

Chapter Seventeen

"Goddess Hecate, we invoke thee to join our celebration, awakening, and amplification." When Mori spoke, something inside of me rejoiced. Their voice had a reverent tone to it, as though they'd been born for this moment. "Come out of the shadows."

Fae joined in, her musical voice lighter than gossamer. "Come to us, Goddess. Lend us your fullest, most loving potential, your highest light and most awesome powers of manifestation." Her arms swooped toward the heavens. She was a golden angel, thin-boned with blonde dreads dripping over slender shoulders down to her waist.

"We are complete, Goddess." Wilky pounded the drum. "We have our fifth element of Spirit." Hearing Wilky speak and watching his normally quiet self blossom, put a smile on my face.

This was it.

We were doing this. I was dancing with witches under a full moon.

The irony of it made me laugh.

I couldn't believe that for once, I had a purpose in life besides going to school or church, feeling alienated from my family, hiding my passions. There was so much out there to learn. My worries seeped out from underneath my bare toes, soaking into the ground.

As the element of fire, it was Crow's turn to speak. "We invoke thee, Lady of the Lake, to come forth and be with us. Show us your face, your fierce determination, your love for this space, this land, fire, and water." His voice had a solemn determination to it. Why was he talking about the Lady of the Lake? None of the others had asked for personal spirits to come through. We hadn't included that bit in our rehearsal yesterday.

I caught a quick exchange between Mori and Fae, but the flicker was offset by a shadow in the distance, near the south edge of the lake. Lobo paced back and forth with an uneasy gait, dipping his head, tipping it back to let out a lonely howl.

What's wrong, buddy?

The clairs reached out to each other and held hands, but Mori gestured for me to step outside the circle, which I did. "Take the walk, Valentina. Join us," Mori instructed.

I did as I'd done during rehearsal, creating an outer perimeter with my path, imagining the clairs as one unit. I raised my arms and pretended I was painting a dome of energy around them. In the flares of firelight, I almost saw the vibrant dome go up, a semi-spherical aura surrounding the clairs. They lifted their hands to the moon then lowered their bodies to the ground and knelt before their offerings.

Yesterday, I had felt le out. They were the four elements, and I was something else. But my job was just as important, so I danced around them, imagining their strengths combining as one power.

As air, Wilky went first, because the sun rose in the East. "Guardians of the East watchtower, keepers of Air, we welcome you to this sacred space," he intoned with that lovely tinge of Creole in his voice, beating the drum and lifting it high. "Please lend us your ideas, intelligence, justice and truth. We humbly accept your guidance."

There was a pause while we stilled to feel the power of Air joining us, and sure as anything, a gust of warm wind swept

over the circle, flickering the flames, tickling my skin, whipping my hair. Wilky beamed.

It could've been a rogue breeze, though I chose to believe the ritual was working. We were powerful beings, capable of creating change. "Guardians of the South watchtower, keepers of Fire," Crow went next, "we welcome you to this sacred space. Please lend us your passion, your drive to successfully open the portal. We humbly accept your guidance." He lifted his arms to the full moon. To successfully open the portal, I suppose that was the goal, but where Wilky had asked for positive attributes, Crow had asked for direct results. I brushed it off. We all had different styles. I closed my eyes, focusing on the words coming to

fruition, on the elements lending us their individual properties.

Behind closed eyelids, I saw her emerge from the lake.

A peculiar woman.

The same one I'd seen falling through the air during the trance writing. The woman who'd broken upon impact in the atrium. It was hard to tell she'd fallen so fast-but it looked like her. Only now, her brittle hair had turned to seaweed. Her facial skin moved and reshaped itself like oil worked by an artist.

One moment, she was beautiful. The next, grotesque.

Trying to stay focused, I danced, watching the woman, in my mind's eye. She waded out of the lake into the center of the circle toward the fire. For a moment, I was afraid she'd walk right into it and burn. My eyes flew open to warn her, but there was no woman, only the flames of the fire spiking high in a tall column, sending a radial burst of heat in every direction. I shielded my face. When I looked again, the female spirit had disappeared.

Fae and Mori shrieked gleefully, Wilky's drumming skipped a beat, and Crow's face held a smug smile. What just happened? And why would the lake woman respond to a call for the element of fire to join us when she lived in water? It didn't make sense.

I danced the circular path.

Bring them together, make them as one...

My curiosity shielded between the bonfire, to see if the lady would emerge again, to Lobo on the horizon, pacing back and forth, watching the ritual with worry. I also kept checking the veranda, in case Cami should come out and see me participating in a pagan ritual. I wanted nothing more than to concentrate, to relive the magic of last night's beautiful dance, but it wasn't the same.

The air grew colder, though it was midsummer, though a fire blazed in front of us and hot, muggy swampland surrounded us. Mori raised their arms and sang to the moon. "Guardians of the West watchtower, keepers of Water, we welcome you to this sacred space. Please lend us your emotion, your fluidity, adaptability. We humbly accept your guidance." They lifted the bowl of water to the sky, and within seconds, it started to rain.

Not the famous torrential rain of summertime Florida, but a light drizzly patter out of nowhere. No thunderheads in the sky, no massive rain clouds, no power deluges to put the fire out. The sky was clear and beautiful. A smile spread across Mori's face. Our attention was drawn to the lake, which apparently had something to say, too.

The surface of the water rippled with waves about a foot to two feet high. There was a sudden surge, as water rose and spilled onto the shore, across the grass soaking our feet. When its squelchy fingers reached the iron cauldron, the outer shell sizzled and let out plumes of steam.

I'd never seen water behave that way. I clutched my cross and tried to stay focused.

My little starshine, sleep, oh, so tight

My little moonshine, dream with the night

Fae looked at Mori with unease, then raised her arms. She lifted flowers to the sky and called her quarter. "Guardians of the North watchtower, keepers of Earth, we welcome you to this sacred space. Please lend us your nurturing love, your wisdom and eternal strength. We humbly accept your guidance!"

At her words, the ground itself shook, a strong tremble. We shrieked. "What's going on?" I called in the middle of my orbital path, but the clairs did not respond. It felt like an earthquake, though earthquakes rarely happened in Florida.

Energy,

Magic; now I understood it.

We were forcing change, invoking powers I'd only dreamed of having. Five intuitive people, stronger than one. The ground stopped rattling, a good thing because my heart almost couldn't take anymore. I thought of my father, wondering if that was how he'd felt on the night of his fateful passing.

The four clairs spoke at once, an incongruous, unsettling melody that covered my arms in goosebumps. "We invoke thee, Spirit! Keep us together, keep us potent in our Goddess's name. Make us whole. Make us powerful. Make us one and the same!"

They chanted their words to the beat, over and over, each time getting faster, their arms to the stars. I moved with the rhythm, accentuated by Wilky's drumming. I wished I'd been here as long as a year so I could grasp the whole of it all. I dome.

Lobo howled his sad song, though I couldn't see him anymore. The hotel loomed large, sad, desolate against the illuminated sky. The lake, forlorn and unkempt, looked like a swamp. I did my best to maintain the circle, the spirit, and

"I am spirit. Bind us. We are one, we are one," I said over and over.

"Make us whole, make us powerful...one and the same!" they chanted.

We were in unison, one heart with all its separate parts, working together to pump blood, life essence, and potential into this hallowed ground. Something was happening. It was as if Earth, Wind, Water, and Fire were all finally speaking to each other, molecules in synch, as though they hadn't seen each other in ages and were now raucously chumming it up. The ritual was their wild party.

Suddenly, the wind, lake, ground, grasses, fire, branches, loose leaves, and all of nature's splendor around us all spasmed at once.

Lobo howled again.

The clairs made room for me in the circle, we held hands and danced faster and faster in tune with nature's song. It should've felt magical, congruous, but for the first time since we started, I was scared. Not unsettled or creeped out, but deeply nervous about what would happen next. The atmosphere buzzed with electricity. I could reach out and touch it, positive and negative ions shooting through me, our steps growing faster, energy surrounding us, silvery and vibrant.

It wasn't in my mind anymore. It was real.

I COULD SEE IT.

And then, the summer sky lit up with electrical discharge and a flash of electricity split the air in two, and a thick bolt of lightning struck smack in the metal fire pit with a loud, powerful slam. My body went flying and skidding backwards until I landed on my ass several meters from the circle, a ringing in my ears and little black and orange dots in my vision.

My head hit.

My vision went black.

When I regained it a few moments later, I saw we'd all flown backwards. Wilky had been dumped in the lake and was crawling out, and a curtain of orange and silver atmosphere had changed the landscape. In the deepest part of my soul, I believed we were dead. And now we'd join the spirits of all who'd perished here. The drumming, the chanting, all movement had ceased, and the clairs shook their heads, brushed off their thighs and legs of mud and grass.

My head hurt too much for me to be dead. Hell no, I'd hit a tree. My fingers grasped a tangle of roots, and burning heat shot through my palm. I pulled away.

Above me, peering into my face was a hooded, robed figure in white, a man in a mask with two cutout holes for eyes. His breath reeked of whiskey. He looked at me curiously, wondering what I was doing there. He signaled to someone, then other masks appeared above.

What. The fuck.

The man reached down a hand.

"No." I scrambled to my feet.

Imagine the light, the purple light of protection...

My little starshine, sleep, oh, so tight

My little moonshine, dream with the night

When you awaken, Love you will be

My little sunshine Heaven gave me

Five, six hands reached down toward me. Get up, here, you piece of shit, someone said. They dissipated into thin air, though I could still feel their hate and desire for power. My mind spun a thousand different directions, trying to rationalize what had just happened.

When the clairs first mentioned this ritual, deep in my heart I thought nothing would change, I thought we'd perform an occult ritual like the ones on Instagram, offer our flowers, say our prayers, and call it a night. That's what happened in real life, in church a er taking communion. We went through the motions. No one actually changed.

For a short time, we felt better about our shitty selves and lives, but no one actually ever transformed. Not in their soul, they didn't. Everyone went back to who they were before they'd arrived.

Not here. Not this.

Something had changed in this sacrament.

Sure, this area was famous for its lightning, weird weather, and all, but this was different. The clairs and I had manifested a clear result. We'd harnessed the elements, bent the laws of physics. And rather than simply "see" a ghost, I'd entered another dimension, walked the hedge between worlds. Instead of the ghosts bleeding into my world, I'd bled into theirs.

I never wanted to touch that tree again. I had a piece of something awful in my memory now. I ran back to the circle, checking over my shoulder to make sure the men weren't following. Their robes and torches would haunt me a long time. I looked down at my hands. The ability I'd had as a child, that for years I'd wondered if it could be true, was more prominent now.

My God, what had I done?

We gathered. The fire had dimmed, replaced by plumes of smoke rising steadily into the night. No one spoke. Maybe the words had fled our mouths and souls, sucked out by lightning. Maybe water had washed our egos free of ever having to speak again. But we were cognizant enough to check each other for wounds, dust each other off, and return to the circle, arms around each other's shoulders.

"I think we did it," Crow breathed.

"Ya think?" Mori chuckled,

In the distance, we heard a scream. We looked up from our huddle.

Cami