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Prologue

On a summer day ripe with dreams and mischief, a trail of whispers trickled like honey into Calliope Petridi's ear. She had just turned ten years old. Her older sisters, Thalia and Eurydice, were tending the garden outside the manor, and for one wild moment, Calliope allowed herself to believe that, perhaps, their mother had finally returned to them.

Following the whispers through the halls, Calliope approached a door that she had never seen before. The rusted handle was shaped into ivy that matched the pattern on the wall. Despite the heat of the day, it was cool to Calliope's eager touch and turned with a sigh. As the door creaked open into darkness, the whispers grew louder.

She checked over her shoulder for Thalia, who always had a knack for knowing when Calliope was about to get into trouble, or Eurydice, whose gentle censure would have been even harder to bear. Yet the hall remained silent and hot save for the cool breeze that blew from the doorway. She danced

down the precarious stairs, her feet so light with excitement they might as well have sprouted wings.

The air was musty, but magic was there, too, soft as stepping barefoot into fresh earth, crisp as biting into an apple. Her skin tickled the same way it had when her mother would whisper spells in Greek. Calliope's honey-wheat hair, the same as all the sisters', swayed about her shoulders with the magic in the air until she sneezed, sparks of light flying out of her mouth.

She turned on the light, and an amber glow lit the basement, if it could be called that. It looked more like a mausoleum of secrets better left kept, lined with shelves of apothecary bottles and tinctures and old books. She followed the trail of whispers to a heavy leather-bound tome. It wasn't hidden or wrapped in ancient cloth or locked behind a series of riddles, like in the books Calliope loved to read. It was waiting. Asking to be found.

Calliope remembered her mother's warnings. Earlier that spring, one clear morning, she had left. The ground had shifted beneath the sisters' feet, a crevice dividing their lives into *before* and *after.*

Penelope had ushered her daughters into the kitchen, her eyes brighter and clearer than they had been in months. Embers glowed in the grate, no warmth to be found.

"Listen," she said, clutching their hands and pulling them in close. "You are the sole guardians of the Dark Oak now. You must stay away from it at all costs or the curse will—" She paused, her eyes misting over.

"The curse will what, Mother?" Thalia asked, focused as always.

"Mama?" Calliope said, her voice thick with worry.

On her lucid days, Penelope had told them that the price

of their magic was memories, and she forbade Calliope and her sisters from practicing it.

Now Penelope's eyes cleared once more, and the old warnings spun out of her mouth like spiderwebs. The girls had heard them before, but the news of an unknown aspect of the curse ensnared them with fear.

"Where magic gathers, there will be those who seek to claim it. Protect your bond at all costs. It's the only thing that can save you. *Never* trust a Shadowcrafter, do you understand?"

"Yes, Mother," Thalia said. Calliope could see her oldest sister was trying to hold back tears and felt her own spill over. "But what about the curse?"

"The curse?" Penelope asked, releasing the girls' hands. Her voice now held a dreamy quality. "What curse?"

Outside in the driveway, a horn honked.

"I'll be back," she promised, but her words were weightless, and they floated away on the wind like a memory she'd already sacrificed.

The sisters watched at the window as their mother climbed into the cab, watched until she rounded a bend and disappeared. They hadn't heard from her since, and though they'd looked in every crack and crevice, there were no answers to be found.

But here, now, within Calliope's grasp, was a font of knowledge. Power leaked from the book like light dripping from the sun. She knew, somehow, that the book had belonged to her mother.

When she reached out a steady finger to trace down the well-worn leather, eager to decipher the markings etched there, the book woke up.

And, for the first time, so did Calliope.

Welcome, my child, the grimoire wrote, the ink splashing across an empty page. *Are you ready to begin?*

Calliope didn't hesitate.

"Yes," she whispered fervently. And the thrill of a newfound power soothed the devastation of her mother's disappearance, at least for a little while.

Chapter 1

Fifteen years later

Calliope ran barefoot through the field, shadows unfurling around her like a sinister promise. Any moment, her skin would burn, and her bones would turn to ash. The shadows whispered things that made Calliope's blood sing with terror. She ran fast and faster still. The Altar was just there, and she knew if she could reach it, she'd be safe on that hallowed ground. But a tendril of shadow swept out, wrapping around her wrist. The pain was a song of death and ice, and a scream tore from her throat as she was pulled into the night—

Calliope jolted awake. Her heart beat so hard and fast she thought it might shatter like glass. The sheets were a tangled mess that smelled of sweat and fear and forgotten things.

Only a dream, she told herself over and over. But when she

rubbed her wrist, she hissed in pain. In the soft dawn light filtering through her high windows, she could see her skin was burned where the dream shadow had touched her. The mark was raised and blistered in places, but instead of feeling hot, it was cold to the touch.

Calliope scrambled out of bed and riffled through her drawers, tossing things haphazardly onto the floor until she found a tin of calendula cream. She would tell her sisters about the nightmares, she would, but not today. Not on the anniversary of their mother's leaving. Too many ghosts were already chasing them; she didn't want to add another. And so, she sacrificed a small memory—Marigold brushing her hair behind her ear during their first date—and chanted a spell in Greek that closed the open wound and soothed the irritated skin. The scar that remained was pink and tender and shaped like a snake. She pulled her sleeve down over it.

The grimoire's pages rustled like an invitation from where it sat on her desk. As she approached, it flipped to a blank page, and Calliope recorded the date before jotting down her dream in a hasty scrawl. Sighing, she stared at the words, willing Grim to help her make sense of them, but for now, the book was silent.

Grim was more than a book. Over the years it had become a friend and confidant, something to turn to when the weight of loneliness became too much, pages to scribble her thoughts in. She'd spend hours poring over chapter upon chapter of spells and potions and recipes. At times it felt like her only connection to her mother. With another sigh, she closed the grimoire and patted its cover lovingly.

By the time she reached the kitchen, her sisters were already awake. The wind whistled through the old stone, and even through the closed windows, Calliope could hear the

birds chirping their songs to welcome spring. Herbs and flowers were strung from the ceiling in various stages of drying, tangles of garlic hung from nails, and heavy cast-iron pots were stacked neatly below the old wood table that served as a kitchen island. It was a witch's kitchen, and Calliope was more at home here than anywhere else in the world.

Thalia held her hands over the teakettle on the stove, her pretty, delicate features pulled into a well-worn frown. Eurydice hugged her from behind. Eurydice was so much shorter that her head rested between Thalia's shoulder blades.

"I think you'd be cold on a beach in summertime," Eurydice said with a laugh, and it was such a sweet sound it made Calliope's teeth nearly ache to hear it.

Thalia groaned and tried to bend her fingers. "It's this house. The stone seeps all the warmth away, even in the spring."

"Let me see," Calliope said, holding out her hands. Thalia paused for only a moment before slipping her fingers into Calliope's palms. Calliope closed her eyes and offered up the memory of her favorite childhood hiding spot—nestled among the branches of an old oak tree—then channeled every warm thing she could think of: summer afternoons, river rocks baked by the sun, apple pie straight out of the oven, and a freshly poured cup of tea that was so hot it burned your tongue. "Na eísai zestós," she whispered. And Thalia's icy hands thawed. Thalia flexed her fingers and gave the type of sigh you release after slipping into a hot bath after a long winter day.

"You shouldn't have done that," Thalia said with a frown. "But thank you."

"Don't you ever miss it?" Calliope asked quietly. "Doing magic?"

"It's not worth the price," Thalia answered without hesitation. "Let's get ready for work."

Thalia had turned eighteen years old the year their mother vanished. And the moment her mother left, Thalia, with two younger sisters to care for, vowed to follow their mother's forbiddance of magic. To this day, she never let a drop of magic pass her fingertips, swearing to guard her memories like the treasures she knew them to be. Magic had made their mother weak, Thalia always said. By the end, there had been so many patches in their mother's memory that a dozen spools of the finest thread couldn't stitch it back together. For Petridi magic was cursed to be only as strong as the memory they sacrificed to fuel it. It was a curse they knew little else about.

Over the years, the sisters had had too many arguments to count about finding their mother. Calliope had spent more than half her life searching for answers, and neither Eurydice nor Thalia had been able to dissuade her. She'd pored over the grimoire, offered up memories, brewed potions, and cast spells, and no matter what she tried or how many memories she sacrificed, always, she came up empty. As if their mother had been swallowed by an impenetrable void.

Still, perhaps this would be the year. The year that something changed. *For the better,* Calliope thought, glancing down at her wrist.

The sisters settled into their routine in a comfortable silence, moving around one another in a long-practiced dance. Calliope handed Dissy the tea cannister before she reached for it. Thalia slid a travel mug beneath the spout just as Dissy picked up the kettle to pour. At the front door, Thalia looped the long end of Calliope's rainbow wool scarf over her shoulder, a simple thing filled with a motherly touch. Calliope was

reminded that her eldest sister had been taking care of them since she was barely old enough to care for herself. When she was younger, Calliope would have rolled her eyes. Even now it grated, just a little. But the feeling was overshadowed by love, as so many small irritations were.

All the while, three cats trailed after them, winding through their feet and rubbing against their legs. Fen—short for Fengári, the Greek word for *moon*—was the oldest, a lanky barn cat that had adopted them two years ago by showing up at their front door one day. And after she had a litter of kittens under their porch last summer, Calliope and Dissy each kept one. Astro, with her fluffy gray-and-white coat, belonged to Calliope, and Solis, the smallest of the litter, had climbed into Dissy's heart and never left. And though Thalia demanded that under no circumstances would those cats be allowed in the house, they always found their way in. Dissy would swear up and down that she wasn't the one who left the window open and little saucers of milk in the kitchen, but Calliope didn't believe her. Meanwhile, despite her protestations, Thalia could be found most evenings with a book in her hands and Fen curled up in her lap.

As the fresh spring air kissed Calliope's cheeks, a family of deer grazed nearby. They tipped their heads lazily as the women passed, their large glassy eyes mysterious but friendly.

"You're feeding them again," Thalia accused Dissy.

"They were hungry!"

"It's spring, Dissy." Thalia sighed, though now there was a hint of laughter to her words. "There's literally green everywhere."

"Okay, fine." Dissy shrugged. "I like to look at them while I drink my tea."

On the mile-long trek into town, the sun warmed their backs as they walked with their arms linked and footsteps in sync. Calliope welcomed the kiss of heat on her skin from the fresh spring morning.

But Calliope knew that behind them trailed the ghost of their mother's presence. Though they didn't talk about such things, it colored the lens through which each sister saw the world.

When the sisters rounded the corner to Main Street, the roads were too narrow for the memory of their mother to sneak through. The little shops and friendly townsfolk and looming clock tower always running a few minutes ahead filled a fraction of the hole left by their mother's absence. Spring banners printed with bright orange poppies hung from streetlamps, and the smell of freshly baked croissants wafted from Whisk and Spoon bakery. They passed the Botanic Dreams plant shop, where Dissy sometimes brought her roses to be sold from her renowned garden; she magically grew a dozen different varieties that smelled stronger and bloomed brighter than any you could find elsewhere. As they passed the diner, they waved to Mr. and Mrs. Nakamura, the elderly retired couple who could be found there most mornings, sharing a crossword puzzle and a plate of pancakes. Everywhere Calliope looked, she was met with a kaleidoscope of colors that heralded spring. Birds sang with wild abandon, and a street musician strummed her guitar on the corner, softly crooning a Joni Mitchell song.

The front door to Tea and Tome was red as a ruby-throated hummingbird and enchanted with luck, thanks to a spell Calliope had gotten from Grim. The door swung open of its own accord as the sisters neared; they never needed a key. The little shop of tea and books was the sisters' labor of love

and, usually, the only thing they actually agreed on. When they walked through that luck-laden door, Calliope sighed in relief as the earthy scent of old books enveloped her and the invisible weights on her shoulders lifted, the ghosts and hurts of the morning sloughing away like so much dead skin.

Soon, the air would be alive with the gentle hum of whispered conversations and the rustle of pages turning. Shelves lined with books stretched to the ceiling, ivy cascading down their sides. Soft lighting illuminated cozy reading nooks, and teacups potted with succulents adorned each wooden table.

The heart of the shop was the tea bar, where an array of tea blends and their mystical properties were written neatly on a chalkboard. Each concoction was meticulously crafted to ignite the senses and evoke feelings of comfort and enchantment. A mix of loose-leaf teas, herbs, and botanicals filled each glass jar, their vibrant colors enticing visitors to explore the flavors and magic within. Whether they needed courage or hope, a dash of desire or a drop of respite, customers would find it there.

On the bar next to a vase of sunflowers sat a stack of one of their bestsellers. The *Tea and Tome Recipe Book* had been Dissy's idea, and the sisters had worked, for once, in harmony until the pages were filled with their favorite recipes, the symbolism they called forth, and hand-drawn illustrations of the dishes.

Thalia settled behind the checkout counter, Dissy behind the tea bar where she was neatly arranging the scones she'd baked that morning, while Calliope flitted about the store, watering plants, straightening pillows, and dusting bookshelves. She'd always envied her sisters' ability to be still. Thalia, in particular, had perfected the art. But Calliope was always moving, needing her hands busy and her mind busier.

She snuck a glance at Thalia, her back straight, delicate neck angled down as she went over receipts. It might have been her imagination, but Calliope thought her shoulders looked more tense than usual, the groove between her furrowed brows deeper. And she wondered if Thalia, too, was thinking of their mother's disappearance. Was she remembering those soft days when they were younger, when fighting over the last piece of baklava was their biggest worry? Or was she playing their mother's warnings over in her head the way Calliope was?

As the morning bloomed, customers began to trickle in, the entry bell tinkling, and the shop buzzed with the chatter of locals and tourists alike, seeking respite and a taste of the magical brews on this perfect California spring day. Regulars gravitated toward their favorite corners, holding worn copies of beloved books like cherished treasures.

During a quiet hour in the early afternoon, the red front door opened, but the bell didn't chime. Calliope looked up from where she'd been restocking a shelf. For it was said that whoever opened a witch bell–adorned door without causing the bell to ring would be an important person in the lives of those who hung the bell in the first place. The last and only other time it had happened, Rosalind, one of their dearest friends, had entered their lives.

Now, though, it was Sean Zhao who entered, ruggedly beautiful in navy-blue pants, boots, and a T-shirt emblazoned with the logo for the Gold Springs Fire Station. He looked around the shop, his dark eyes seeming lost.

"Sean?" Calliope approached him, feeling her sisters' eyes on her.

"Calliope, right?" he asked, his full lips stretching into a smile. "Danny introduced us a while back. They're friends

with my buddy Joe? Anyway, I remembered Danny saying you owned a bookstore, and I just got off my shift but it's my sister's birthday and I'm meeting her at my parents' house for dinner. If I show up without a gift, I'm toast." His words tumbled out with a boyish kind of charm.

"You've come to the right place," Calliope said with a laugh. "What kind of books does your sister read?"

"She likes biographies about women in history," Sean said.

There was a flurry of movement behind them, and Calliope saw Dissy out of the corner of her eye as she fetched a book from the nonfiction section.

"We, um, we just got this book of essays about women who changed the course of World War Two," Dissy said quietly, holding the book out to Sean but not meeting his eyes. "It only came out two days ago, so I don't think she'll have it yet."

"Oh," he said, his dark eyebrows shooting up like she was some kind of magical book fairy. Which, to be fair, she was. "Thank you, that's actually perfect." His eyes turned thoughtful as he studied Dissy. "You're Eurydice, right?" he asked. "We were in the same grade in high school, I think, but you ran with the smart kids," he added with a self-deprecating laugh. "So, our paths didn't cross much."

Dissy looked anywhere but at him and, instead of answering, barreled on. "And we also have, um, a tote bag of women who changed the world." She walked to the register and came back to hand him the tote bag decorated with illustrations of female suffragettes, scientists, secret agents, and politicians. Her cheeks were splotched with red. Without another word, she disappeared behind the tea counter and busied herself with rearranging cannisters and wiping down the already spotless tabletop.

Sean shook his head as though to clear it and then looked at the items in his hands. "I guess I'm ready to check out. I couldn't have picked these out if I spent two hours looking."

"We'll gift wrap them for you," Thalia said with a smile from behind the register.

While Sean chatted idly with Thalia, Calliope looked at her shy, quiet other sister. "What was that about?" Calliope asked Dissy under her breath.

"What do you mean?" she whispered, not meeting her sister's eye. "I just wanted him gone quickly."

Sean left with a merry wave and another chorus of gratitude, and when he opened the door, again, the witch bell stayed silent.

"Weird," Thalia said as she stared at the red door.

"Do you know him?" Calliope asked.

"No, not really," Dissy said quietly but firmly. "There's already so much going on. I don't think we need anyone new in our lives right now."

"When the witch bell stays silent, it doesn't really matter what we want," Calliope said. "Look at Roz. If Sean's meant to be in our lives in some way, it'll happen whether we want it to or not."

"Perhaps," Dissy answered, organizing the teacups so all the handles were facing right.

✶

THE HOURS WORE on, and Calliope had almost forgotten about the shadow dream, even their mother's absence. But near closing time, as she was on a ladder shelving a stack of books at the back of the shop, she felt a whisper of cold brush her skin. Books cascaded out of her arms and clattered to the

floor as she whipped around, only to find the shop nearly empty. Her eyes went wide, her heart beating fast, her whole body immobile as the whisper came again.

Sisters, it hissed. And Calliope shivered. *Three,* it said, though it sounded farther away this time. Calliope's hands were numb, her feet leaden, as though the words were a spell that rendered her frozen.

"Opie?" Dissy asked. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"You didn't hear that?" she demanded.

"You're scaring me, Opie. What did you hear?"

"A whisper," she said. Grabbing Dissy's wrist, she dragged her over to the register where Thalia was going over a list of inventory. "Did you hear anything?" Calliope asked. Thalia glanced back and forth between Calliope and Dissy.

"No," she said. "What's going on?"

"You're telling me neither of you heard that whisper? It was calling us. It felt . . ." Calliope shuddered. "Dangerous."

"You're tired," Thalia said, her lips flattening to a thin line. "You haven't been sleeping well. And now you're dropping stacks of books and hearing things." For all that being a witch entailed, Thalia was reluctant to ascribe meaning to things she couldn't see with her own eyes or hear with her own ears.

The memory of the shadow dream she'd had that morning flared in her mind. Maybe now was the time to tell them. "This wasn't sleep deprivation," she said, taking a deep breath. "I *heard* it. I had a dream this morning, too. Look." Calliope held up the burn on her wrist, and Thalia's eyes flicked over it dismissively. "And you know that Grim says—"

"No, no," Thalia snapped, her eyes darting to the customers who were still browsing the romance section. "We are not bringing that book into this. Not here."

"Would you just listen—"

"I said *no*. Not now."

"Sisters," Dissy said, laying a hand on Calliope's arm. "Let's not argue. Calliope, I'm sure you heard something. But perhaps it was just the breeze? I did prop open the door earlier. And are you sure you didn't just burn yourself when we were baking?"

"This wasn't the wind!" Calliope snarled. "And I would've noticed a burn in the kitchen." Her sisters merely stared at her. "Very well," she said, squaring her shoulders and clenching her jaw to keep from saying anything she'd regret. "I'm going for a walk. You can close up without me."

As she walked out, Thalia's ire seared her like a hot brand, a worse pain than the burn on her wrist. It had taken years of shouting matches and slammed doors, but she'd finally learned that when her sister got that look on her face, there was little she could do to make her listen. But the timing of that whisper seemed too fateful to be a coincidence.

The sun was nearly set, turning the sky into a cascade of flaming colors. Calliope inhaled the crisp spring air and smelled a sharp, spicy amber cutting through the scent of fresh earth and new blooms. The hair on the back of her neck prickled as the feeling of being watched swept over her, as soft as a caress. But when her eyes scanned the streets, she saw nothing unusual. Shaking off the feeling, she set off in search of Roz, ignoring the unease coiling in her chest.