

Book Excerpt

Chapter 9: The Ritual

The full moon hung high overhead flooding the meadow with its luminous light. Butterflies swarmed in Vittoria's stomach. It was time for the Benedanti to begin their ritual. Her heart fluttered from the anticipation.

The meadow was no longer the horse's grazing place. It had been transformed into a place betwixt and between, neither heaven nor earth, but a place of wondrous magic.

More strangers emerged from the trees smiling pleasantly. Their eyes twinkled in the moonlight as they walked two by two, man and woman, boy and girl, into their respective places within the circle.

Tsura took Vittoria by the hand and guided her to a place on the eastern edge of the meadow. The circle grew full and round with people. Each held their head high, proud to be Strega. Tsura grinned at Vittoria and she reciprocated with a gleaming smile of her own.

Greetings of good cheer were uttered around the circle. All the women were dressed the same as she, in their diaphanous gowns and braided crowns of hair stacked upon their heads. The men wore shin-length breeches. Their hair loose and free. She was reminded of Nico.

The ritual circle became silent and Vittoria watched with interest as Celestina and Lucio entered the circle together. Celestina's eyes roved over the circle of people allowing her gaze to linger on Vittoria. A flash of hot fear blazed over her skin. It was cooled by the inkling of a smile Celestina let flicker from her eyes. It seemed to Vittoria, a hint of approval.

Tsura received a nod from Celestina about something known only to the two of them. As she continued her inventory of all in attendance, Lucio stepped forward in a black robe. Like Celestina's it was embroidered in white and gold thread. They represented day and night, light and dark, young and old, male and female.

Celestina extended her arm and pointed a dagger out in front of her. She twirled in place thrice. Each time she spun her white robe whirled around her body and the pressure in the air rose. During Celestina's ancient chanting, Vittoria caught a word she recognized from the late-night conversations with Tsura. *Diana*

The intensity of the atmosphere grew, and Vittoria's common sense told her to run away as fast as her legs could carry her. Synchronously, she was pulled closer to Celestina, to the dagger, and to the one called by many names.

The Strega in the circle closed ranks as if an invisible rope had been cast about, compelling them to move ever closer to the source of its power.