

Enslaved

Ten years ago, an entire pack was wiped out in a single night. Even now, no one knows who did it or why.

Now I understand why the white asphodel only grew in this part of the forest. In my magic lessons, Diana Calla told me that the white asphodel has another name: narcissus, the flower that Persephone collected on her way to Hades in the underworld.

“The symbol of a premature death,” I murmur as I study the empty earth where they should be. “But it’s not here. So what do I do now?”

I can’t stay here for long. Sooner rather than later, a wolf is going to wander this way, and all they’d need to do to track me is follow their nose. And I have to get back to the café to help Aunt Mel. But I can’t just leave, either.

I need that flower. Even one would do it.

So I get down on my hands and knees, because desperate times call for desperate measures. Without the flower, there’s no spell to speak to Mom, and there’s no figuring out what kind of messed-up witch I am that my gift flares to life once, kills my parents, and is rarely ever seen again.

I’ve just spotted a hint of something white buried beneath dead leaves and reach for it, excitement bubbling in my belly, when a twig snaps behind me.

I freeze.

I’m dead.

Every muscle tenses, I wait for a wolf to leap on my back and rip my throat out.

Seconds tick by, and nothing happens.

My heart, staggering so fast it feels like I’m a breath away from having a heart attack, slows.

Maybe it was just a deer, or a—

A hard blow drives me face-down to the ground. I scream, choking on grass and dirt as I flail about, my arms covering my face and neck, because that's where a wolf will bite first.

I lose track of how much time I spend rolling around before it hits me that no wolf is trying to bite me, so I stop and slowly peel my arms away from my face and neck in case it's a trick.

As I sit up, my eyes probe every inch of the forest. Nothing. There's no one here.

I reach a hand to touch my back, in case I'm hurt so badly that whoever attacked me wants me to die in agony alone in the forest. Only there's no wound, no... anything. I'm not hurt, and I'm not bleeding.

So what the hell hit me?

"I'm okay," I mutter beneath my breath. "It was just a twig from a tree. That's all."

I get up, still unable to believe I'm alive.

As I stand there, a sudden movement out of the corner of my eye nearly gives me another heart attack. I spin to face it.

A bird lands on a tree branch. About a second later, I realize what's strange about this situation, and it's not that I'm having a staring contest with a bird.

"Why are you here?" I whisper. "This place is full of dead souls. The living avoid the dead."

But the bird doesn't have an answer for me.

Something rustles a few feet away, and I jerk my head toward it. A second later, my eyes connect with a small brown mole nearly hidden in a prickly bush.

My frown deepens. "You shouldn't be here either."

Something isn't right.

The animals are coming back here, and that should only happen if the souls are gone. But things like that don't happen unless someone makes it. Souls don't just disappear. One might cross over to the place where spirits go when a person dies, but not an entire slaughtered pack.

A chill that has nothing to do with the staring mole makes me back up the way I came. Above my head, more birds perch on trees. Birdsong fills the silence, and it feels like the forest is coming back to life. A beetle scampers over my sneaker and I kick it off.

Wheeling around, I sprint back the way I came, uncaring of how much noise I make—because it isn't wolves that frighten me now.