

## Chapter Nine

Tarot cards in hand, I sat outside in the late evening as a Macy had left. No matter which question I asked, I got a Major Arcana card which indicated major events in a person's life journey.

Should I stay home alone? THE HERMIT.

Am I on the right path? JUDGMENT.

Which path should I follow? THE STAR.

Answers were up for interpretation, sure, but I tried to go with my instinct. I'd hoped sitting under the moonlight would help, but nothing clear came to me. I needed guidance now more than ever.

The Moon knew it all. Even dark, she was claircognizant. That was her most powerful time when she brimmed with pure potential. Tonight,

she was halfway through waxing, bright enough to lead anyone through obscurity.

"What do I do?" I asked straight up, toes nestled in the cool grass.

I held my deck against my chest. A few cocuyos flitted from blade to blade, then chased each other into the canopy of the banyan. I kept my eyes out for my wolf, assuming I hadn't hallucinated him that night.

"Do I stay out of trouble, or go back?" I asked the moon.

I could hear Father Willie, Camila, and the rest of the gang telling me the answers lay with God. Just search my soul. They weren't wrong.

But God was everywhere. Why did I have to find him in a church? God was just as much in the tepid outdoors of muggy swampland as He was anywhere else.

"Anyone?"

Talking to the universe—that was one thing about me that hadn't changed in the last year. Whether God was a He, a She, a They, or a collection of countless souls didn't matter. I knew that every moment of the day, someone could hear me. The spirit world was probably the only part of life I truly believed in. What kind of person would I be if I ignored its call?

But the Sunlake Springs scared the hell out of me. That atrium gave me nightmares. Could I hang with the clairs and not get caught up in my own fears? Could I handle screams in the middle of the night? Would it be any different at Macy's? I'd heard screams here just the same. At least at the Sunlake I wouldn't be alone.

"They can help me," I reasoned. "If they're really clairs, they can help me communicate with Dad. Right?"

I hugged my knees and gazed at the moon. "You're not helping at all. It was a simple question. A sign for yes. Silence for no. I'll accept whatever you say." I watched the sky for any streaks of light that might shoot across the cosmos.

Nothing.

Sighing, I turned toward the house. I was halfway across the yard when I heard it—a long, clear howl in the distance. I smiled. "I'll take that as a yes."

I arrived past midnight, du el bag slung over my shoulder, hair wet from a shower, probably my last for a while. I brought all my stuff, including my fear, open-mindedness, sense of adventure, and cross around my neck. Just in case.

I heard them before I reached the auxiliary door through which I'd entered last time. They were laughing, shrieking, screaming in the empty corridors. Pausing outside the loose door, I listened. If I heard any Satanic singing, I'd get back in the car and drive home. I didn't believe in Satan in the sense of a horned, red demon with a long tail and trident, but I believed in evil like I believed in love, and I wouldn't mess with either.

The longer I listened, the more they sounded like people my age having a good time. I pulled the door handle and slipped into the front desk office, letting the door close softly behind me. I measured my way through the lobby, picking up shapes sitting in darkness-covered sofas, the old birdcages again, the columns with the fishtails. The interior was murky, filled with shadows that had me moving fast.

Again, I stopped in front of the atrium.

Again, I stared at it, despite the knot that formed in my stomach every time.

What was it about this room? By all accounts, it should've felt lighter, energetically. After all, there were plants, glass, and so moonlight filtering into it. Even the mermaid sitting atop her fountain, holding up the sun was beautiful with the fine, rounded features of a cherub. Shadows here shined, and yes, the Spanish moss freaked me out yesterday, but there was something else. Something I couldn't pinpoint. It was as if the atrium hated me.

That was utterly stupid. How could a place hate me? But that's how it felt, like the room itself was pissed that I was here. Like I was going to alert authorities that it, along with the rest of the building, was more than ready for demolishing. It didn't take an expert to see that.

Down the hall, the ballroom was pitch dark, its entrance hard to make out. I had to hold onto the walls for support and follow the sounds of laughter. When I did, I sensed immense sadness and pain. Isolation, desolation, worry that my family wouldn't come visit. They weren't my thoughts—they were somebody else's. I let go of the walls and the intrusive thoughts went away.

The floor felt unsteady. More than once, I tripped over something. A wave of discombobulation overcame me. I grabbed a column to keep from falling and immediately let go. Floor tiles were fissured and sunken, creating valleys in the hall. Finally, I saw the pulsating glow of candles come into focus.

"Bring her to me, bring her to me, bring her to me, three times three!" Fae was singing, her melodious voice echoing from an unknown location. I watched her emerge from the depths of hallway, sweeping down the corridor in her panties, strawberry blonde hair flailing out behind her. "Oh!" She stopped short when she saw me, skidding to a halt, honey eyes wide and startled. "I guess it worked."

I waved. "Sorry, I should've made a noise or something."

"She's here!" Fae cried. She did a sweeping pirouette and rushed over to me, the smell of burning sandalwood preceding her, as the others came out of the woodwork into the hall like ghosts permeating walls.

"You're back!" Mori, fully dressed, gave a triumphant clap. They glanced at Wilky, as though he'd had some sort of personal investment in my return. I suppose they all did, if having a fifth clair would help their causes.

I was glad to help. And now, I had a cause, too.

I couldn't wait to tell them.

Crow stood a good distance behind them all, watching me with that mistrustful gaze of his. I hated that he'd gone from happy I was here on the first night to not trusting me anymore. I felt almost personally responsible for his discomfort. He wore jeans without a shirt, showing off the tattoos I couldn't see before. Over his right pec was a skull intertwined with a moth. On the other was a beautiful nude woman, long hair sinking into a pool of water.

"Valentina, welcome back," he said, kicking aside the extension cord. "Thanks." I patted my du el bag. "I guess I'm here, if you need me." Fae's fists tapped together. "You'll help us? You'll be the fifth?"

"I have nothing to lose," I said, letting my arms fall against my sides. I entered the ballroom, looking for a good space to call my own. It wasn't entirely true (having nothing to lose). I could easily get lost in their world, lose my soul, get arrested for trespassing, come home with a terrible reputation. But they would be mistakes of my own, and I was good for it.

Mori, Wilky, and Fae came charging at me, blurs of beautiful skin shades. They wrapped their naked, admittedly not-so-fresh-smelling arms around me, and I felt a deep sense of belonging. I'd come home to strangers and couldn't be happier with my decision. I was all too aware of Crow brooding in the shadows, but I wouldn't let it bother me. It was within his right not to trust an outsider.

"Let me make something clear," he said. The others quieted. "This place wants to live again. You'll feel its sense of survival in no time, Vale. But if I find out you're here to expose us, observe living conditions, record the number of cracks, or file paperwork for the county—"

"I'm not from the country, I told you that," I said.

"We've been here a year. You've been here a day. If you're going to help us, like you say you are, you have to swear that you don't have ulterior motives. We've seen them."

The others nodded.

"They come with their clipboards, hard hats, they take notes... They want this place torn down, and we've managed to delay them every time. The project I'm working on has bought us some time."

"Unity spell!" Fae ran off to grab a few things from her stash.

"The Sunlake is not just a place we love," Mori said to me. "Our future's here."

"Our past is here," Wilky added.

Crow walked up to me. "We'd do anything to see this place live again. So, if you stay, you're sworn to a vow of silence."

They looked at me, four beautiful beings vibrating at different frequencies. I imagined their auras in my mind. Fae's was green, Wilky's yellow, Mori's blue, and Crow's either red or orange.

"I'm only going to say this once...I just want to learn from you all. I want to help. And maybe you can help me, think I figured out my why."

"Your why?" Fae asked.

"My reason. I lost my father a few years back, I want to communicate with him. I miss him," I said with some difficulty.

Crow stared through me one last second. "Then we have a week. Your training starts tomorrow." He collected the clairs into a hug and brought the bunch to me.

Everyone threw their arms around me, Fae plucked a strand of my hair, "for our unity jar," and someone thanked the goddess Hecate for my arrival. In their group hug, I felt a mixture of hope, excitement, but also apprehension. It was hard to tell if it was Crow's or mine.

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