

CHAPTER 1

The Gypsy woman crossed herself before she spoke, her long, creased fingers steady and sure as she turned the tarot cards, one by one.

“You have an enemy,” she said, not a trace of surprise in her voice. “Death. The Tower. Five of Swords. Nine of Wands. Queen of Swords . . . shall I draw a sixth card for emphasis?”

“*Da*,” I said, nodding. It was the same price regardless. Ten euros, or what amounts to about twelve dollars for a basic reading. I was passing a sunny early January afternoon in Budva, a medieval city perched on the coast of Montenegro. Everything about this tiny country near the border of Croatia pulsed with mysticism. I’d never had my tarot cards read before, but it seemed perfectly normal to be visiting a fortune-teller amid Budva’s incense-filled Orthodox churches and colorful, crowded streets. I’d been roaming the ancient city when I’d come upon the woman, her small table with its bright floral cloth and two chairs set up adjacent to a church built in the ninth century.

Having recently recovered the empathic skills that were my birthright, I could tell she believed what she was telling me. Whether the cards could really predict the future was an entirely different story.

“Four of Swords, reversed,” she said, turning over the sixth and final card and placing it upside down in front of me. It showed a woman lying on some kind of pedestal, three swords dangling above her head, one sword lying flat beneath her. The fortune-teller, whose long black hair, streaked with gray, was pulled tightly into a braid, eyed me suspiciously.

As I gazed back, I felt a shock of recognition. How had I not recognized her? We’d met before, but in San Francisco. She’d performed a spell on me, to embed a map of magic locations on my arm. Nadia was her name, and she’d been introduced by my friend Elsa.

Now, as then, her expression was stern. She clearly had little interest in talking about old times.

“The energy around you is strong. Too strong,” she said. “You should have told me of all your powers, *chuvibani*.”

I looked up, startled to hear the word. Josef, the brooding brother of my lover, William, had once used the term, when describing the types of supernatural beings that held sway in Eastern Europe. If I’d understood him correctly, the word meant “witch.”

Was it possible she knew that I wasn’t exactly human?

“I’m not sure what you mean,” I said, drawing another skeptical look.

“Tell me, *chuvibani*, why didn’t you know? You should have sensed it.”

A flash of anger quickened my pulse, and pushed me to be honest, regardless of the risk. “I was lied to,” I said, instinctively turning my head to scan the area before continuing. “Nobody told me until just recently that my father was a powerful witch.”

“Things are changing,” she said, clearly unruffled by my response. “The cards say as much. See here: Death. It usually means a break with your old life . . . leaving your past behind. But look, for your present, the Tower. It tells me you have suffered a great shock or surprise.”

“Yes,” I said, pushing down the anger that again surged through me. “To learn I had a father? That was a surprise indeed.” And the reason I’d come to Montenegro.

I paused, suddenly feeling that I shouldn’t say more. My father, Gabriel Laurent, comes from a long line of ancient and powerful witches. He’s also the head of the Council, a shadowy organization that plays a major role in the fate of humans and Others. Regardless of my grievances, I’d sworn to keep the Council’s existence a secret.

“*Chuvibani*, you must take responsibility,” Nadia replied. “A witch is wise. She protects her village. She’s the keeper of the seasons and the spirits.”

I almost fell off my chair. Wise? Hardly. I’d been born with super-natural empathic skills, the ability to read the emotions and intentions of others. But I’d spent most of my life shunning those talents. “A witch must embrace her strength,” she said. “She reads the minds of the living and the dead, and leads her people to their destiny.”

“I think you’ve got the wrong *chuvibani*,” I said, the sarcasm slipping out against my will. I hardly qualified as a clear-sighted leader. I’d been blindsided, kept in the dark and manipulated by the people I loved. My mother, through omission, had lied to me my whole life, never uttering a word about my paternity. My father had recruited me for the Council but hadn’t had the courage to tell me the truth about who he was—until my mother spilled the beans.

“I understand you’ve struggled,” Nadia said, bestowing a bit of empathy. “But that time is over.” She looked into my eyes. “The cards tell the story.”

“Go on,” I said, pointing at the third card in the line of six. “Five of Swords,” she said, showing me the card. It depicted a young man holding a sword in his hand and looking off into the distance. Two more swords were lashed across his back, and yet another two were lodged in the ground in front of him.

“As I said, you have an enemy, one who is very dangerous. A saboteur. He may be more than you can handle.” She placed her hand on the card and closed her eyes.

“You are taking on great evil,” she murmured.

I didn’t need the fortune-teller to explain. I knew exactly what “great evil” she was referring to: Nikola Pajovic, a thousand-year-old vampire. The world’s financial elite knew him as a wealthy Serbian hotelier and casino owner, but I was certain he was something else: a murderer who’d recently orchestrated the bombing of the Academy of Sciences’ headquarters in San Francisco, killing my colleague Aidan Burke in the process. And it just so happened that I’d pushed Aidan to investigate possible ties between Nikola and a syndicate of former Balkan war criminals in the days before the attack. Unable to stay and grieve for Aidan, I’d had to flee to Paris to avoid the inevitable police investigation—and any further entanglements with Nikola.

“Go on,” I said. “I was momentarily distracted. What do these cards mean?”

“The Queen of Swords,” she said, pointing at a card with an image of a woman standing alone on a bluff, holding a sword in her hands. “You are entering a time when you will have to stand up for yourself, perhaps alone.”

I nodded. I certainly *felt* alone. After the encounter with my mother in Paris, where she’d revealed that Gabriel Laurent was my father—proving that she’d lied to me for my entire life—my trust in her had been destroyed. Thankfully, William had helped me pick up the pieces and escape to Montenegro to think. His love was one of the few things that I knew I could trust. Late at night, when I tried to picture my future, it was the feeling of his body next to mine that kept me from falling into despair. No matter what happened, we would be together—sometimes I imagined we might even marry— and we would find a way to get on with our lives.

Once again, the card reader’s words pulled me back to the moment. “Beware, though, because the card is not certain. It could also mean that soon you will be dealing with a solitary female who has known great sadness. A widow, perhaps.”

Elsa. The raven-haired time-walker and spirit guide who’d helped me access my supernatural abilities. She’d helped save my life when Stoner Halbert, a conservative political consultant and my professional nemesis, had dabbled in black magic and summoned a demon whose dark powers wreaked havoc on my once-peaceful life in San Francisco. It was Elsa who awakened my sixth sense and trained me to fight supernatural evil before the demon could destroy me. Then, after the car bombing, it had been my turn to see her life fall apart. She’d been Aidan’s lover, and his death had undone her. After the explosion, she disappeared. I suspected she had jumped back in time to somewhere none of us could find her.

“And this card?” I asked.

“Yes, the Four of Swords reversed. Normally, it means a time for rest,” she said. “But for you, upside down like this, it means the opposite. It means no rest. You must start work immediately. It means troubles are coming to you.”

I would have laughed aloud, but I didn't want to offend her. Trouble coming? I tried to imagine what that might be. In weeks not long past, before I'd arrived in Montenegro, I'd encountered a criminal gang of Others in San Francisco, and their supernatural powers had nearly blinded me. Then there was the car bombing. My own injuries after the blast had been serious enough that William had reluctantly shared his vampire blood to heal me. A risky gesture. All that was left to bind our lives together, at least according to my supernatural friends, would be for him to drink my blood.

“Troubles are coming,” I said, repeating her phrase like an idiot. “Well, I guess I had better get ready, then.” I wasn't exactly sure how to close our transaction. Saying thank you seemed like a bit of a non sequitur.

“What will you do?” she asked, scrutinizing me as she folded my euros and stuffed them into a small cloth change purse she kept in her lap.

“Go home,” I said, not knowing what else to say. For the moment, “home” was not my cozy 1930s house in San Francisco, but a restored fifteenth-century stone cottage on an island fortress in the Adriatic. In the summer, wealthy travelers paid a handsome sum to stay in the place we'd selected. But in late December, the place had not been difficult to book. I was traveling with William and his brother, Josef: two ancient and powerful vampires who'd lived through wars and had trained me to fight. We had Josef to thank for finding our small home in Sveti Stefan, the fortress-turned-luxurious-resort just slightly south of Budva.

Before becoming a vampire during World War II, Josef had lived in what was then Czechoslovakia and had traveled across Eastern and Central Europe; the cottage in Sveti Stefan had lodged in his memory as a welcome place to retreat. It turned out to be the perfect hideaway for the three of us. We were biding our time, hiding out, avoiding my family and Nikola, unsure of who to trust or how to proceed. Now, though, according to Nadia, that was all about to change.

“You cannot hide from what is coming,” she said, her eyes dark with foreboding.

“I need to think,” I said as I gathered up my things. I didn't say it out loud, but my first impulse was to board a plane for somewhere else. Turn and run. It was becoming my habit, for better or for worse. If Elsa were here, she'd no doubt scold me for the thought. She wouldn't have wanted me to turn my back on my parents as I had in Paris. And she'd expect me to rise to the occasion

now. After all, she'd picked me up off the floor where Stoner Halbert's demon had laid me out, then trained me to use my instincts and fight.

I missed her.

"You don't have much time," Nadia said. "Your fate will outrun you, if you're not careful."

"What do you suggest?"

"Assemble your allies," she said, rummaging around in a bag she'd set next to the leg of her chair. "You need to bring your people to your side and prepare."

"You make it sound like war," I replied.

"Perhaps not war, but a battle nonetheless," she said. "Now go. You'll be late if you don't leave now."

"Late for what?" I asked. I used my empathic skills to probe her feelings and sensed her certainty growing stronger, as if she were being influenced by an outside force. I looked up, but there was no one else in the square.

"Just go, *chuwihani*. It's time to accept your destiny."