

CHAPTER 2

Sydney

I didn't really expect a secret initiation into a witches' coven to start off with a tea party.

"Would you pass the ladyfingers, dear?"

I quickly grabbed the china plate from the coffee table and handed it over to Maude, one of the senior witches in the group and our hostess for the night. We sat in a circle of folding chairs in her immaculate living room, and my history teacher, Ms. Terwilliger, was beside me munching on a cucumber sandwich. I was too nervous to say anything and simply drank my tea as the others chatted about light topics. Maude was serving herbal tea, so I didn't have to worry about breaking my caffeine deal with Adrian. Not that I would've minded having an excuse if she had been serving black.

There were seven of us gathered, and although they would allow any number of worthy candidates into their group, they all seemed especially pleased to have a prime number. It was lucky, Maude insisted. Occasionally, Hopper would stick his head up and then go scurrying under furniture. Since witches didn't blink an eye at callistanas, I'd let him come out tonight.

Someone brought up the pros and cons of winter versus summer initiations, and I found my mind wandering. I wondered how things were going over at Clarence's. I'd been responsible for transporting Jill to her feedings since September, and it made me feel strange (and a little wistful) to be here while all of them were gathered and having a good time. With a pang, I suddenly realized I hadn't made any arrangements for dinner. Adrian had simply been the driver, so I hadn't thought to say anything. Would Zoe have

taken charge? Probably not. I pushed down the motherly instincts within me that worried they'd all starve to death. Surely someone was capable of getting food.

Thinking of Adrian brought back the golden memories of our time together this afternoon. Even hours later, I could still feel where he'd kissed me. I took a deep breath to help get a grip, fearful that my soon-to-be sisters would realize magic was the last thing on my mind right now. Actually, these days, it seemed like everything except getting half-naked with Adrian was the last thing on my mind. After a lifetime of praising myself for stoically adhering to mind over matter, I was kind of astonished that someone as cerebral as me would take to physical activity as quickly as I had. Sometimes I tried to rationalize it as a natural animal response. But really, I just had to face the truth: My boyfriend was insanely sexy, vampire or not, and I couldn't keep my hands off him.

I realized then that someone had asked me a question. Reluctantly, I blinked away thoughts of Adrian unbuttoning my shirt and tuned in to the speaker. It took me a moment to recall her name. Trina, that was it. She was in her mid-twenties, the youngest person here, aside from me.

"I'm sorry?" I asked.

She smiled. "I said, you do something with vampires, right?"

Oh, I did a lot of things with one vampire in particular, but obviously, that wasn't what she meant.

"More or less," I said evasively.

Ms. Terwilliger chuckled. "The Alchemists are very protective of their secrets."

A couple other witches nodded. Others simply looked on curiously. The magical world of witches didn't cross with the vampiric one. Most of them, on both sides, didn't

even know about each other. Learning about Moroi and Strigoi had been a surprise to some here—meaning the Alchemists were doing their job. From what I'd gathered, these witches had encountered enough mystical and supernatural things to accept that blood-drinking magical creatures walked the earth and that there were groups like the Alchemists keeping that knowledge under wraps.

Witches freely accepted the paranormal. The Alchemists were less open. The group that had raised me thought humans needed to stay free of magic for the sanctity of their souls. I had once believed that too, and that creatures like vampires had no business being friendly with us. That was back when I'd also believed the Alchemists were telling me the truth. Now I knew that there were people in the organization who lied to both humans and Moroi and who would go to great extremes to protect their own selfish interests, no matter who it hurt. With my eyes open to the truth, I could no longer answer blindly to the Alchemists, even though I still technically worked for them. That wasn't to say I was in open rebellion against them either (like my friend Marcus), since some of their original tenets still held merit.

Really, what it all came down to was that I was working for myself now.

“You know who you should talk to—if she'd talk to you? Inez. She's had all sorts of encounters with those beasts—not the living ones. The undead ones.” That was Maude again. She'd recognized the golden lily on my cheek right away that identified me (to those who knew what to look for) as an Alchemist. It was made of vampire blood and other components that gave us some of their healing abilities and hardiness, while also being charmed to stop us from discussing supernatural affairs with those not privy to the magical world. Or, well, my tattoo used to do that.

“Who’s Inez?” I asked.

That brought some chuckles from the others. “Probably the greatest of our order—at least on this side of the country,” said Maude.

“This side of the world,” insisted Ms. Terwilliger. “She’s almost ninety and has seen and done things most of us can’t imagine.”

“Why isn’t she here?” I asked.

“She’s not part of any formal coven,” explained another witch, named Alison. “I’m sure she used to be, but she’s practiced on her own for . . . well, as long as I’ve known about her. It’s hard for her to get around now, and she mostly just keeps to herself. Lives in this ancient house outside of Escondido and hardly ever leaves.”

Clarence popped into my head. “I think I know a guy she’d get along great with.”

“She fought a number of Strigoi back in the day,” mused Maude. “She’s probably got some spells that you’d find useful. And, oh, the stories she can tell about them. She was quite the warrior. I remember her talking about how one tried to drink her blood.” She shivered. “But apparently, he couldn’t do it, and she was able to take him out.”

My hand froze as I lifted my teacup. “What do you mean he couldn’t do it?”

Maude shrugged. “I don’t remember the details. Maybe she had some sort of protective spell.”

I felt my heart speed up as an old, dark memory sucked me in. Last year, I’d been trapped by a Strigoi who’d wanted to drink my blood too. She hadn’t been able to do it, allegedly because I “tasted bad.” The reason for that was still kind of a mystery, one the Alchemists and Moroi had let fade away when other pressing matters came up. But it

hadn't faded for me. It was something that constantly nagged at the back of my mind, the never-ending question of what it was about me that had repelled her.

Ms. Terwilliger, accustomed to my expressions, studied me and guessed some of what I was thinking. "If you'd like to talk to her, I could arrange for you to meet her." Her lips quirked into a smile. "Although, I can't guarantee you'll get anything useful out of her. She's very . . . particular about what she reveals."

Maude scoffed. "That's not the word I'm thinking of, but yours is more polite." She glanced at an ornate grandfather clock and set down her cup. "Well, then. Shall we get started?"

I forgot about Inez and even Adrian as fear settled over me. In less than a year, I'd traveled leagues away from the Alchemist doctrine that had governed my life. I didn't give being close to vampires a second thought anymore, but every once in a while, warnings of the arcane would flit back to me. I had to steel myself and remember that avoiding magic was a road I'd long since passed and that it was only evil if you used it for evil. Members of the Stelle, as this group called itself, were sworn to do no harm with their powers—unless it was in defense of themselves or others.

We held the ritual in Maude's backyard, a sprawling piece of property filled with palm trees and winter flowers. It was about fifty degrees out, balmy compared with late January in other parts of the country, but jacket weather in Palm Springs—or rather, cloak weather. Ms. Terwilliger had told me it didn't matter what I wore tonight, that I'd be supplied with what I needed. And what I needed turned out to be a cloak composed of six pieces of velvet in different colors. I felt like a peddler in a fairy tale as I flung it over my shoulders.

“This is our gift to you,” Ms. Terwilliger explained. “Each of us has sewn and contributed a piece. You’ll wear it whenever we have a formal ceremony.” The others donned similar cloaks composed of varying numbers of patches, depending on whatever the coven’s number had been during their respective initiations.

The sky was stark and clear with stars, the full moon shining like a brilliant pearl against the blackness. It was the best time to work good magic.

I noticed then that the trees in the yard were oriented in a circle. The witches formed another ring within it, in front of a stone altar that had been bedecked with incense and candles. Maude took up a position by the altar and indicated that I should kneel in the center, in front of her. A breeze stirred around us, and although I tended to think of overgrown, misty, deciduous forests when it came to arcane rituals, something felt right about the towering palms and crisp air.

It had taken me a while to come around to joining, and Ms. Terwilliger had had to assure me a hundred times that I wouldn’t be swearing allegiance to some primeval god. “You’re swearing yourself to the magic,” she had explained. “To the pursuit of its knowledge and using it for good in the world. It’s a scholar’s vow, really. Seems like something you should be on board with.”

It was. And so, I knelt before Maude as she conducted the ritual. She consecrated me to the elements, first walking around me with a candle for fire. Then she sprinkled water on my forehead. Crumbled violet petals spoke for the earth, and a wreath of incense smoke summoned the air. Some traditions used a blade for that element, and I was kind of glad theirs didn’t.

The elements were the heart of human magic, just as they were in vampire magic. But like the Moroi, there was no nod to spirit. It was an only recently rediscovered magic among them, and only a handful of Moroi wielded it. When I'd asked Ms. Terwilliger about it, she hadn't had a good answer. Her best explanation had been that human magic was drawn from the external world, where the physical elements resided. Spirit, tied to the essence of life, burned within us all, so it was already present. At least that had been her best guess. Spirit was a mystery to human and vampire magic users alike, its effects feared and unknown—which was why I often lay sleepless at night, worrying about Adrian's inability to stay away from it.

When Maude finished with the elements, she said, "Swear your vows."

The vows were in Italian, since this particular coven had its origins in the medieval Roman world. Most of what I swore to was in line with what Ms. Terwilliger had said, a promise to use magic wisely and support my coven sisters. I'd memorized them a while ago and spoke flawlessly. As I did, I felt an energy burn through me, a pleasant hum of magic and the life that radiated around us. It was sweet and exhilarating, and I wondered if it was what spirit felt like. When I finished, I looked up, and the world seemed brighter and clear, full of so much more wonder and beauty than ordinary people could understand. I believed then more than ever that there was no evil in magic, unless you brought upon yourself.

"What is your name among us?" asked Maude.

"Iolanthe," I said promptly. It meant "purple flower" in Greek and had come to me after all the times Adrian talked to me about the sparks of purple in my aura.

She held out her hands to me and helped me up. “Welcome, Iolanthe.” Then, to my surprise, she gave me a warm hug. The rest, breaking the circle now that the ritual was over, each gave me one as well, with Ms. Terwilliger being last. She held me longer than the others, and more astonishing than anything else I’d seen tonight were tears in her eyes.

“You’re going to do great things,” she told me fiercely. “I’m so proud of you, prouder than I could be of any daughter.”

“Even after I burned your house down?” I asked.

Her typical amused expression returned. “Maybe because of that.”

I laughed, and the serious mood transformed to one of celebration. We returned to the living room, where Maude traded tea for spiced wine, now that we were done with the magic. I didn’t indulge, but my nervousness had long since disappeared. I felt happy and light . . . and more importantly, as I sat and listened to their stories, I felt like I belonged there—more so than I ever had with the Alchemists.

My phone buzzed in my purse, just as Ms. Terwilliger and I were finally preparing to leave. It was my mom. “I’m sorry,” I told them. “I need to take this.”

Ms. Terwilliger, who’d drank more wine than anyone else, waved me off and poured another glass. I was her ride, so it wasn’t like she had anywhere to go. I answered the phone as I retreated to the kitchen, only a little surprised that my mom would call. We kept in touch, and she knew evenings were a good time to get ahold of me to chat. But when she spoke, there was an urgency in her voice that told me this wasn’t a casual call.

“Sydney? Have you talked to Zoe?”

My mental alarms went off. “Not since this afternoon. Is something wrong?”

My mom took a deep breath. “Sydney . . . your father and I are splitting up. We’re getting a divorce.”

For a moment, the world spun, and I leaned against the kitchen counter for support. I swallowed. “I see.”

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “I know how hard this will be on you.”

I thought about it. “No . . . not exactly. I mean, I guess . . . well, I can’t say that I’m surprised.”

She’d once told me that my dad had been more easygoing in his youth. It was hard for me to imagine, but obviously, she’d married him for some reason. Over the years, my dad had grown cold and intractable, throwing himself into the Alchemist cause with a devotion that took precedence over all other things in his life, including his daughters. He’d become harsh and single-minded, and I’d long since realized I was more of a tool for the greater good in his eyes than his daughter.

My mom, on the other hand, was warm and funny, always willing to show affection and listen to us when we needed her. She was quick with a smile . . . though she didn’t seem to smile so much these days.

“I know it’ll be emotionally difficult for you and Carly,” she said. “But it won’t affect your daily lives that much.”

I pondered her word choice. Me and Carly. “But Zoe . . .”

“Zoe’s a minor, and even if she’s off doing your Alchemist work, she’s still legally under the care of her parents. Or parent. Your father intends to file for sole custody so that he can keep her where she is.” There was a long pause. “I plan to fight

him. And if I win, I'll bring her back to live with me and see if she can live a normal life."

I was stunned, unable to imagine the sort of battle she was proposing. "Does it have to be all or nothing? Can you guys share custody?"

"Sharing might as well be giving it to him. He'll wield the control, and I can't let him have her—mentally, that is. You're an adult. You can make your choices, and even if you're established on your path, you're different from her in the way you go about it. You're you, but she's more like . . ."

She didn't finish, but I already knew. *She's more like him.*

"If I can get custody and bring her home, I'll send her to a regular school and maybe salvage some sort of ordinary teenage existence for her. If it's not too late. You probably hate me for that—for pulling her from your cause."

"No," I said swiftly. "I think . . . I think it's a great idea." *If it's not too late.*

I could hear her choke up a little and wondered if she was fighting tears. "We'll have to go to court. No one's going to bring up the Alchemists, not even me, but there's going to be a lot of discussion of suitability and character analysis. Zoe will testify . . . and so will you and Carly."

And that's when I knew why she said this would be so difficult. "You guys will want us to choose one of you."

"I'll want you to tell the truth," she said firmly. "I don't know what your father will want."

I did. He would want me to slander my mom, to say she was unfit, just some homemaker who fixed cars on the side and couldn't possibly compare with a serious

academic like him, who provided Zoe with all sorts of education and cultural experiences. He'd want me to do it for the good of the Alchemists. He'd want me to do it because he always got his way.

"I love and support whatever you feel is right." The bravery in my mom's voice broke my heart. She was going to have more than family complications to deal with. Alchemist connections extended far and wide. Into the legal system? Very possibly. "I just wanted you to be prepared. I'm sure your father will want to speak to you too."

"Yes," I said grimly. "I'm sure he will. But what about right now? Are you okay?" Stepping away from Zoe, I had to acknowledge how life-altering this was for my mom. Maybe their marriage had become painful, but they'd been together for almost twenty-five years. Leaving something like that was a big adjustment, no matter the circumstances.

I could sense her smiling. "I'm fine. I'm staying with a friend of mine. And I took Cicero with me."

Thinking of her spirited our cat away made me laugh, in spite of the solemnity of the conversation. "At least you have company."

She laughed as well, but there was a fragile quality to it. "And my friend needs some work done on her car, so we're all happy."

"Well, I'm glad, but if there's anything you need, anything at all, money or—"

"Don't worry about me. Just take care of yourself—and Zoe. That's the most important thing right now." She hesitated. "I haven't spoken to her lately . . . is she okay?"

Was she? I supposed it depended on how you defined “okay.” Zoe was thrilled that she was out learning the Alchemist trade at so young an age but arrogant and cold toward my friends—just like anyone else in our organization. That, and she was a constant, looming shadow over my love life.

“She’s great,” I assured my mom.

“Good,” she said, her relief nearly palpable. “I’m glad you’re with her. I don’t know how she’ll take this.”

“I’m sure she’ll understand where you’re coming from.”

It was a lie, of course, but there was no way I could tell my mom truth: Zoe was going to fight her, kicking and screaming, every step of the way.