

CHAPTER 1

On the very top floor of the Witch Health Organization headquarters, at the very back of the lab, at the last bench on the left, Nadia Nox was wiping down her worktop and consolidating her notes when she felt her phone vibrate in the front pocket of her eggplant-colored lab coat.

The phone was a typic (read: human) device, but it had been treated with a personalization charm common in the Sphere, so that whenever Nadia received a call or message from another witch, she knew instantly who she was hearing from. The vibration Nadia felt now was one she knew well. It was her mother, Natasha. Nadia touched her hand to her pocket, giving the phone permission to display the message, and two words appeared in the air before her in a stressful red script: *Urgent—Eve*.

Nadia tightened her grip around the stack of paper she was holding. Her sister had been due to give birth over a week ago, but she'd been in the hospital for days, resisting the doctors' appeals to induce labor. Nadia had canceled her dinner plans so she could crowd into the hospital room with her family and

wait, only to be sent home in the early hours of the morning. She called her mom.

“Nadia,” Natasha answered. Nadia tensed—there was a subtle, nearly imperceptible note of anxiety in her mother’s voice. “Nadia, please come to the hospital as soon as possible. Whatever you’re working on, put it aside.”

“Is the baby okay?” Her mother’s message was lean, and a sudden fear erupted in Nadia’s chest, one she hadn’t realized was waiting to be released. She heard a soft snapping noise and looked down to see that she had managed to puncture the finger of her magic-fortified latex glove with one of her black acrylic nails. She should’ve known better than to go with an almond shape.

“The baby is healthy—that’s not the concern. I’ll see you soon.”

Nadia hurried out of the lab, careful not to knock over any of the containers of unstable magic lining the counters. Most of her peers would be afraid to leave like this—early, frantically, directly in view of Dr. Diop’s glass-walled office—but Nadia’s role in the Atmospheric Magic Effort made her much more valuable to the WHO than most other researchers. Nadia rarely abused her position, but she was definitely aware of it.

On the stairs outside the building, Nadia stooped down and hugged her knees, gathered the tails of her lab coat around her, and closed her eyes. Though she’d improved over the years, transporting wasn’t her strong suit, and she needed absolute concentration to make sure she didn’t end up in a random hospital on the other side of the world. She steadied her breathing, blocking out all anxieties about the baby, her research, and whether the auburn she’d dyed her close-cropped hair yesterday complemented her eyes. Then, she focused all her thoughts on the hospital: how it looked, how it smelled, how the air had felt

the last time she'd been there. When she opened her eyes, the thoughts had come to life, and she was in the bustling delivery wing of the 72,88 Witch's Ward.

"Excuse me?" Nadia stopped a nurse dressed in lavender scrubs. "I'm looking for room 3B."

The nurse stared, apparently taken aback.

"I'm looking for Eve Nox's room," Nadia clarified.

"Of course." The nurse's face cleared into a broad smile. "It's down that hall and to the right. Oh, it's wonderful news—Nadia, right? You're her sister? It's just wonderful news, congratulations."

Nadia turned away and headed down the hall, annoyed to hear the nurse speak to her so familiarly. Unlike her sister, Nadia didn't bask in the notoriety that came with the Nox family name. She hadn't used her name to be more popular in training school, didn't enjoy small talk with strangers who approached her, and had done her best to hide her identity when she applied for her research position at the WHO. When her friends planned their weekends, she was often the only one to vote in favor of staying in instead of having a night out drinking and dancing in Centre Sphere.

She'd carried a vague distaste for the celebrity of the Nox name throughout childhood, but it had solidified into something permanent on her first day at Bekere University (alternately known as 81,22, a coordinate that landed in Switzerland). She'd been so excited for the opportunity—it was the top-ranked medical school in the Sphere—and thought of it as a chance to get away, to be somewhere her family and its history didn't loom over her like a low-flying drone. But at orientation, in a room full of witches she'd never met, Nadia was met with the familiar sidelong glances and judgmental stares, and she realized that no matter where she went in the Sphere, she'd always be a Nox.

Nadia rounded the corner of the hall leading to room 3B, her chunky patent leather loafers squeaking across the floor as she turned. She placed her hand on the door, which had been treated with a popular interior design charm. The door was glass, and behind it was a swirling, starry nightscape, so lucid and lifelike you would think you could step into the sky. Nadia paused before turning the handle. The nurse's congratulations could've meant anything, but Nadia, reluctant optimist that she was, couldn't help but think of the best-case scenario, one in which the WHO's efforts to end the Typic Crisis had actually, finally *worked*.

Nadia pushed the door open. Her parents and Eve's husband, James, stood over her sister's bed. The baby had already been cleaned and swaddled, and Eve had even made herself up, looking comically tidy and calm. If Nadia hadn't known better, she would've thought Eve was on her way out to dinner, not lying in a hospital bed moments after giving birth. All eyes snapped to Nadia as she entered.

"Honey," her mother said quietly. She broke into a tentative smile. "Come look."

Nadia walked over to the bed, joining her family and peering at the baby gurgling in Eve's arms. The baby's face was at once familiar and unrecognizable, the way all babies' faces are—an innocent canvas for parents to project themselves onto. With her eyes trained on Eve, Natasha reached into the blankets and gently pulled out the baby's foot. There, stark and unmistakable, was the mark Nadia recognized from her own baby pictures, Eve's baby pictures, and the baby pictures of every witch she had ever known: a purple print that started at the heel, so dark it seemed black, then bled out to the middle of the foot, fading like watercolor. In just eight hours, the print would disappear completely, giving way to normal flesh.

Eve gazed up at her sister, eyes shining with the tears she'd refused to release since her first daughter, Helia, had been born without the mark three years ago. "Nadia," she whispered. "She's a witch."