs with as much force as she could in her position. Her back was to the figure, their arms wrapped around her front too tightly for her to wiggle out of their grasp just like she had seen in her dream. The webbing between her fingers and toes wove together, but she knew it would be useless to continue struggling. Knew exactly who she would have to face at the end of this.

They finally reached the stone house covered in purple coral and seaweed that Delphine remembered so vividly from her vision. She was shoved

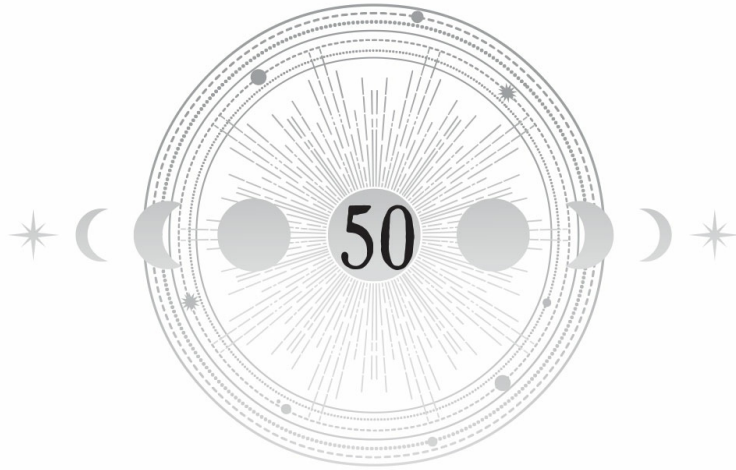
through the doorway and finally released.

Delphine whipped around. “Celeste,” she said as she stared at the familiar beauty.

Celeste’s hair had gotten much longer since the last time Delphine had seen her, the thick coils almost reaching the siren’s waist.

“Hello, Delphine,” Celeste said.

Please keep your promise, Hannah, Delphine thought. *Please come for me soon.*



Hannah couldn't tell if this was another dream.

It certainly didn't feel like one.

For one, there was pain, so much pain, and usually when she dreamed, she felt numb. She could not tell what part of her hurt, though, only that it was her entire being.

Except for her throat.

She knew for a fact that her throat was on fire.

"What do we do?" someone whispered next to her, the voice strong and smooth.

"I have no idea," another voice Hannah suddenly recognized as Ezra's spoke softly.

Delphine.

Hannah's heart ached. Delphine had been taken by those monsters. They were going to drag her back to Siren's Sea and—

Hannah's eyes fluttered open.

"Hannah?" someone asked in alarm.

Ezra.

"Hey, easy," the prince said as she tried to sit up.

Ezra gently helped her until she could hold herself up, and she scrubbed at her eyes until she could see again.

She opened her mouth to ask what happened, but nothing came out. She

looked between Cass and the prince in panic.

“You probably damaged your vocal cords,” Ezra told her. “We tried to get you to stop, but you wouldn’t—”

“I had to knock you out cold,” Caspian interjected on her right.

Hannah turned her head to see Caspian, looking at her with equal concern, his usual jovial expression gone, his eyes somber.

Ezra huffed at the man’s bluntness before telling Hannah, “You need to drink some water.”

Hannah nodded slowly, and Ezra reached over with one of their water canteens, placing it in Hannah’s hands. Ezra watched solemnly, waiting for Hannah to finish before she spoke.

“I’m so sorry, Hannah,” he said.

Hannah closed the lid to the canteen and looked down at her lap. She was afraid if she looked at anyone right now, she would cry.

“We tried to take them all on, but once they used their siren songs, it was over,” Ezra explained, a look of regret washing over his face. “Calla isn’t doing too hot either.”

Hannah darted her eyes back to the prince and widened her eyes, as if to say *Where is she?*

“Gideon is making her rest and refuel. He thinks she may have overextended her magic.”

Hannah roamed her eyes over the two men. They looked absolutely haggard. Ezra had a nice-sized bruise forming over his left cheek and his clothing was a disheveled mess. Cass didn’t look much better. She had no idea where Kestrel was.

“We are going to find Delphine as soon as we can—” Ezra began again, but Cass quickly cut the prince off.

“When? After we finally make it to the Witch Eater? If we ever do?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be the optimistic one?” Ezra snapped.

“Eventually, everything runs out. Except for my good looks. There’s an infinite resource of that.” Caspian’s tone was flat despite his joke, and Hannah got an uneasy feeling in her gut. If even Caspian was in a poor mood . . . things were bad.

“Shut up, Caspian.” The prince sighed deeply.

“Well, am I *wro*—”

Hannah clamped her hands over her ears and blocked them out. She couldn’t do this. Any of this. She needed to find Delphine.

“Hannah.” Ezra’s voice was muffled outside of her hands. “I’m sorry. We’ve stopped, I promise.”

Slowly Hannah dropped her hands from her head.

“We need to make it to the Witch Eater and then get to Delphine as quickly as possible,” Caspian concluded.

That wasn’t what Hannah wanted to hear. She wanted to hear that they would go get Delphine right away and keep her last promise to her friend. Hannah squeezed her eyes shut again and lay back down. She didn’t want to walk anymore. She didn’t want to find the Witch Eater. She wanted Delphine back. The others’ voices continued above her, but as she replayed the scene of Delphine being taken over and over again in her head, she drowned the rest of the world out until nothing but the sound of her own screaming echoed through her mind.



“I’ll take first watch,” Gideon offered as soon as he and Kestrel returned from washing the blood from their clothing. No one protested.

During the battle, both Guild members had taken nasty slices from the sirens’ weapons, which were already long healed, but when Calla had nearly collapsed from exhaustion, Gideon had been too busy making sure to find her something to eat and drink to wash up. The commander on the other hand, had gone as far as he could to try and track down the pack of sirens with the help of Gideon’s compass, but they had all known it would be useless.

Gideon made his way to lean against a tree so he could stay up and take watch, and Calla quickly settled herself down atop the shirt she was using as a pillow not far from where Hannah was completely passed out. The other three men were sprawled out around the camp, and it wasn’t long before Calla could hear the sound of everyone’s steady breathing that meant they were all asleep.

But Calla knew she would not be getting any sleep tonight. With the sound of Hannah’s and Delphine’s screams in her head, she didn’t know if she would get sleep ever again. She desperately wished that she could sob, but she would never allow herself to break down like that in front of the others when they were all trying so desperately to keep it together.

The worst part of all of it was how changed she suddenly felt—and how guilty she felt of the rush she had experienced earlier. She had known so

vividly in that moment that she could change the outcome of the situation, but she didn't. Because if she were to purposefully take a life, she was only reinforcing what everyone had always thought of her, that she would have been no better than Delphine's abusers. But now, with her friend gone, suffering somewhere she couldn't get to, did Calla care what anyone else thought of her besides those she loved? The people who knew her most in the world? The ones who had risked so much to come to this forest just so Calla could run from a Fate she didn't think she deserved? Maybe it wasn't about if she *deserved* everything that had ever been thrust upon her—but about what she decided to do with the dice she was given. What she decided to do with the power she had just discovered within her. If she had taken that siren's life and become the monster others thought her to be, wouldn't that price have still been worth saving Delphine? She continued to put her friends in danger because she couldn't accept the cards she had been dealt. She was so terrified to face her Fate head-on that she kept stumbling in the wrong direction over and over again.

Now she was wide-awake. The loop of her friend's screaming suddenly quieting in her mind as her heartbeat thundered in her chest. She needed to do *something* for Delphine. Whether that was getting to the Witch Eater not for a spell but for a favor—

The sound of her name suddenly cut through the night. Her full name.

Calla's eyelids burst open—she hadn't realized that she had been squeezing them shut—and she sat up to peer in the direction of the voice. After letting her eyes adjust for a moment, she could easily make out where Gideon was crouching a few feet in front of her. Calla was about to ask him what he was doing, but one look at his face and she knew. Of course she knew.

Calla glanced over to Hannah, who was curled in a tight little ball, completely unmoving. She moved to crouch down over the blond and brushed a light finger over the girl's cheek. "I'm going to fix this," Calla whispered, barely audible even in the deadly silence of the forest.

She finally stood and turned to follow Gideon, tiptoeing behind him as he moved through their makeshift camp and headed into the thick of trees. The prince didn't speak as he led them farther and farther away, until the camp was lost in the distance.

She stopped walking. "Gideon."

He finally paused and turned to look back at her, gripping the bag he

carried as his silver eyes roiled with molten coal.

“We have to make sure we’re back as soon as possible. They’ll be lost without the compass,” Calla told him.

“I know. Don’t worry too much, though. Kestrel’s instincts are unparalleled—I guarantee you he was awake the moment we left. He’ll know not to move until we come back for them.”

Calla lifted her brows. “And he didn’t try to stop you?”

“No. Because he’s a strategist at heart,” Gideon spoke confidently. “He knows just as well as I do that if we can find the Witch Eater sooner rather than later, we may not have to drag the rest of our friends into this mess any more than we already have.”

Calla bit her lip and looked away.

“I know you couldn’t sleep,” he told her, his voice dropping low. “I want you to know how horrible I feel that things went down the way they did. That I couldn’t stop any of it from happening. That she was taken.”

She looked at him intently as she whispered, “It wasn’t your fault. I could’ve stopped it and I froze. Again.”

Something flashed in his eyes—understanding. And she knew he did—truly understood her in this moment. They were both always terrified they were never good enough to protect their friends, and that’s why the people they loved got hurt.

“You want to know the worst part?” Calla almost choked on the words. “What’s happened in this forest isn’t even as bad as it could get.”

“I know,” Gideon said solemnly.

“I can’t get my vision from earlier out of my head. Or what those nymphs made us do. And all I should be thinking about is Delphine, but—”

“It’s been too much,” he reassured her. “And you almost overloaded yourself earlier. No one would fault you for being in shock. Least of all Delphine—she knows you tried your best.”

Calla shook her head at his last words. “But I *haven’t*.”

He was silent. Waiting patiently for her to decide what she wanted to bring out in the open between them.

“I haven’t tried nearly enough. With myself. With my magic. With my fate. And now Delphine is gone, because *I’ve* made a mess of everything, and with everyone I’ve ever known. I have only ever run from everything instead of trying to face it, and look where we are.”

Gideon took a step toward her and tilted her chin up until she was looking

directly into his eyes. “You have always been playing the game, Calliope. You’re just finally seeing yourself as a worthy opponent instead of a casualty to the rules.”

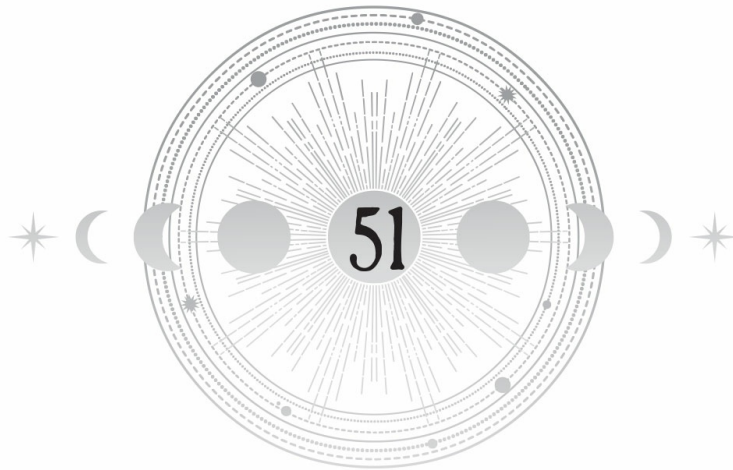
Her breathing became shallow as he leaned forward and placed his mouth by her ear.

“You don’t want to be a pawn anymore? You want to save your friend? Start making your own rules.”

Gideon pulled away from her, his eyes holding an emotion she couldn’t quite decode, and he turned on his heel and began walking away.

Calla watched him for a brief second, feeling his words sink deep into her bones. And when she started after him, she stood a bit taller. Because Gideon *was* right, and she had learned enough about taking risks from Ezra to know when to fold and when to go all in.

If the Fates were going to use her as a pawn anyway—she might as well play to win.



Ezra knew he was dreaming.

He was crouched down behind a flower cart, holding a bottle of rum in his right hand and a small bag of coins in the other. And right next to him, smiling like a fiend as she peeked over the cart, was Calla.

“I can’t believe we got away with that.” She tipped her head back and laughed. “Did you really know he didn’t have that last ace?”

She looked at him with her bright eyes, her face as open as it had ever been with him. His breath caught at the sight, but he didn’t think she noticed. He had always been so incredibly careful with letting her see how he stared at her when she wasn’t looking, but lately he was slipping up more and more. And he was afraid he wasn’t going to be able to play with fire much longer.

“Of course I didn’t,” he answered her with a light smirk. “I just took a shot in the dark and figured, if we didn’t win, we’d just take everything and run anyway.”

“We aren’t very good sports, are we?” Calla mused.

“We don’t have to be—we won,” he told her as he peeked his own head over the large cart to see if the pissed-off troll they had just hustled was still looking around for them. “Okay, they’re gone. We need to get out of here.”

She grinned at him again and confidently reached out to take his hand, pulling him up with her and tugging him out from behind the flowers and down the road. Toward her apartment. He closed his eyes for a moment as he

relished the feel of his warm hand in hers; he could remember a time when she had been so oddly careful to touch him at all, but these days, she never hesitated anymore. It was a fact that made his heart both swell and sink at the same time.

And with her next words, he knew he couldn't let this happen any longer.

"Delphine and Hannah aren't at the apartment tonight." She dropped his hand as soon as their paces synced, looking at him innocently from behind the curtain of waves that covered half her face. "We could celebrate our winnings."

He looked at her intently. Taking in the trust that was shining in her eyes for him for the last time. He had never hated himself more.

"Yeah," he said, his voice hollow to his own ears. "Let's go celebrate."

Calla gave him a soft smile and looked back ahead of them, her hands twisting themselves together in front of her—she was nervous. And he was a bastard.

He knew what was supposed to come next, how he would follow her up to her apartment and drink rum with her and rip away any affection she held for him with only a few words. . . .

But none of that happened now. Instead, Ezra stopped in place and Calla kept walking. She didn't seem to notice that he wasn't behind her anymore and he tried to make his feet move, to go after her, but he was utterly frozen. He watched her figure walk farther and farther away—and then something snapped.

Ezra shot up from where he was lying on the ground, temples slick with sweat. His breathing was labored as he looked around the dim camp. It was a dream.

It was a dream, but when he looked around at the sleeping bodies of his friends, he already knew he wasn't going to find hers.



"Oh shit," Caspian said as soon as Ezra shook him awake.

Cass scrubbed a hand over his face and stretched his limbs out quickly before standing up and surveying the situation. He had known something was off the moment he gained consciousness, his magic immediately noting the lack of familiar energy that had been with him the past day.

Gideon was gone. And so was Calla.

He looked around to find his commander, knowing full well Kestrel was most likely already aware of the current situation. . . .

There, on the edge of the circle, Kestrel was standing ramrod straight, looking into the trees. His long white hair had been tied up in a neat bun with a leather strap, and he hadn't bothered to change into any of the extra clothes Gideon and Ezra had offered him the day before. As Cass approached, the commander barely so much as turned his head to acknowledge his presence.

"Kestrel, what the Hells?" Cass questioned.

"They left last night."

"*What?*"

Double shit, Cass thought as Ezra's growl sounded off behind them.

Caspian winced a bit as Ezra scrambled to his feet, his movement disrupting a still-sleeping Hannah in the process. The little witch sat up groggily and scrubbed her eyes in the dim light of dawn.

"You knew he was taking her and—"

"He didn't *take* her," Kestrel interjected.

"But you knew they were going to leave and you did nothing?" Ezra clenched his fists and stood his ground, refusing to back away from the commander's lethal glare. Hannah came to stand next to Caspian as they quietly watched the storm that Caspian knew was about to unfold, and he angled himself toward the blond, like he was trying to shield her from the brewing tension.

"If I know Gideon at all," Kestrel said in a bored tone next to them, "I can guarantee this plan has been swimming in his head the whole time. And don't pretend the girl isn't cut from the same cloth."

"Why would Gideon plan this?" Cass questioned.

"So they could go to the Witch Eater by themselves," Ezra gritted out in realization. "I know my brother. This misplaced self-sacrifice stuff is a recurring theme in his life. Calla's, too, apparently. But you didn't have to just *let* this happen."

"If Gideon wants to take the witch to do their business themselves and leave the rest of us out of it, why should I stop them?" Kestrel crossed his arms.

"Because they're our *friends*. You don't just let them walk into stupid situations because they want to. Where's your sense of loyalty?" Ezra spat.

"Do not lecture me on loyalty. I followed Gideon into this forest the same as you. If he wants to risk everything on that ridiculous little witchling—"

“Don’t speak about Calla that way,” Ezra growled.

“I’ll speak about her however I want—” Kestrel started before he suddenly staggered backward, a hand flying to his face as blood spurted from his mouth and nose.

Ezra straightened himself up, shaking out his fist.

Caspian was so shocked he couldn’t move.

Ezra had just punched one of the deadliest members of the Guild in the face.

Triple shit.

“That,” Ezra seethed, “is for being a self-righteous asshole.”

Hannah’s delicate features were laced with shock as she glanced over to Ezra and took a slight step toward Caspian, who spread out an arm so she could tuck herself into his side for comfort. Kestrel bared his teeth at them, his nose and mouth covered in bright red blood.

“I ought to teach you a lesson you won’t soon forget.” He started toward Ezra, raising a hand and summoning a whirl of wind around the clearing.

Caspian knew he should step in, but truth be told he was too tired to get in the middle. He was beginning to feel the weight of everything settle over his shoulders, and if Ezra and Kestrel wanted to throw punches, he was going to let them. Those punches would hurt less than everything else they had all just been through anyway.

Ezra summoned his own twister of wind, fists clenched at his side, ready to strike the moment Kestrel made an advance.

It was *Hannah* who untucked herself from Caspian’s side and stepped in front of the prince and made the commander skid to a halt.

Stop it, she conveyed wordlessly, holding up a hand to each of them. Cass sighed—so much for staying out of it—and quickly stepped in to back her up.

“This isn’t going to help anything, Kestrel,” he inserted calmly.

“Why are you all blaming me for this? *They* left. They clearly decided they didn’t need *our* help.”

Cass slid his gaze to Kestrel in surprise.

He wasn’t sure if the others noticed it—the subtle hint of pain that was laced into the witch’s words. Kestrel’s face and eyes gave nothing away, the centuries of careful training as a commander easily masking whatever it was that was burning beneath the surface.

“And? That’s not only their decision to make. Stopping Gideon when he has an incredibly dumb idea is the entire reason we’re all here,” Ezra said.

Kestrel didn't say anything to that, only turned his head away. Caspian looked to Ezra. "What are we going to do, then?" Cass questioned.

The prince shook his head. "I have no idea. We can give them a few hours to make their way back to us or we can risk just going after them now."

"What if we leave and miss them?" Cass threw back.

"Let's give them the benefit of the doubt," Ezra reasoned. "We wait a few hours and then we go out and find them ourselves. Gideon's compass should be able to lead them straight back to us, and it would probably be easier if we didn't become a moving target."

Hannah nodded reluctantly.

"I'm going to wash up," Kestrel said, finally breaking his silence and stalking away.

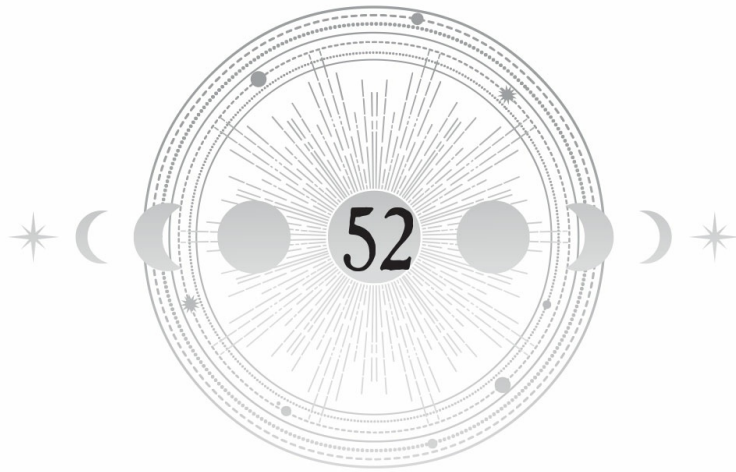
Caspian watched as his commander took a few long strides and made it to the tree line, disappearing toward their bathing stream.

"He's going to try and murder me later," Ezra muttered as soon as the commander was out of earshot.

"That is highly likely," Caspian agreed.

"If only he had been the one to disappear during the night," Ezra muttered.

And almost as if the Gods themselves were listening to his request—Ezra got his wish. Just as Caspian's magic had told him Gideon was no longer nearby, he felt Kestrel's energy snuff out completely, and in that moment, Cass knew the commander was gone.



Do you think it's me?"

Gideon started a bit at her abrupt question. It was the first time either one of them had spoken in the last hour, the tension between them not uncomfortable but . . . different. They had only stopped to drink water, and Calla couldn't help breaking the silence—it was starting to make her antsy. It didn't bode well that the forest was getting moody. The trees were drooping with gray moss, and there was a swirling mass of black clouds above them. The grass on the ground had become brown with death, and Calla spotted a few familiar-looking black-and-violet buds poking out from between the dried-up blades.

"It's hard to say," Gideon finally answered, knowing exactly what she meant without her having to explain. "Why?"

She thought carefully about what she was about to say. "I think . . . part of me hopes it is."

Gideon's brows shot up at that confession. "What's changed?"

"Besides everything?" She shook her head bitterly. "For the first time since I left my coven, I feel like I'm finally doing something bigger than what I ever thought I was capable of. Of course, I don't *want* there to be a war, I didn't want to have to go through any of this, but if it's inevitable . . . and I've had to lose everything because I rolled these numbers . . . then I hope that at least I was destined for *something* and it hasn't all been a waste. That I

haven't spent my entire life being judged for a curse that isn't even mine."

Gideon looked sidelong at her, adjusting the strap of the bag on his shoulder as he said, "Nothing is ever a waste if you grow from it."

They walked for a little while in silence, the only sound the noise of the grass under their feet, before Calla finally asked, "How much longer, do you think, before we get there?"

"The compass has been pretty steady since we left, and I'm hoping that means it won't be long. Perhaps before evening."

"Are you ready? For all of this?" Calla bit her lip.

He gave her a thoughtful look. "I'm ready to go home and feel like I'm not an impostor."

Ask him. Ask him now.

"Gideon?"

"Hmm?" he hummed patiently.

"Your mother . . . Ezra has never seemed confident about her intentions. I know she's your mother but—"

"Ezra and our mother have never gotten along." He nodded. "Probably because he refused to do anything she tried to mold him into doing. Which I'm proud of him for—not giving in to her, I mean. He never had an interest in being a part of the Guild or taking a position in her court, and it always caused friction between the two of them."

"But you and she are close?" Calla asked skeptically.

Gideon scoffed. "I would never say *that*. We were close when I was younger, I suppose. None of the queens have had children in centuries. So, when I came along . . . she doted on me a lot, and as a child, it's hard to see that as anything but affection. I know that must have been hard for Ezra, but it wasn't any easier for me. My mother's expectations are high, and I have the burden of keeping the peace long enough to make a change before everything falls apart."

Calla waited as he gathered the rest of his thoughts, kicking a wayward twig out of her path as they continued forward.

"I can't help that she's my mother by blood," he continued, his voice low. "I understand on the one hand, she and the other queens are the only reason we exist the way we do. That, if not for the bargain they made with the Fates, our mortal ancestors would have starved, powerless in the Wastelands. But . . . I also can't excuse anything she's done. Not to Ezra, or her own people."

"Do you think the bargain they made was worth it?" Calla whispered.

“Giving up their souls to the Gods in exchange for immortality and magic—yet cursing their people in the process?”

“The queens like to say they were cursed, too.” Gideon snorted. “And perhaps they felt it was their only route to salvation. The fae had made the territories into a barren playground for their debauchery. They couldn’t grow food—everyone was starving. My mother and her sisters gave up their places in the afterlife to make the lands profitable again and our people capable of finally fighting back. I can’t say it’s the decision I would have made, but I suppose all we can do now is untangle the webs they weaved.”

“Things are so screwed up,” she groaned miserably, scrubbing a hand over her face. “This war, our rolls. Delphine—”

Her voice broke slightly as she said Delph’s name.

“I know,” Gideon murmured as he kicked a stone out of his way.

“I messed things up with Ezra,” Calla continued, shaking her head in frustration.

“We messed things up with Ezra,” he reasoned. “I should have never kissed you like that. I knew how Ezra felt about you and I did it anyway.”

“*Felt* is the key word there.” She swallowed. “But it’s not your fault. I agreed to the nymphs’ game; you just did it so I wouldn’t lose a memory. I should probably thank you for your sacrifice.”

“Sacrifice,” he murmured, giving her a loaded glance.

She felt her cheeks flush slightly at the strange charge in the air between them and quickly changed the subject. “I’ve decided that you were right, by the way.”

“You may have to be more specific.” He tilted his head.

“I need to stop being a pawn. I need to make my own rules.”

“Yes.” He nodded readily.

“Back at the apartment, with those fae, was the first time I had siphoned from anyone in years. It terrified me when I lost that much control. And the vision I had after the demon’s oak only made it ten times worse.”

“What was your vision?”

She watched him carefully as she revealed, “I saw myself siphon all of the blood out of someone’s body.”

Gideon’s brows lifted, but there was no reproach in his expression and she was relieved. “I didn’t know that was possible. Have you ever tried that before?”

“Not before the vision, but during my fight with that siren, Zephyr, I may

have almost done it. When he touched my skin, I had been using my Rouge magic already, and it isn't like that hasn't been the case before, but it's almost if that vision unlocked something in me."

"Did it feel like you were able to control it?"

"It felt like one thought would accidentally bleed him dry," she admitted. "It would take practice to control it better—"

"Then we're going to practice," he cut in adamantly.

"We're going to practice?" A shocked laugh came out of her mouth with the words.

"Is there someone else here that I can't see?" He ticked a singular brow with a smirk, though his eyes were serious.

"Wait, you mean *now*?"

"Considering we're about to visit someone named the Witch Eater, there may not be another time."

"Uh, Gideon, did you not hear what I just said? I could've accidentally drained that siren *dry*. What if that happens to you?"

Gideon shrugged. "Then don't let it happen."

She made an unintelligible noise as he began rolling up the right sleeve of his shirt to his elbow, thrusting his bare arm toward her.

"There's no way I'm risking this—"

"You're going to have to practice sometime, Calliope."

"Yes, but—"

"Did you kill that siren?"

She exhaled in frustration, her eyes fluttering shut as she answered, "No."

"Then you won't kill me. Now, *try*."

She slowly blinked her eyes back open to look at him. His face was determined, and she had half a mind to dig her heels in about this, but she also got the distinct feeling that he wasn't going to let this go easily and she was too tired to be stubborn about it any longer.

"*Fine*."

He grinned at her, lifting his arm to her in offering.

She took a deep breath and reached out her hand to him slowly. There was a moment of hesitation before she let her fingers brush his warm skin, and when they finally made contact, a shiver ran through her body. She gently wrapped her hand around his arm and concentrated on her Rouge magic, feeling out his erratic pulse and taking in the movement of his blood flowing through his veins. The next part was trickier.

Gideon was steady and strong, not swaying an inch as she figured out what to do next. She reached for her inner Siphon, and the moment she locked in on the feeling, something inside her whirled to life and she felt it as her two magics clicked into place together. And every drop of blood in Gideon's body was at her mercy.

"Whoa," he exhaled as he watched his veins pulse through his arm where she gripped him. He looked up at her face and his eyes were . . . proud.

Calla's breath hitched.

He grinned. "Okay, now try to drain some of my blood. *Some.*"

She was still reveling in the feeling of his approval, but she managed a good-natured eye roll before closing her eyes and concentrating again. She could feel how easy it'd be to just jerk her power and rush all the blood right out, but the more she focused the more she found she could isolate the concentration of her magic on small areas of blood. She tentatively wrapped a tendril of her Rouge magic to a small spot on his forearm and, as gently as she could, gave a small tug.

A small bubble of blood seeped out of Gideon's skin and floated in the air above where she was gripping him. She immediately dropped his arm, and the second she lost her focus, the orb of blood splattered to the ground and onto their shoes.

"Oh my Gods," she said in a rush, leaning in to fuss over the spot on his arm where the blood had oozed from. A bluish bruise the size of a spectral began to bloom there but disappeared just as quickly thanks to his healing abilities. "Are you all right?"

"*That* . . . was excellent," he decided.

She looked at him skeptically. "Did it hurt?"

"Greatly." He gave her a rueful smile. "But you didn't kill me."

She gave him an exasperated look before giving his chest a playful push. "You're incorrigible. But . . ."

He grabbed her hand before she could move it away and held it there on his chest, his silver eyes whirling with black as he echoed, "But . . ."

"That was exhilarating. I could feel the way the blood and magic rushed through your veins," she said breathlessly. "I could feel your heartbeat sync up with mine."

His eyes flashed black at her words, and he tilted his head closer as he whispered, "You are . . ."

Her heart pounded against her chest at his proximity, and she tried not to

glance at his mouth while she waited for him to finish. This somehow felt ten times more intimate than their kiss.

“I’m what?” she prompted.

“Brilliant,” he told her. “Like a new star—you only get brighter.”

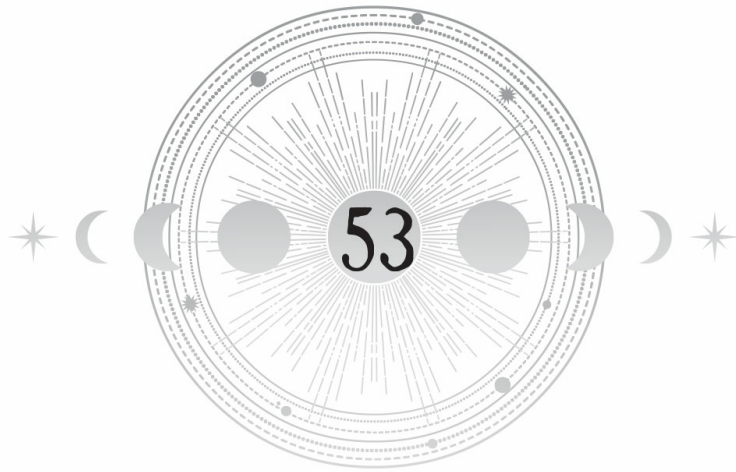
Warmth flooded through her body at his words, and for a second, it looked like he was going to say something more but decided better of it.

“Gideon?” she whispered tentatively.

“We should get moving again.” He cleared his throat, dropping her hand as he took a step back. “Let’s go change our fate.”

“*Our* fate,” Calla emphasized, searching his face seriously. “We’ll finish this together, right?”

He stared back at her evenly for a moment before promising, “We’ll finish this together.”



Is there any water left?" Calla asked as she licked her lips a good bit later.

She was absolutely parched and Gideon was ruthless about how long he'd let them take breaks. Calla didn't know how much longer she could go without at least a nap.

"Here." Gideon handed her the leather canteen.

She downed almost the entire thing before finally coming up for air, and he raised a brow at her.

"Do we need to rest again?"

Yes.

"No," she lied. "We are almost there aren't we?"

He looked at her skeptically. "I believe so, but I wouldn't mind a quick break. Let's sit."

Calla knew he was doing this for her benefit, but she was much too tired to protest. They picked a tree to sit against, and Calla began massaging her aching feet as Gideon rummaged through their bag of supplies.

"Where did you find such a valuable artifact, anyway?" She looked back over to Gideon as he finally procured the item he had been searching for.

"It's a family heirloom," he answered as he flipped the golden lid to the compass open.

"Why would a witch have a family heirloom customized for this forest?"

"It isn't necessarily for this forest. And it's customized for *me*—or at least

for anyone in my bloodline. When I begin to close in on my desired destination, it usually begins to heat up.”

“Oh?” Calla peered at the compass more curiously. “Has it gotten warmer, then?”

“See, that’s just it—it’s been burning up.”

Calla raised her eyebrows in surprise. She looked around them frantically. There was nothing but trees surrounding them, not even a large clearing that she could see in the spaces between the trunks. Gideon set the compass down for a moment while he riffled through the bag. Calla reach out with a tip of her finger, brushing it across the lid briefly, noting how cool the gold metal felt. Magic was a strange thing.

“What do you think this means?”

“I’m not sure, but—”

Suddenly, there was a small rustle from their left, and Calla and Gideon were instantly on their feet. They both seemed to hold their breaths as they waited for another indication that something might be there.

A few moments later, the culprit revealed itself.

There, coming out of a nearby bush a few feet away, was a small black rabbit. Calla saw its little nose stick out of the leaves, wiggling as it scented for danger.

“It’s a *bunny*,” Calla cooed as the small animal took a small hop toward them, leaning her hands down on her knees to peer at it closer. The rabbit had long, straight ears and a puffy black tail, and just as Calla was about to coo at it some more Gideon began trying to kick it away.

“Gideon, what are you doing?” she said in annoyance. “Leave the bunny alone.”

“That is *not* a bunny,” he growled. “*That* is someone’s familiar.”

“What?” She inspected the rabbit closer, alarmed.

Calla knew what familiars were—subject had been brought up briefly back in her schooling days—but she had never seen one of the magicked beings so close before. Familiars took the shape of a variety of small animals, but lurking beneath their glamour, they were soulless beings bound to their lords—often by a badly made bargain or debt.

The rabbit’s depthless eyes momentarily glowed red as she peered down at it, and she quickly backed away with a small yelp.

“Scram,” Gideon said as he kicked at it again.

The rabbit jumped away from his foot before quickly dashing between

them, making them twist around to see where it had gone.

“No!” Gideon yelled as the rabbit picked up the compass in its mouth.

Gideon lurched forward to grab the small creature, but it deftly avoided his grip. The familiar began running away, turning for the woods on their left, and Calla hurriedly followed after it as Gideon righted himself behind her. Bouncing from side to side the creature made it impossible for her to try and capture it, not to mention how its black fur disguised it in the dark patches of shadow that blotted the forest ground from the trees’ limbs. A true gremlin of the dark.

She made a frustrated sound in the back of her throat as it once again averted her attempts before an aggressive breeze suddenly whirled past her. Calla glanced back to see Gideon strutting forward, a hand raised in front of him as he controlled the gust of wind that was trapping the familiar in a small tornado.

“Enough of this,” Gideon muttered as he moved past Calla and easily reached down to snag the trapped rabbit up by its scruff. He shook the fighting rabbit by its neck until the compass dropped into his free hand, and just as he turned to say something to Calla, the rabbit screeched.

“Ah!” Calla cried as she reached up to shield her ears from the sharp noise the familiar was emitting.

Gideon winced in pain as he tossed the critter away from him, and Calla watched as the rabbit twisted through the air to nimbly land back on its feet.

Gideon cursed.

“What the Hells was that?” Calla asked him in panic.

“It just called its lord.”

Calla paled.

“That’s not good,” she noted.

“Well, it is and it isn’t,” Gideon explained as he stepped closer to her.

The intense way he was inspecting the woods around them revealed his careful training, a fact that made her rigid with awareness that they were clearly not in a good position.

As she spoke again, she could hear the nervous edge in her tone. “Why is that?”

“Remember when I said earlier that the compass was hot?”

Calla swallowed as she nodded.

“I have a suspicion as to why.”

“So, you think its lord is . . .”

“Yes.”

“Where do you think—”

Before Calla could finish her thought, something spoke from behind them. A voice so chilling, Calla felt it slice all the way down to her bones.

“I’ve been waiting for you.”



“Must you be so positive about everything?” Ezra admonished as Caspian tried to assure them all for the thousandth time that Kestrel was fine.

“I don’t think being negative would help anyone right now,” Cass reasoned.

“Was your childhood happy or something?” Ezra asked skeptically.

Cass gave him a puzzled look. “Yes?”

“No tragic backstory? Are you even allowed to be here?” Ezra muttered.

“Out of all of us, Kestrel is the one most likely to survive out there,” Caspian continued as if Ezra hadn’t spoken, though it sounded like he was trying to comfort himself with his claim more than the others.

The three of them had come to search for the commander once Cass announced that he had disappeared. If Ezra had thought for one second that things had gotten as bad as they possibly could, he had been detrimentally wrong.

“We need to find Calla and Gideon as soon as possible. Gideon’s compass could help find Kestrel too,” Cass suggested before Ezra quickly interjected.

“Why should we bother? Can you tell me if it had been Hannah or me who had gone missing he would come for us?”

Cass winced, but Ezra didn’t back down.

“We shouldn’t bother for Kestrel, we should bother for Gideon,” Caspian reasoned. “And we need to find Calla and Gideon anyway, so it isn’t like we are going to have to go out of our way.”

“Fine,” Ezra allowed. “Gods, this asinine plan has been a disaster from the beginning.”

Hannah nodded gravely in agreement.

“Where to next, then?” Cass asked.

“That way.” Ezra pointed back to the clearing. “That’s the direction Kestrel had seemed to think they left last night.”

They all began in that direction, Caspian striding ahead as Ezra waited for Hannah to follow so he could trail behind the group. Ezra knew they desperately needed to leave this place and that this entire mission had most likely been a wild-gremlin chase from the beginning. He knew good and well that if they found Calla and Gideon before they accomplished what they had come here searching for he would not be able to make them leave. His brother may have too much faith in this entire endeavor, but Ezra was grateful at least that Gideon hadn't been foolish enough to think he would be an exception to the queen's wrath against the Blood Warriors—and that he was trying to do something about it. Though Ezra had not started this journey thinking the spell would be a success, he was more desperate than ever that it would be.

Because of her.

Because without him she would be one less roll from disaster.

Not for the first time he thought about his bargain with Myrea, his dream last night making the role he had played in Calla's fate all too clear. Myrea may have been the one to summon him to the Rouge palace five months ago, but he had been the one who completed her request. All to avoid conflict with his mother that was probably inevitable anyway. Ezra had been apprehensive of the Rouge Queen's task, and he cursed himself for not knowing better than to get involved, regardless of his mother's orders. If not for the fact that Myrea had never summoned him, only ever Gideon, then he definitely should've known better because of the timing with Gideon's quest.

Originally, Ezra had been dead set on staying behind from Gideon's journey, afraid that it would be suspicious to his mother if he claimed he was helping his brother search for the last Blood Warrior. Especially considering Ezra had shown no such interest in his mother's affairs before. Then he went through with Myrea's request anyway.

So, giving Calla the die . . . that burden was all on him.

Ezra shook his head dejectedly and saw Hannah give him a worried look from out the corner of her eye. He looked away.

He remembered the first time he had heard the Rouge Queen speak Calla's name. Calliope. Great muse, her name meant.

And she was a great muse—a great muse to the Gods' wicked games.

He never quite understood why Myrea had thought him, of all people, good for the job, but he suspected perhaps it was because if she were going to trust anyone to do it discreetly, it would be the Witch Queen's son, who was

supposed to be bound to obey. Now he worried he had missed something integral. Of everyone sent to find Calla, why did it have to be *his* fate to curse her?

As he stared straight ahead, he heard the last thought echo in his mind over and over again and couldn't help but feel, for some reason, that he was being watched.



They were horrendous.

Calla thought she might be sick as she took in the nightmarish person who stood before them.

The being might have been as tall as Gideon had their spine not been so hunched. They were nearly skin and bones—though Calla could tell their gray skin stretched over muscular sinew in the places that mattered most to be lethal. The being's face was elongated, as if it had been stretched down by the chin, and their ears would have been described as fae-like had the sharp points not been as long as they were.

The worst part, however, was their eyes.

The Witch Eater's eyes were as clear as glass, and worse, completely soulless.

It was what she saw in them that was the most eerie of all. If she stared into them too long, she saw sins. All of them. Hers, Gideon's, every person who had ever gazed upon this ancient one's face—

"Look away, child," they rasped. "You cannot handle what I have to show."

Calla finally broke her stare away from the Witch Eater's glass gaze and looked to Gideon in horror. The prince never took his eyes away from the being's direction, but he did reach out to brush a hand down her arm in comfort.

Calla's breath caught in her throat.

"It did not take quite as long as I thought it would for you to find me."

"I wish we could say the same," Gideon answered, his prince voice coming out to play.

"Shall we take this inside?" The creature tilted their head, and Gideon nodded once in confirmation.

Calla almost asked where *inside* was, but luckily, she didn't have to. To

the right of them, a cottage now stood, its black stone exterior completed with a wood door and roof. The latter was pitched with a large stone chimney sticking out on its right side.

And there in front of the cottage door sat the familiar.

The Witch Eater turned for the house, and Calla and Gideon did not move for a moment as they watched them walk away. The ancient one's gray body was covered with a formfitting black material, and from behind Calla could see just how abnormally grotesque their spine jutted from their back.

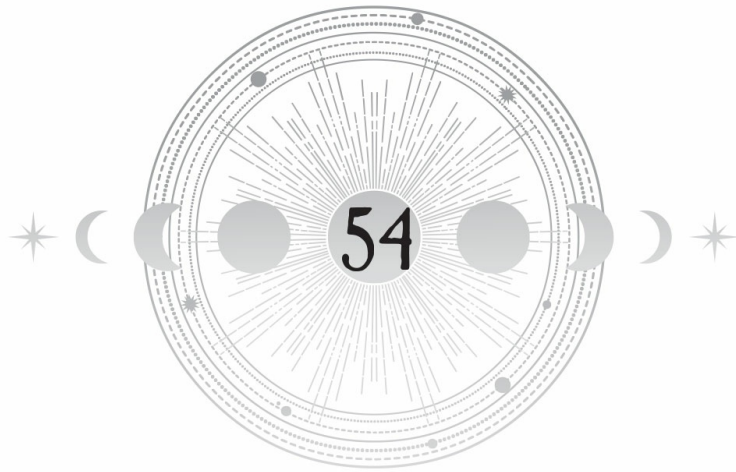
"It's going to be all right," Gideon told her.

Calla didn't believe him, but still she nodded. "Okay."

"Calliope." The way he said her name made her look up at him, and she sucked in a breath when she saw that his eyes were as pitch-black as the night sky. "We *are* in this together."

She glanced back to the cottage, where the Witch Eater was watching them expectantly.

"Together," she vowed.



Come in and sit,” the Witch Eater said as they crossed the threshold.

Calla didn’t know what to take in first.

The entire cottage was covered in *things*.

From what Calla could see the space was just one large room—no bed or kitchen or much other furniture besides a wooden rectangular table and four matching chairs. The table’s surface was covered in crystals and rocks and stacks of books and papers. The walls were plastered with star charts, lines of strings connecting various pieces across the large surface. In the far corner of the cottage was a stone fireplace with another of the wooden dining chairs facing it, a basket of the same string that had been pinned all over the walls sitting next to it.

Calla saw that the being had cleared a singular walkway through all the items that littered the floor. And upon closer inspection, for a second time she almost lost the contents of her stomach. On the floor were stacks of jars. Jars containing body parts and other things she wished she didn’t have to look at. Among the jars were also other odds and ends—buttons and glass marbles and so many feathers.

Valkyrie feathers.

“Em, please bring me my charts,” the Witch Eater rasped at the rabbit.

Calla and Gideon took the seats across the table as the familiar, Em, hopped around the table at their liege’s request. Gideon pulled Calla’s chair

out, careful not to disturb any of the knickknacks around them, before settling in next to her.

As the Witch Eater gathered a few things from around the table and lit a few black candles between them, Calla watched Em transform. Where the rabbit had just been now stood what appeared to be a young girl. As thin as a wraith, the girl stood only about five feet in height, her paper-white skin almost translucent. Calla could see all of the familiar's black veins, which would have been creepy enough, but to add to the grotesque look, the girl's eyes were just as pitch-black as they had been when she was in her other form, her raven hair matching the color perfectly.

Em lifted a few papers off the top of a stack in the corner and brought them to her boss, smoothing them out on the table before reaching over to grab a discarded wooden pencil and hand it to the ancient creature. The Witch Eater took the pencil without thanks before dismissing the girl with a wave of their hand. Em bowed her head before folding herself back into her animal form and skittering off between a pile of junk on the floor.

Calla watched the rabbit until it disappeared, and she must have had a miserable look on her face for the poor girl because the Witch Eater said, "It's going to be such a shame when I have to replace Em. Her three centuries of service will be up in the next year, and then she will have to go to the Hells—and I will have to find another unfortunate soul to train."

Calla looked horrified. "Why wouldn't you just keep her, then? If she has served you so well?"

The ancient one's face did not express emotion, but if it did, Calla was sure it was looking at her with puzzlement.

"Why would I do that?"

"Loyalty?"

The creature gritted out a laugh. "There is no such thing as loyalty here, girl, only bargains. I have fulfilled my end by allowing Em to live out three centuries of servitude with me after she bartered away her soul to another creature instead of being sent to the Hells right away."

Calla looked back in the direction of where Em disappeared. She had always thought becoming a familiar was a pitiful thing to do, but now she wondered if her judgment had been too harsh. Calla could not say she wouldn't make such a deal if it meant prolonging a trip to the Hells. Of course, not bartering your soul away in the first place would be a good way to avoid such a fate, too. She looked to Gideon. She hoped that wasn't the sort

of situation they were about to find themselves in.

“I was wondering when you would arrive,” the ancient one moved on as they sat down. “I did not know if it would be this decade or next; the numbers did not appear clearly for you, Prince. Every time I would catch a glimpse of something another number kept coming up instead.”

Calla stared at the being intently as it spoke, watching as they drew lines all over the map that lay on the table in front of them.

“What was the number?” Gideon asked.

Calla didn’t want to hear what she already knew the Witch Eater was about to say.

“Six.”

Calla paled, but Gideon didn’t miss a beat. “Then you already know why we are here.”

“Of course I do. But do *you* know why you are here?”

Calla tilted her head in question, but the ancient one never looked up from their maps.

Gideon spoke for them again. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, Prince, that you coming to me has been destined for some time now.”

“And what about me?” Calla questioned.

“You, child, were never supposed to cross paths with him. You narrowly missed each other once before.”

Gideon looked shocked, and Calla was sure her expression mirrored his.

“Please explain,” she pressed.

“In due time, girl.”

The Witch Eater finally dropped their pencil and stood from the table, and Gideon and Calla watched as they went to the wall and tacked up the map.

In the middle of the map were two circles, both with a different pattern of lines running through them. The Witch Eater grabbed a spool of the thread that was hanging from the map to the left and traced it over the lines in the two circles they had drawn.

“Gideon Amadeo Black, born under the Maiden constellation and the Griffin moon to Queen Lysandra. Of all the beings who have ever deliberately sought me out, you are perhaps the youngest.”

As they spoke, they circled the chart on the right with the spool of thread. Star charts, Calla realized. The creature had drawn their birth charts.

“And you,” the ancient one said, looking back to her. “*Calla*, is it? Born

Calliope Lillian Rosewood, under the Cetus constellation and the Minos moon, to Indra Rosewood. You were supposed to follow a much different path.”

“What path?”

The Witch Eater did not answer right away—they simply finished tracing Calla’s chart in thread, before finally letting the spool hang to the floor once they had finished. “That path is no longer relevant, is it? Because you are here now.” The ancient one turned back to them and took their place back at the head of the table.

“But what if I can get back on the path that was meant for me?”

The Witch Eater shook their head. “That is not how fate works. No matter what is destined for us, we get to make our own decisions along the way. Those decisions may not change the destination, but they do change the path we take to get there, and you have chosen *this* path. There is no going back.”

“And the spell we came for, that will change my path again, correct?”

“Precisely.”

The Witch Eater looked to Gideon, reaching out an open palm toward the prince. “Now, is there something you have brought me?”

Gideon lifted the bag he still had hitched on his shoulder and placed it on the table. He dug through and pulled out six items: the siren tongue, the Valkyrie feather, two black-and-green scales, and two long white fangs. He pushed all the items toward the Witch Eater, and they quickly inspected each one. They bit down on the scales with their yellowing teeth before tossing them over their shoulder into a pile of other scales with a *clank*. Next, they sorted away the two fangs before focusing on the last of the items. They plucked the Valkyrie feather off the table and carefully peered at it with a grin before tucking the marbled brown feather behind their ear.

“And the Witch’s Dice?”

Gideon reached back into the bag and carefully pulled out a small velvet drawstring pouch. He tossed it over and the being easily snatched it from the air before dumping the contents inside onto the table.

A pair of red dice tapped their way out in front of them.

“Do you know how Witch’s Dice are created, young witches?”

Gideon exchanged a look with Calla.

“The Fates created them,” Calla answered.

“Yes, that is the simple answer. The details are much more complicated, however.”

The Witch Eater picked up one of the dice and fidgeted with it between their long thin fingers. “For every witch born, six die are created at the same time, as I’m sure you know.” Calla watched them set the die back down on the table carefully.

“When the Fates gave the Witch Queens their magic and immortality, they needed payment, but Gods do not deal in souls or bargains as we do. The Gods like their games to be complicated. A con of being eternal—you get bored easily.” The Witch Eater barked a sickly laugh. “The Fates, in particular, are the most cynical of all the Gods. Heartless. And when they see an opportunity to create a mess—they take it. When your queens made their bargain, they had nothing materialistic to offer in payment. Luckily for them, the Fates don’t mind dealing in matters of the mind. Or heart.”

The Witch Eater grinned at them, showing off their sharp teeth. Calla was careful not to cringe.

“The Fates told your queens they would get to keep their magic and immortality as long as they did two things. First, they had to stay tied to their lands, not ever leaving their gifted territories, lest they lose their powers. Secondly, they had to fight, and win, a war to prove their worthiness of the Fates’ gifts and show that they knew how to use them. The Fates allowed the Queens to build their own power source by taking it from the witches who have completed their rolls, and they can also order any indebted witch in their presence to do as they ask—an unbreakable bond of servitude that allows them to create an army so loyal they are sure to have an advantage.”

Gideon and Calla exchanged a knowing look. Gideon had already begun preparing for this very thing.

“It seems almost imbalanced, doesn’t it?” the being asked rhetorically. “The Witch Queens have been set up perfectly to win this war. Armies of loyal witches and a seemingly unending stream of power. While the Gods only gave themselves six fated Blood Warriors. Why is it, do you think that is?”

Gideon was the one that answered. “I’m assuming it has something to do with the Witch’s Dice?”

“Very good, Prince.” The ancient one grinned at him again. “You see, Witch’s Dice are not just your curse, young ones, but your mercy. They give you your magic and they curse you to serve. They choose who is fated to go to war with the queens—and they grant you the gift of keeping your magic if the queens lose.”

Calla and Gideon raised their brows.

“What do you mean?” Calla asked. “I thought if the queens lose the war, our people lose our magic.”

“If only things were that simple. The Gods like an insurance policy. They knew if the Queens were to use all the currently indebted witches in their war, there was a good chance they’d win. So, the Gods set up several provisions—just in case. One was that if a Blood Warrior completed their six rolls, they become almost as invincible as a God themselves—until the war started. The second insurance was that once the last warrior is chosen, all the current indebted witches will be the last ones with that burden. Witch’s Dice would no longer connect you to the queens. Instead, any witch who starts or finishes their rolls after the war has begun will get to keep their magic and immortality regardless of if the queens win or lose.”

“So those witches could choose to fight against the queens themselves, along with the Blood Warriors,” Gideon finished.

“Exactly.”

Calla’s head was swimming.

“What about the ones who have to serve the queens in the war? What happens to them if the queens lose?” she asked.

The Witch Eater shrugged. “If they survive, they will most likely suffer the same fate as the queens themselves. If the queens win, they will be fine and the ones who fought against them will suffer. Pain all around, I say.” The ancient one grinned.

Hannah.

Hannah had already completed all her rolls, and if Calla had her rolls erased, the likelihood that they would be on opposite sides of this war was too high.

“Let’s get on with the spell, then,” Gideon said, clearly not detecting the crescendo of panic rising in Calla’s mind.

“I don’t know, Gideon, maybe we should think—”

“I haven’t seen a Siphon in ages,” the Witch Eater cut her off.

Calla looked at the being.

“May I?” the ancient one asked as they held out their hand in invitation.

Calla hesitated.

“Do not worry, you cannot take from me like you do others.”

Calla’s brow furrowed in curiosity, and she finally reached out her hand as well.

The creature grasped Calla's hand and their eyes flashed black for a moment. Calla could hardly pay attention to that, however. All she could focus on was the way that, for the first time, touching someone didn't feel like anything.

No, that wasn't true. It felt like something.

It felt like emptiness.

Calla's magic couldn't sense anything to take. No energy, no magic, no life force. It was almost as if the Witch Eater was a hollow shell and nothing more.

The ancient one finally let go of her hand and leaned back in their chair, their eyes still pitch-black.

"Are you all right?" Gideon asked, smoothing a hand over her knee under the table.

"I think so," she whispered.

The Witch Eater finally came out of their trance and sat back up.

"You are an interesting being, Calliope Rosewood," they finally spoke.

"What does that mean?"

"You carry a lot of weight on your shoulders. A lot of death."

Calla paled. "No," she spoke firmly.

"You killed your mother."

Calla felt like her breath was ripped from her lungs, and Gideon's eyes snapped to her face.

"Please, *stop*," she ground out.

The Witch Eater tilted their head. "It was not your fault. It's the same burden all those the Siphon curse chooses must bear."

"*Stop*," Calla hissed again. "Of course it wasn't my fault. I was an *infant*. That doesn't mean I need to hear about it from *you*."

The Witch Eater's expression did not change for a charged moment before their face split into a devouring grin. "I think it's time to see if you're ready."

"Ready for what?" she demanded.

"To get to the point of your visit."

Calla and Gideon exchanged another charged look.

"You both would like to erase your rolls."

A statement not a question. Calla and Gideon nodded.

"Normally that would mean I need payment for you each. But you only brought payment for one."

Gideon looked ready to say something, but the Witch Eater raised their hand.

“In this case, however, I think you’ll find one payment is enough.”

Gideon looked puzzled but did not question it, simply asked instead, “We can begin, then?”

“That depends,” the Witch Eater said, peering at Gideon with seeking eyes. “Tell me, Prince, has the Heartbreak Prince found his vice?”

Gideon turned his head to look at Calla for a moment, and her eyes widened at him in confusion. When he finally broke their gaze and looked back toward the Witch Eater, he simply said, “Yes.”

“Gideon?” Calla asked. “What are they talking about?”

“They’re talking about,” he said each word slowly, “my brother being in love with you.”

“*What?*” Calla cried. “No, you’re mistaken—”

“I’m not.”

“He speaks true,” the Witch Eater said, and Calla whipped her head back to the being. “Prince Ezra is in love with you.”

Calla’s mouth gaped open for a moment at that information, but before she could unpack that claim, she turned back to Gideon and said, “You promised everyone that the Heartbreak Prince story wasn’t *real*.”

Gideon looked pained for a moment before he fixed his mask. “I know. I have a plan—”

“What’s going to happen to him?” Calla demanded. “What does this mean for Ezra?”

“I will not let anything happen to him. Because I have one more thing to bargain with.”

Calla watched as Gideon reached back into his bag and pulled something else out.

A second Valkyrie feather. This one a mottled brown and black.

The Witch Eater made a noise of content.

“When you erase my rolls, I want you to transfer Ezra’s curse to me,” Gideon demanded.

Calla made a horrified sound in the back of her throat. “Gideon, *no*.”

“Ezra is already in love.” He looked back at Calla. “Which means the Heartbreak Prince curse can claim his heart at any given moment. We’re lucky it hasn’t already.”

“So, when you said you already had an item for that part of the spell, back

at the apartment . . . you knew you were going to ask to take this curse from him the entire time, a curse that would make you lose your heart, and you still made that deal with the Valkyrie? Are you *mad*?”

“She won’t get my heart, Calliope. We’ll be out of this forest before her deadline is up, and since she has been magically exiled here, she cannot leave without paying her debt.”

“Why haven’t you told anyone your plans, Gideon? Why keep your brother in the dark about his own fate?”

“It was too late,” Gideon lamented miserably. “I had a feeling it was him for some time, that our mother hadn’t just picked *that* story of all stories to tell us when we were younger. But I was always afraid telling him of my suspicions, that they would somehow trigger an unwanted chain of events, especially when Ezra had never even shown any interest in anyone before. So, I let him believe I thought it was just a fae tale, an old legend mother told to us to make us go to bed. Then you came along and . . .”

“You are not saying this is *my* fault when you are the one who could have told him the truth!” she protested, her tone coloring with hurt as she abruptly stood up from her chair.

“I’m not saying it’s your fault at all, Calliope.” He stood up, too, his eyes pleading with her to understand.

“If you had told him the second you suspected, then he could have stopped himself from feeling anything. He could’ve—”

“I don’t think he could have.” Gideon looked at her unflinchingly. “I don’t think anyone who meets you can stop themselves—”

“*Don’t*,” she scolded him. “Do not eulogize me with empty words.”

“He’s not,” the Witch Eater said matter-of-factly.

Calla had almost forgotten where she was for a moment.

“What he means, Calliope Rosewood, is that you have a lasting effect on all of those you meet. Good or bad. You derail fate like I’ve never seen before.”

Calla looked at the creature in disbelief. “I don’t mean to. I’ve never—”

“Ah, but it is your burden. Great muse.”

“I am not the Fates’ muse,” she snarled at the Witch Eater.

The Witch Eater seemed entertained as they finally snatched the feather out of Gideon’s hand and added the plume to the other tucked behind their ear. “Do you want to move forward with the spell or not?”

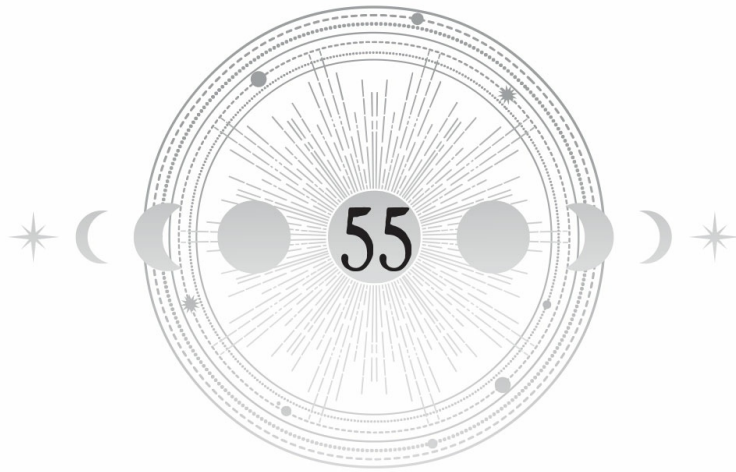
Calla looked to Gideon and took a deep breath. There was so much she

wanted to say to him, so much she wished she had the time to think through.

“Fine,” she said clearly, and Gideon stared back into her eyes as he nodded his head in confirmation as well.

The Witch Eater grinned and leaned over to blow out the candles on the table, and from her periphery, Calla noticed Em had reappeared to pull the curtains to the window closed before quickly exiting the cottage altogether. Once Em shut the door behind her, they were plunged into darkness, and though Calla could not see what was happening, she could *feel* Gideon nearby, his magic having become familiar to her over the last few days they had spent together. A fact she hadn’t noticed until now.

“Let’s begin,” the Witch Eater declared.



Calla knew this was it. This was the last time she would ever be exactly as she was right now.

She was completely shrouded in darkness, not able to see Gideon standing in front of her, but every inch of her body was attuned to him. The air was charged with something she couldn't quite name, perhaps with anticipation, and if she was honest, her excitement. But the static that prickled over her skin and across the back of her neck was more than that.

It was magic.

A magic Calla had never felt before—an old kind of magic. One that smelled of ashes.

At least it doesn't smell like Dark Magic, she thought with relief.

Suddenly, a blinding light appeared in front of Calla, and she had to shield her eyes from it until they could adjust. When she finally peeked back through her fingers, she saw that before them was a large glass-like orb floating just above the open palms of the Witch Eater. Calla could see straight through the glowing crystal ball right into the Witch Eater's face—which was now missing a right eye.

This glass orb was *their* eyeball.

Calla stifled a sound of horror as she peered directly into the Witch Eater's empty pitch-black socket.

"First, the items," the Witch Eater proclaimed as they reached over and

plucked the pair of red dice off the table with their long fingers. “Witch’s Dice.” They plunged both dice into the glowing orb, and the dice began swimming around inside.

“Siren’s song,” the Witch Eater continued, throwing the dark blue tongue into the magic ball as well.

The Witch Eater looked to Calla with their one eye. Calla was unsure what to do as the ancient creature reached a palm out to her. “The Heartbreak Prince’s vice. I need something that symbolizes what you mean to him.”

Calla paled and looked over to Gideon for help, sucking in a sharp breath as she took in his appearance. His already-angular face seemed sharper illuminated by the silver light, and his blue hair was almost midnight in the shadows. He looked so much like Ezra in this moment, if it weren’t for his molten-steel eyes, or the piercings, she might have done a double take.

Gideon reached into his pocket and dragged out a crumpled piece of paper. A letter.

Ezra’s letter, she realized as she recognized his scrawling handwriting. It was the one that he had stuffed under her window sash inviting her to meet him for that game at the inn. The game that had changed everything. Gideon must have picked it up back at her apartment—after he blatantly lied to all their faces—and now he was handing it across the table to the Witch Eater. Calla watched as the ancient one put it into the orb and the black ink bled into the crystal liquid, churning within it like smoke.

“And, finally, Fates’ Blood,” the Witch Eater announced, staring at the pair of them.

Gideon reached into the sheath on his belt and pulled out his jeweled dagger. He made a small cut on his inner forearm, a few drops of his dark red blood spilling onto the table. He offered Calla the hilt, and she took it from him, weighing the heavy weapon in her hand. She placed the tip of the blade on her own arm, pressing just enough to draw blood from the sensitive area, before handing it back to Gideon.

“Together?” he asked, his eyes piercing into hers.

She looked steadily back at him. She didn’t know where she stood on their conversation of *trust* anymore. He had shown so much to her in the little time they had been together, truths she had not wanted to face for years. Yet kept one of the biggest secrets from all of them.

As she looked at him in the eyes and felt the blood running down her arm, the blood they were both shedding together, she understood him. Knew that if

she had to lie to save Hannah or Delphine, she would have. Knew that even if he hadn't told her the whole truth about the Heartbreak Prince, he had never lied about where they stood with each other.

"Together," she answered.

They both reached out their arms to the orb and let a few drops of their blood fall in, Gideon's cut already slowly weaving itself back together. The orb flashed a bright red, and Calla flinched, tucking her own arm back into her body while she waited for it to heal. The contents inside swirled around, and the Witch Eater began reciting a language Calla had never heard before. She moved slightly closer to Gideon as the orb grew larger, the contents twisting more tumultuously than before. The Onyx Prince angled his own body toward her and slipped his hand into hers. Calla didn't let her fear show on her face, simply grasped on to his hand and watched as the Witch Eater continued their spell.

"Srevere einitseds iehtr as luoss iehtr nibd. Sruce ihts efsnarte etafs iehtr saree. Raeht segnortst hte evn kaerbs enitsedd hte of oolbd. Rapat evenr ehtegotr yawlas."

The words were slippery to Calla's ears, her mind unable to focus on any of them individually as if the magic didn't want her to remember them. Within seconds, the siren's tongue disintegrated, as did her note, and Calla watched in absolute rapture as the contents all somehow got absorbed—right into the pair of Witch's Dice. The dice began changing color, becoming a marbled black and red, and just as Calla thought it was about to be over, her left arm felt as if it had caught on fire.

She let out a wail of pain as she clawed at her arm, ripping her hand out of his.

"Calliope." Gideon reached for her again before he gave his own yell of pain.

The burning sensation in her arm was so intense she was sure when she looked over she would see charred skin. She whimpered in agony and peered down at her arm where she saw the pattern of dots slowly disappearing.

No not disappearing. Turning *bloodred*.

"What is happening?" she cried.

She looked around wildly for the Witch Eater, but they were no longer standing at the end of the table, the silver orb abandoned.

Calla looked over to Gideon, who was gripping the edge of the table in pain, his entire body hunched over as he gritted his teeth to keep from calling

out. The agony in Calla's arm was slowly starting to numb, but Gideon looked as if his was only becoming worse as another shiver racked his entire body.

She moved closer to him. "Gideon, what's happening? How do I help you?" she asked.

"You can't," *that* voice rasped.

Calla's head snapped up to see the Witch Eater was now standing near the wall in front of her—next to the birth charts they had drawn for them earlier.

"The spell is not working correctly," the ancient one explained nonchalantly as they lifted the spool of thread they had used to trace their charts earlier.

"Why *not*?" Calla demanded in frustration as Gideon groaned again and doubled over more.

The Witch Eater flicked a one-eyed glance at her before looking back at their charts. They unraveled a bit more thread and began creating a large circle around both Calla's and Gideon's charts. "Because you provided an item of affection from the wrong prince, and the magic was asked to transfer the curse to someone who already had it."

Calla stared at the being, dumbfounded. "You mean—"

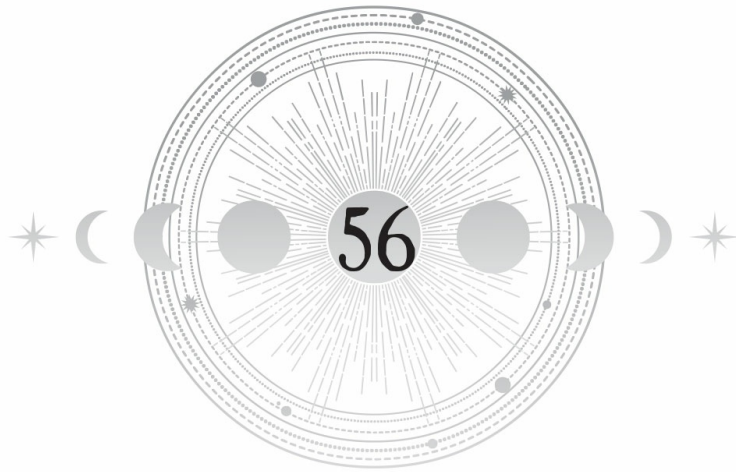
"Gideon Black was always the Heartbreak Prince. However, the spell was tasked with shifting a curse to you—and that's exactly what it is doing. It just isn't giving you the one you thought it would be."

Gideon moaned again, and Calla feathered a light touch of her hands over his back as she tried to think of what to do.

"What curse is he getting, then?" she questioned as he began panting greatly.

The Witch Eater stopped circling their charts with the string and looked at her fully.

"Yours, of course."



*M*y curse?” Calla asked, dread coloring her voice.

“You were the last fated Blood Warrior.”

Calla could’ve sobbed. In relief? In horror? In regret? She wasn’t sure.

“Make it stop! Take it back!”

“Nothing can make it stop now, child. He will bear your curse just as you will bear his.”

“What do you mean— *Ugh!*” she grunted as an electric spasm slithered down her spine. She could barely stay standing as sharp stabs of pain covered every inch of her skin, her veins shooting with lightning as she cried out. Next to her, Gideon finally relaxed, though his chest was still heaving with effort. He managed to reach out and squeeze Calla’s hand.

“Just breathe,” he gritted out to her.

She *tried*. She tried to breathe in through her nose and out through her mouth, but all she could think about was how she was going to pass out from the pain. This was a thousand times worse than her cycle or when she fractured every bone in her arm after Delphine had *sworn* it was safe to cross that decrepit bridge near the first home the girls had lived in.

Calla let out a frustrated yell as she gripped the edge of the table.

“You knew this would happen,” Gideon accused the Witch Eater as he feebly pushed himself off the table to stand straight. “You knew exactly who I was, and you did not say a thing.”

“It is not my job to inform you of anything, Prince, and it is certainly not my job to influence the decisions you decide to make. May they be reckless or otherwise.”

“I ought to—” Gideon started, and Calla felt him move away from her toward the ancient one.

“I’d be careful, Prince. Your power is no match for mine, and I do not think you wish to make an enemy of me.”

Gideon turned back to Calla. The pain was rolling through her body in waves, off and on, and she was hoping that meant it would be over soon. “If I now have Calliope’s curse, does that mean she has mine?”

“Yes,” the Witch Eater answered. “You have both your own and each other’s curses from this moment forward.”

“What do you mean *our own* as well?”

“You initiated a very powerful spell and provided the wrong ingredients. Once magic like this is activated, incorrectly at that, no one can control what it chooses to do. All actions have consequences, Prince. This is yours. A ruinous fate.”

Calla whimpered in pain again, and Gideon ran a soothing hand over her hair. “What do we do now? Our rolls weren’t even erased.”

The Witch Eater tilted their head. “I am not your faery Gods-being. Figure it out for yourselves.”

Calla turned her head to look at Gideon as she panted from exertion just as he had moments before. Her body was finally beginning to return to normal, but she still could barely move without the sharp pain shooting through her limbs again.

“We need to leave, Gideon. *No more playing their games*,” she begged.

Gideon looked at her with a pained expression before nodding. When he slid behind her, the Witch Eater appeared inches before them.

“You’re going to leave without considering these?” The being held out the pair of Witch’s Dice the spell had created in their open palm. Calla glanced up to see the orb was now completely empty and clear.

“You’re out of your mind if you think we are taking those,” Gideon told the ancient one.

“These are no longer Witch’s Dice as you know them, Prince. They have been transformed—much like you have. They’re Fates’ Dice now, and I’m not offering them to you for free. Fates’ Dice have the ability to change the entire course of the future. They’re perhaps one of the most valuable items

one could own, and if you want them, you'll have to pass a test to show me you are worthy of them."

"You want us to pass a test to take a pair of dice that we know nothing about? How do we know we will need them?" Gideon asked.

"I suppose you will have to find out for yourself."

Gideon eyed the dice skeptically, but Calla was the one who gritted out, amid another spasm of pain, "Caspian's vision."

Gideon swung his gaze on her. "What—"

"When Caspian woke up from the demon's oak, he said he saw me on a battlefield and that he was holding a Witch's Die—"

"Only it didn't look like a regular Witch's Die," Gideon murmured as he shut his eyes in surrender. When he opened them again to look at the Witch Eater, they flashed silver. "What's the test?"

The Witch Eater grinned. "Let's see how well connected the two of you are now, shall we?"

The pain in Calla's body was finally subsiding, and as she straightened herself up, she gave Gideon a terrified glance. But before either of them could ask what the Witch Eater meant, the door to the cottage wrenched open and they were dragged outside by what felt like invisible hands.

Calla let out a yelp of surprise as she and Gideon were unceremoniously dropped to the hard ground in the clearing. They both scrambled to their feet as the Witch Eater grinned at them from the doorway.

"All you have to do to get the Fates' Dice is slay the Hydra."

Calla balked. "The *Hydra*?"

The Witch Eater let out an earsplitting whistle and called, "Em!"

The black rabbit came dashing out of the cottage and skidded to a stop a few yards away from Calla and Gideon. Calla looked at the bunny in confusion, about to ask what was going on, when something horrifying happened. The rabbit transformed.

Gideon cursed wildly.

Calla thought she might vomit as the small rabbit grew, and grew, and twisted unnaturally into a giant ebony beast right before their eyes. The beast was as large as a dragon, with a long serpent-like neck that gave way to a vicious face with fathomless eyes. It was covered in sable scales from head to toe and its hands and feet ended in glistening talons.

"Don't cut off its head," Gideon advised dryly.

The Hydra struck, poising its neck like a serpent and shooting toward

Calla, causing her to dodge quickly out of the way. One of the hundreds of pointed fangs jutting from its mouth still caught Calla in her right bicep, and she hissed in pain as she rolled back to her feet. She looked down at her arm as crimson blood streamed down to the ground.

“What the *Hells*?” Gideon barked.

Calla looked over to him and saw his right arm was *also* bleeding.

“How—” she asked.

“Calla,” Gideon said slowly, his voice holding more terror than she had ever heard from him before.

“What? What’s going on?” she shouted.

Gideon didn’t answer as he whipped out a dagger from his belt and expertly spun the blade in his hand to press its sharp tip to his left forearm. She watched as he sliced through the skin there and— She hissed in pain.

Calla looked down at where an identical cut appeared on her own left forearm, in horror. “Gideon,” she choked.

“You might want to run now,” the Witch Eater said gleefully from where they stood.

Calla and Gideon twisted around to find the Hydra getting ready to strike again. They ran. Both took off into the woods, weaving among the trees, as the Hydra’s heavy footsteps thundered after them. As she sprinted next to Gideon, Calla couldn’t believe she ever felt sorry for the familiar.

Gideon thrust his hands ahead of him and completely uprooted a thick tree in their path, swinging it around behind them, splintering at least three other trees and creating a decent obstacle in the Hydra’s way. Both of them paused running for a moment to catch their breaths.

Gideon glanced at her sideways. “Ready for more practice?”

“What?” Calla yelled over a frustrated screech from the beast.

“I want you to drain that thing dry,” he called back. “A Hydra’s skin can’t be pierced with a blade. We don’t have many other options.”

“But I’d have to be *touching* it!” Calla half shrieked.

Gideon nodded, as if this fact was no big deal. “That’s where *I* come in. Though, remind me if we survive this to help you start figuring out how to Siphon *without* direct contact.”

Calla was about to ask him if the spells had caused him to lose his mind when the Hydra finally broke past the barricade of trees. She panicked for a moment, trying to make her feet move again, but Gideon dashed in front of her and raised his hands and—cut off the beast’s oxygen.

The Black brothers were nothing if not incredibly consistent.

The Hydra's head whipped wildly through the air as it struggled for breath, its body crumbling to the ground as it writhed uncomfortably. Gideon's feet were planted in the dirt, and Calla could somehow feel the strain rolling off of him as he fought to keep the beast from breathing.

"Go! Now!"

Calla didn't want to—she *really* didn't want to—but she didn't know how much longer Gideon could hold on and she didn't have time to argue. She sprinted to where the Hydra's front arm was stretched out on the ground a few yards in front of them and kneeled to thrust her hand onto the cold, scaly skin.

"You can do this," she whispered to herself. "Just like before."

Calla concentrated the same way she had with Gideon earlier, unfurling her Rouge magic and waking up her Siphon at the same time. She felt an overwhelming rush of darkness emanating from the beast's veins as she latched her magic on to its blood. Unlike the others she had siphoned from before, this creature was soulless. Usually, she could feel the life force humming deep in a being's core, but this felt . . . empty. It made a shiver run down her spine.

She pulled hard with her Siphon, and when she opened her eyes, she noticed that a few droplets of blood had begun oozing out of its skin—but it wasn't near enough. And Calla was already panting from effort.

"Gideon." She choked on his name as she called over to him. "It's too big, I don't have enough energy."

"Take mine," he grunted back.

She whipped her head to him. "*What?*"

As she lost her concentration, the inky-black blood she had already drained from the Hydra splattered to the ground.

"Take mine!" he repeated as he jolted forward, with obvious strain, until he was within touching distance.

"I—I *can't*," she reasoned. "You're already hemorrhaging energy!"

"I'm *fine*." He looked at her with wild midnight eyes, his jaw clenched with effort.

"Gideon, I *can't*. What if I hurt you? What if I *kill*—"

"*I trust you, Calla*," he swore to her, looking down into her mismatched gaze intensely. "I need *you* to trust yourself right now."

He reached a hand down to her, and she looked at it for a moment before

reaching back and gripping it for dear life.

The moment their hands touched, both Calla's and Gideon's tattoos began to glow. Bright crimson light sparked from the dots ingrained in their left forearms and a shock of energy went through her body. She held on to that rush of power and closed her eyes in concentration and started from the top. She felt the power build in her as she delved into the beast's seemingly bottomless well. A bead of sweat trickled down her cheek from her temple as she homed in on her Siphon and pulled with every bit of energy she and Gideon had left to give. There was a tense moment as the pressure built beneath the Hydra's skin—and then the dam broke and the world exploded.

Or, at least, the Hydra did.

Calla and Gideon flew back in a tangle of limbs, away from the dark creature as its heart literally burst from its body. The two of them landed with a heavy *thud* on the ground a few yards away, and Calla could feel every single ache from both of their wounds and bruises. The foul black blood Calla had ripped from the Hydra rained down atop them, and Gideon maneuvered his body over hers to shield them both from the onslaught.

Just when it seemed as if blood would pour over them forever, the onslaught finally stopped, and Gideon lifted his head to assess the aftermath.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"No," she choked out, almost unintelligibly, her eyes still squeezed shut.

"Great. Me either."

She tilted her chin up and opened her eyes to find his face hovering right above her own. They stared at each other in silence for a moment before a small sob broke from Calla's throat and Gideon scooped her body up into his.

"You did it," he soothed her. "We'll be okay."

"No, we won't." She let out a ragged breath as she pulled back from him. "Our rolls—we're connected somehow."

"I know."

"What are we going to do?" she whispered.

"One thing at a time," he told her reassuringly. "First, we get those dice from that bastard Witch Eater and then we find the others. We can do this."

She nodded miserably, and he reached out to brush a strand of her hair out of her face. She couldn't explain it, but something between them was different. Altered. Every time his skin made contact with hers it was as if he was recharging her somehow.

Things were about to get so much more complicated.

“You saved us,” he told her.

“Only because you helped,” she answered.

He looked as if he was going to say more but decided against it, taking a deep breath instead. “We have to be so much more careful than this.” He shook his head and detangled himself from her. She didn’t ask what he meant as he stood, because she had a feeling she already knew, and a deep feeling of dread rocked through her core. Gideon reach down to offer her a hand up, but she declined.

“I got it,” she gritted out as she made an effort to get herself back to her feet.

Once standing, she assessed her wounds but found they were rapidly healing themselves already—much faster than they usually did.

“It looks like you heal as fast as I do now,” Gideon murmured as he observed the same thing.

“Well, at least *that’s* convenient,” she said blandly.

The two of them finally turned back to get a look at the Hydra—but the gigantic beast was no longer there. Instead, a girl was in its place, lying on the ground with her chest wide open and her heart missing.

Calla had to look away so she wouldn’t be sick.

“Let’s get back to the Witch Eater,” Gideon told her solemnly.

“I’m right here.” The Witch Eater suddenly emerged from the tree line and made their way straight toward their dead familiar. A jolt of anger ran through Calla as she watched the ancient being bend over the girl without an ounce of remorse.

“We passed your test,” Gideon seethed at the being. “Give us the damn dice and let us go.”

The Witch Eater ignored him completely as they waved a hand over the girl’s lifeless form, and Calla watched as the familiar’s chest began weaving itself back together. A moment or two later, a loud heartbeat rang through the air and the girl opened her eyes. Calla’s mouth dropped as the girl nonchalantly stood and bowed her head to the Witch Eater before transforming back into her bunny form and bouncing away into the woods. As if everything that just happened had been a figment of Calla’s and Gideon’s imaginations.

“You did pass my test,” the Witch Eater finally acknowledged. “With flying colors.”

“The dice,” Gideon demanded again.

“So touchy,” the Witch Eater remarked. “Did you both not just learn an invaluable lesson?”

“My patience is wearing thin,” Gideon responded.

“Immortals aren’t as fun as they used to be,” the Witch Eater sighed, reaching into the pocket of their black garment, procuring the Fates’ Dice in their palm. “Here, Prince. Princess.” Calla curled her lip in distaste at the title, and the being gave a breathy laugh as if they *knew* that would annoy her. Gideon quickly swiped them out of the Witch Eater’s hand and, in a moment of truth, tried to drop them into the pocket of his pants. The dice fell from his palm with no grand affair, and if Gideon was shocked, he didn’t show it.

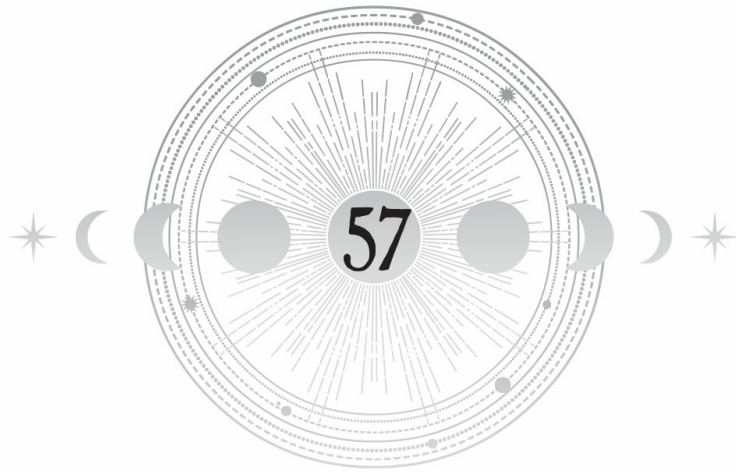
“We will cross paths again, great muse,” the Witch Eater told Calla.

“Let the games begin,” she declared boldly.

She could swear the Witch Eater’s answering grin was—*proud*.

Gideon threw one last furious look to the Witch Eater as he reached out for Calla’s hand, and they walked back out into the forest.

Together.



Gideon?” a masculine voice said in utter shock.

Calla’s and Gideon’s heads whipped around to see who had spoken as they stepped into another clearing a few minutes later.

Caspian, Ezra, and Hannah were just exiting the thick of the forest, rushing toward them, just as the black rabbit scampered underfoot and disappeared into the trees once again. Calla ran straight for Hannah and wrapped her arms tightly around the blond with an exhale of relief.

“What in the Hells happened to the both of you?” Ezra demanded as he assessed the blood covering them both.

“Where in the Hells is Kestrel?” Gideon retorted back.

“That’s a long story,” Caspian answered sheepishly.

“So is ours,” Gideon and Calla spoke at the same time, both looking at each other as their words came out in sync, their gazes loaded.

“At this point, I’m convinced none of us ever woke up from the demon’s oak,” Caspian said, his tone solemn.

“Well, well, well,” an amused voice interrupted from behind them. “Isn’t this a touching family reunion?”

The entire group spun.

Calla’s face drained of color.

“This cannot be fucking happening.” Gideon paled at the sight of the Valkyrie. “You’re early.”

“Time bores me,” Amina said. “I’d much rather have what I was promised *now*.”

“No,” Gideon ground out. “We still have hours until—”

“And what is going to change in that amount of time?” The woman laughed, before quickly sobering up and tilting her head at all of them. “Although it does seem like quite a few things have changed since I last saw you all, hasn’t it? One of your friends is currently being dragged to the Siren’s Sea, the other is missing, and *you* two—”

Amina gave Calla a wicked grin.

“Well, if I was going to get myself soul-bonded to somebody, it wouldn’t be a prince with a curse. But, hey, each person to their own.”

“Soul-bonded?” Calla asked in alarm.

The Valkyrie turned to Caspian. “Oh, but you look just as I left you, don’t you, handsome?”

“Answer my friend,” Cass demanded, crossing his arms over his chest, any hint of his usual flirtation completely gone.

The Valkyrie rolled her eyes.

“Go away.” Gideon glowered at the woman.

“You’re starting to upset me, Prince. You should be honored to be in my presence, alive.” Amina narrowed her eyes as she spoke. “Now, give me what you promised me.”

“What if we bargained something else?” Calla begged.

“No. I named my price already, darling. There’s no changing it now.”

“Not even for something from the Witch Eater?”

The Valkyrie’s eyes brightened with curiosity, but she was careful to not show it anywhere else on her face. “Oh?” she asked, her tone bored.

Calla knew she had gotten the woman’s attention, though. She nudged Gideon with her elbow. “Two very special dice, gifted by the Witch Eater *themselves*.”

Gideon lifted his blue brows at Calla before quickly removing the dice from his pocket.

Amina recoiled.

“You tricked me,” she seethed at Gideon. “You told me I could have your heart knowing you would get those dice.”

Gideon’s expression was sharp as he countered, “*You* told me I could have two full days. And we had no idea we would get these dice; we aren’t even sure what they do, but I know now they must be valuable—”

“They mark you two as chosen,” the Valkyrie spat at him, flicking her eyes between Calla and Gideon. “If you have been gifted those dice, then they are from the Fates themselves to be used to further their agenda. Do you think I am foolish enough to incur the wrath of the Gods?”

“I’m going to need everyone over the age of one hundred to get together and write us a play-by-play, because this is way too much for me to comprehend,” Caspian muttered.

“Does that mean you won’t accept my heart as payment, then?” Gideon asked, hopeful.

Amina bared her teeth at him. “You are going to regret this.”

The five of them stared at the Valkyrie as she backed away from them and flew into the air, collectively holding their breaths until she fully disappeared into the tops of the thorned trees.

When they were sure she was gone, they all sighed in relief.

“Let’s move,” Gideon said quietly, and they all began forward, almost as if in a trance, glancing at one another intermittently as if they weren’t sure they had actually just escaped that.

Gideon and Caspian took the lead as Calla and Hannah followed behind them with Ezra bringing up the tail.

“I’ve officially had enough of this forest,” Caspian commented.

“Calla?” Ezra murmured from behind her.

“Yes?” she asked as she turned her head back to look at him.

Ezra opened his mouth again but didn’t say anything.

“Ezra?” she asked, fully turning to him as the others paused behind her to see what was going on.

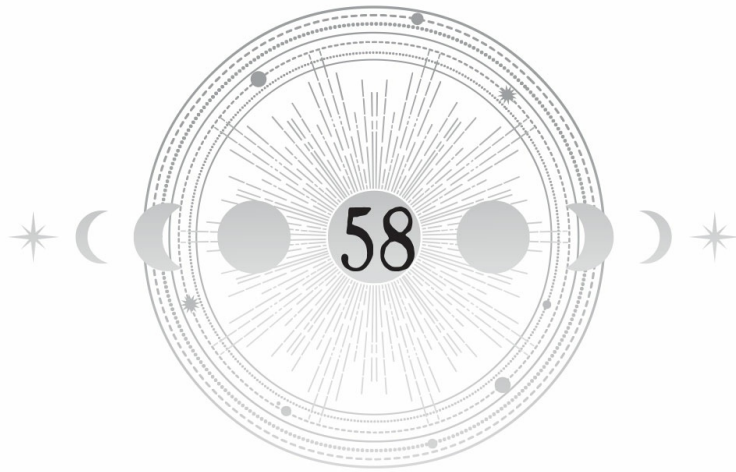
That’s when Ezra dropped to his knees, clutching his chest.

And there, standing with his still-beating heart in her hands, was the Valkyrie.

“You promised me your heart, Prince,” she spoke to Gideon steadily.

“And some could say your brother’s heart is yours, too, is it not?”

And just as quietly as she had appeared, the Valkyrie left. And all Calla could hear was the sound of her own scream as the light left Ezra’s eyes.



Ezra,” Calla cried as she threw herself on the ground beside him.

The prince was staring up, but Calla didn’t think he could see anything, his gaze as glassy as the Witch Eater’s had been, the fire that usually burned in his eyes completely extinguished.

“*Do something!*” she cried as Gideon knelt on the other side of his brother. “*Now.*”

Gideon turned to her. “Can you do necromancy? I know some Rouge witches can, and his body should be trying to regenerate enough to hold out for a few more minutes—”

But Calla was already shaking her head. “It takes so much energy and practice. I’ve never done it before.”

“What about Hannah?”

Hannah looked haunted as she stared down at Ezra from where she stood over Calla’s shoulder.

“No—” Calla’s voice broke. “Hannah can’t.”

“I don’t know what to do,” Gideon said, his voice thick as he stared down at his younger brother. “This isn’t even the Valkyrie’s fault; she only took what I promised her. But this wasn’t supposed to be *his* fate. I had a plan.”

Ezra’s breath became shallower, his magic slowing down as it overworked itself to heal an unfixable wound.

“I don’t know what to do,” Gideon repeated.

Calla had a gut feeling Gideon had never said those words so desperately in his life. His gaze had turned fully black, and she knew the pain in his eyes mirrored her own. Ezra grunted and Calla looked back down at him, watching as her tears fell on his lips.

Ezra's black eyes, now much dimmer, peered up at her. She knew he only had seconds left, that if it wasn't for his magic trying so desperately to heal him, he would've already been dead.

"Do you remember the first thing I ever said to you?" he whispered to her weakly.

Calla barked a watery laugh down at him. "Yes. You said you had never seen a girl with a face like mine—and that you knew we were supposed to cross paths."

Ezra closed his eyes and smiled for a moment before blinking them back open. "I was talking about your poker face, of course," he said softly.

"Of course," she mumbled to him, a sob threatening to slip out with her words.

"Calla?"

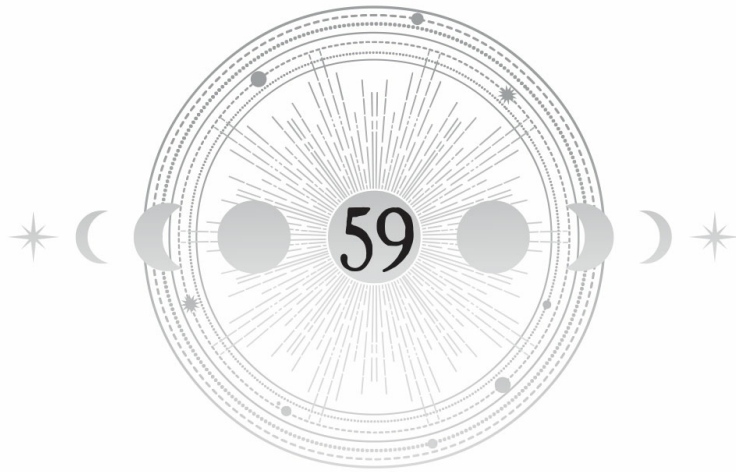
"Hmm?"

"I meant what I said then. About knowing we were supposed to cross paths. And not because I was sent by Myrea." He took in a deep shaky breath. "But because . . ."

Calla's breath hitched as she waited for him to finish, barely able to hear his voice as he whispered again: "You were *always* my destiny."

Her tears fell onto his face as he said those last words, and she leaned forward and pressed her lips to his. Just for a moment.

Then Ezra Black broke her heart for the final time.



Calla's eyes were squeezed tightly shut against the pain ripping through her. She was as still as the death clinging to the air around them, Gideon a ghost right beside her.

"What do we do?" Caspian whispered to no one in particular.

Calla's eyes burst wildly open, and she roughly pushed herself up to stand. Around her, the forest changed—thorned black vines twisted themselves out of the ground and wrapped around every tree in sight. The glistening purple buds that had been poking up from the dead grass flowered, and the dark swirling clouds above them finally gave way to a storm, lightning clapping out above them with a thundering *crack*.

Calla tilted her head up and bared her teeth at the angry tempest above her.

"*You want to play games?*" she shouted at the Gods wildly. "*Then let's play games!*"

Calla could feel the tumultuous power inside her core writhing with her rage. The Fates had made a dire mistake. They had sincerely underestimated the weapon they had created when they gave a Rouge witch the Siphon curse. *She* had sincerely underestimated the weapon she could be all her life.

Calla spread her arms out on either side and summoned her Rouge magic from her core, watching as her veins bulged out from her fingertips to her elbows. Then she called out to the Siphon within her and embraced the

familiar warmth that spread over her skin when it answered, her Siphon magic filling her veins and intertwining itself with her Rouge magic. So many years of keeping her Rouge magic separate from her Siphon, operating under the belief that her Siphon blood was the *bad* half of her—the half she could pretend didn't exist if she tried hard enough. So many years thinking that if she only focused on her witch blood, she could pretend she was a whole, complete person. But she had *always* been a whole, complete person. What made her weak was all the years of tearing herself to pieces.

No more.

Hannah's jaw went slack with shock as she watched Calla's mismatched irises begin to glow, and Caspian reached out to place a steadying hand on the blond's shoulder, his eyes shining—like he was a moment away from shedding tears himself.

Gideon rose to his feet, his eyes not leaving Calla for a second.

Rain flooded down on them, the torrent of water soaking through Calla's hair and every inch of her clothes, washing the black blood off her skin. She looked only at Gideon as the prince lifted his chin to her, his pitch-black eyes completely devastated.

"I'm afraid that we might be out of cards, Calliope." Gideon's rough voice strained over the roar of the rain. "We've just been dealt a fatal hand."

Calla's expression turned absolutely feral at the broken sound of her name coming from his lips. The grin that spread across her face in the next moment was reckless—and slightly unhinged. Hannah gasped at the sight from behind the prince, but Gideon didn't flinch.

"It doesn't matter," Calla responded, her words drenched with conviction as she turned her challenging gaze skyward—toward the Fates. "I'm all in."



Kestrel Whitehollow stepped into the middle of the marble dais and faced the queen.

If there was any time to change his mind about this—it was now. But he knew he wouldn't. Couldn't. Not if it meant Gideon could come home.

"You've brought me information, Commander?" The queen smiled at him wickedly, her ivory skin flushing with anticipation.

"Yes."

"Rumor has it you and your betas have not been seen for months. Peculiar, don't you think?" she mused.

He did not bother responding to that statement, and she grinned wider. "What have you come to tell me, then?"

Kestrel's voice rang out clear as he announced, "I know where the final Blood Warrior is."

Myrea leaned forward. "Do tell."



If you are the sort of person who loves reading acknowledgments (like I do), I hope you enjoy the next several pages of rambling. First, I cannot believe I'm writing these right now. Did I touch demon's oak? If I did, no one wake me up.

If this is *not* some sort of enchanted-tree-induced dream, then first and foremost thank you to my agent, Emily Forney, for believing in me and this book, and for helping me achieve my deepest of dreams. There's literally no one I would rather do this with. Not only would this book not be what it is without you, but my life would be much more boring without your humor and our bad-rom-com movie nights. I'm so appreciative of everything you've done for me and all the hard work you've put into this book and your loving vision for these characters. Your expertise and confidence really got me through every step of this process, and I just can't believe how lucky I am to have you as a partner in this endeavor. I could write an entire book on how amazing and badass you are, but I'll spare everyone for now. You're the Yee to my Haw and my favorite Coward. Cheers to many more magical adventures together and neverending chaos!

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Kaylie Smith is a writer and lover of all things fantasy. She grew up in Louisiana, where she frequently haunted bookstores and practiced her craft. After college she decided to pursue her lifelong dream of becoming an author, and when she isn't writing or reading, she can be found at home with her menagerie of animals, fussing over her houseplants, or annoying people about astrology. You can find her on all social media as @KaylsMoon or check out her website at KaylieSmithBooks.com.