

The book cover features a man and a woman in a close embrace. The man, on the left, has dark hair and is wearing a black leather jacket with a fur collar. He has a blue, crystalline energy emanating from his chest. The woman, on the right, has blonde hair in a ponytail and is wearing a red, patterned, long-sleeved top and dark pants. She has a blue, crystalline energy emanating from her chest. The background is a mix of blue and purple hues with sparkling light effects and stylized flames. The title 'Gift of Fire' is written in a large, ornate, golden font across the center. Below the title, the text 'ELEMENTAL BLOODLINES' is written in a smaller, white, serif font. A decorative flourish separates 'ELEMENTAL BLOODLINES' from 'BOOK ONE', which is also in a white, serif font. At the bottom, the author's name 'C.L. CARHART' is written in a white, serif font.

Gift of Fire

ELEMENTAL BLOODLINES

BOOK ONE

C.L. CARHART

Gift of Fire

Elemental Bloodlines

Book I

C.L. Carhart

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DISCLAIMER: This book is intended for adults only. This book includes graphic sexual content, profanity, and mature themes. Please read at your own discretion.

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For Carter

who hasn't given up on me

even when the world watches me burn

BRIEF PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Eihalbe – EYE-hahl-buh (eye is pronounced like eyeball)

Erlangen – AIR-lahng-en

Gabi – GAH-bee

Johanna – Yo-HAH-nah

Leitaeri – Leye-TARE-ee (eye is pronounced like eyeball)

Leitalra – Leye-TAHL-rah (eye is pronounced like eyeball)

Taubenball – TOW-ben-ball (ow is pronounced like cow)

Teutonica – Too-TAHN-ih-kuh

Werndl – VERN-dool

Wuotan – VOH-tahn

Zum Weißen Hirsch – Tsoom VICE-en Hersch

You can find a full [pronunciation guide](#) and [translations](#) at the end of this book.

BLURB

A wary fire witch searches for belonging, not love. But fate, it seems, has other plans

After a decade of blending in with humanity, I've returned to my magic-infused hometown to start over. Within hours, I lock eyes with the jock who bullied me in high school. What's worse, he's set to be my new boss, his misty aura tantalizing my darkest desires.

Now all the Teutons in town believe I'm fated to ascend as their next matriarch, thanks to some age-old tradition. But the priests consider my bloodline far too weak for such responsibility. I'm a threat to the established order.

I have no wish to submit to fate's whims. If my only escape involves claiming my boss as my lover, I'll reignite my fire for a wild dance with mist.

Desperate desire blooms into what might be love, but will passion prove strong enough to defeat fate's ruthless schemes?

AUTHOR'S NOTE

All stories in the Teutonic Fantasy Realm take place in a world much like our own. Major historical events—like the World Wars—occurred similarly to those in our present world. Major locales—like München, Nürnberg, and Erlangen—can also be found in modern Germany.

However, all Teutonic history, customs, and magic, are utter figments of the author's imagination. As far as she knows, no actual elemental witches roam modern Germany in secret, nor is it possible for outsiders to seize their magnificent gifts. And no, the demon lord Wuotan is not a real being.

We hope.

Some of the businesses in this story—like Werndl Accounting and Zum Weißen Hirsch—are fictional. Others? You would have to visit Erlangen yourself to find out.

Chapter One:

**NOT JUST A JOB
INTERVIEW**



Why him?

My instincts had warned me against coming here, back to the hometown I had fled nearly a decade ago. After graduating high school, tired of facing censure from my peers, I had leaped into the world of outsiders—regular humans who knew nothing of the elemental

mystics lurking in the shadows. Though I found it difficult to stifle my fire magic at first, now I hardly paid it any heed, presenting myself as a poised and respectable businesswoman, a financial auditor.

I had arrived at my parents' house just before noon. After depositing my worldly goods into its empty halls—thanking my lucky stars that I managed to postpone the inevitable reunion scene—I hopped back on the bus en route to the city center. My interview was scheduled for four p.m., so that gave me several hours to putter around my hometown. I had escaped Erlangen in August 1994; now it was September 2003, the sky a vibrant autumn blue.

By the time I turned my steps toward Werndl Accounting, the sensations of home had put my mind and spirit at ease. The smooth dialect of my childhood flowed into my ears from store owners, from the waitress at the café, from pedestrians walking the streets. My fears of returning to a city infused with Teutonic magic began to dissipate. Erlangen was not a large metropolis and its Teuton community was even smaller. Just under three thousand magic-users called Erlangen their home.

When I stopped in at the Huguenot church around two-thirty, I murmured a quiet prayer for divine guidance and protection. *If I was wrong to come back here, please make it obvious right away. Show me whether I can find a place for myself here, with or without my magic.*

Now I had left the familiar streets behind, and the HR manager of Werndl Accounting guided me into a standard-issue conference room for my interview. Clad in a mauve blouse, black pencil skirt, and heels, with my brown hair tied up in a bun, I attempted to project a confident aura. My buoyancy had shot upward when I greeted the HR manager—a middle-aged woman with short red hair and freckles clustered upon her nose—and cast my gaze over the cubicles occupying the space between the lobby and the conference room. I sensed a busy yet positive vibe humming in the air, the marks of a business untainted by an overbearing boss.

If I nail this interview, I can definitely carve out a place for myself here, I decided as the HR manager paused outside a half-open doorway. With a friendly nod, she gestured for me to precede her. A smile worked its way across my lips as I stepped into the conference room. *Just because I'm in Erlangen doesn't mean I have to return to the prejudiced community that chased me away. I can be a regular human here, too.*

I felt certain of that.

Until my eyes fell upon the man standing behind the oblong table at the center of the conference room, his strong fingers resting casually atop the back of a rolling chair. He stood about a head taller than me, his black hair buzzed on the sides and slicked on the top, an olive Tommy Hilfiger dress shirt hardly hiding his sculpted torso and arms. His hazel eyes were turned away from the doorway as he listened to the older man at his side.

That one had a voice that lilted upward at the end of each phrase, reminding me of a yelping dog.

I hardly had the wherewithal to react to the older man's unique voice. Heat rose deep in my veins as images from a far different time exploded in my mind. Although I kept my supernatural nature hidden these days, I had sensed hints of elemental manipulation while I passed through the city. Unusually vibrant mums in a window box here, a warm breeze hovering around the man at the bus stop there. My fire had taken note of it and shrugged it off.

But now its heat spread from my pounding heart outward to my limbs as I studied the younger of the two men waiting to interview me. Both diverted their attention to me the instant I stepped through the doorway. As the red-haired lady closed the door behind us, I realized that I needed to approach the table and return the greeting the older man offered, his right hand outstretched in welcome. Why had the air grown thin around me?

Forcing myself to take a deep breath, I ordered my emotions—and my fire—to settle down. No, I had not expected to find myself facing *him* mere hours after returning to my hometown. No, I would not permit this awful circumstance to ruin my chances for a job at Werndl Accounting.

I schooled my expression into one of professional courtesy and shook the older man's hand. My voice

sounded strained as I thanked him for having me, my panic-tainted thoughts whirling in an invisible hurricane. The man gave a squeaking chuckle and nodded at *him*, commenting that *he* had extracted my résumé from a thick pile and pointed out its striking qualities.

Shit. He remembers everything. And he brought me in here to shame me before these outsiders as a Teuton whose fire is slipping away. A failure.

A slight blush crept onto the young man's cheeks, but he masked it quickly as we shook hands. His gaze locked with mine as he introduced himself and spoke his own welcome—unnecessary, since I knew what a wretch he was, but part of German professional culture. Personal matters were not meant for the office.

Lukas Felder.

His hazel eyes betrayed no sign of recognition.

Maybe his older peer was correct. Maybe his interest in me was professional only. Maybe he believed I could fit an unfilled niche here, a perfect addition to this small accounting firm. Maybe he could keep my Teuton blood out of it, adhere to cultural expectations. We were the only Teutons in this office . . . right?

Or maybe he doesn't remember his history with Gabi Scholz.

That was a distinct possibility. After all, I was not the only student he and his high school buddies used to

torment. I just happened to be lucky enough to be in most of his classes, hear him rattle off answers to questions like a modern-day Einstein, watch the sex-starved cheerleaders cast their bodies at him. I had spared those vamps many an eye roll, for it became clear early on that Lukas refused to entertain the longings of outsiders.

He wanted a Teuton woman with strong blood and magic. Not them.

Not me.

I crushed that notion the instant it sidled into my brain. This was not the time to consider how toned his body appeared beneath that pricey olive shirt, how firm his hand felt when it enclosed mine a moment before. My fire had sensed his mist in that fleeting second, swirling in his essence with the freshness of an early morning walk beside the Regnitz River. And it continued to smolder in my spirit as the interview commenced, prodding me to take primal notice of the man seated across from me, asking after my experience with financial auditing.

I fixed my gaze upon a poster on the wall behind him when I replied, hoping he might not judge my avoidance of direct eye contact. Silently chiding my magic, I endeavored to seal it back into my spirit, where it belonged. *I know you've never gotten the 'opportunity' to bind with some other Teutonic element. But if we're going to seize that opportunity while we're here in*

Erlangen, that man won't be the recipient. We're not good enough for him, remember?

My magic seemed antsy, discarding my warnings like dirty socks. I did my best to respond respectfully to each question, meeting the eyes of the older man or the HR manager whenever they presented a query. But curiosity had tracked its way up my spine despite my restraint. Were Lukas and I the only Teutons in this office? If I allowed my magic to make a quick sweep of the surroundings, maybe it would quit fixating on Lukas' mist.

As I answered a generic question about my schooling, I stretched my fiery spirit forth, touching each human who worked at Werndl Accounting. Neither of the outsiders in the conference room reacted to my intrusion. But when I gathered the courage to shoot a glance at Lukas, I saw his black eyebrows crimping upward, a trace of watery blue flecking his irises.

Great. He noticed.

And we were the only two Teutons in the building.

A short pause ensued after I finished describing my studies at the university in Freiburg, and then Lukas cleared his throat. "Is it your intention to remain here for a while, or do you plan on returning to Freiburg within a year or two?"

He lifted his gaze from the notepad before him to stare into my eyes, and my fire warmed my blood again as he pressed his lips into a thoughtful expression. Lukas

had contained his mist with finesse; his irises were hazel again. His question prompted me to pause, because I had not yet figured out just how long I would stay in Erlangen. If things turned sour, I might try my luck elsewhere.

But not in Freiburg.

One thing had already turned sour. Lukas Felder, my high school bully, was interviewing me for a job.

Of course, neither he nor anyone else in this office would want an employee who planned to bolt within months or a year. I would have to lie, pretend I had reasons to stay in town. I parted my lips to speak.

“*Zoubaraera Teutona.*” Two words crept into my consciousness, a breath on the breeze, a phrase I had not heard in many years. Uttered in Teutonica, the forgotten dialect of my people, the phrase kindled a rush of childhood memories—autumn days when my best friend and I played together under the silver oak tree in my backyard, testing the limits of our magic. Only one being would speak those words to me.

A silver oak fairy, an *Eihalbe*.

Doubtless *the* silver oak fairy who revealed itself to me when I was a mere child, igniting broken sticks with my elemental magic. I considered that *Eihalbe* a friend, for it hid my secrets and offered wisdom from eons past. It allowed me to weave its fallen leaves into artwork and taught me how to make a healing salve. And it always

referred to me as a Teuton witch, despite the diluted nature of my blood.

Why it saw fit to accost me here at my interview, when I usually met it amid the branches of its tree, I could hardly guess. *Something must have turned sour*, I realized, wondering whether this was heaven's message that I should have stayed away from Erlangen. First I ran into Lukas Felder—who sat across from me, brow furrowed, awaiting my reply to his question. Had he heard the *Eihalbe's* ethereal voice? The fairy may have whispered directly into my ear; none of the others in the room looked as though they had heard anything strange.

So much for my attempt to ignore Teutonic magic. Guess my days at being a regular human were numbered. I should have expected this.

“My family lives here in the city,” I finally managed to say, casting my gaze around the room and wishing I dared to invoke my fire to its fullest, so I could see where the *Eihalbe* skulked. But I did not need my irises to turn red in front of two outsiders. I still wanted this job.

I gave a faux cough and went on. “I think it's about time I see what Erlangen has to offer, and help my parents prepare for retirement.” That lie rolled easily off my tongue. My father planned to continue working for at least another decade. He had only just turned fifty.

The older gentleman next to Lukas gave a bubbling laugh and remarked that the golf courses in this area could entertain a retiree for years on end. Lukas

chuckled and shared his thoughts on the subject, while I continued to glance around the room, hardly hearing their banter. Of course Lukas played golf these days. He had been a jock in high school, a member of the rowing team. Maybe he still did that on weekends. That was likely why his dress shirt barely concealed what seemed to be a ripped torso and arms.

Warmth seeped into my cheeks at the direction of my thoughts, spurred on by my fire's interest in Lukas' mist. What was wrong with me? For all I knew, the man might already be married. He had no interest in me except for what I could bring to Werndl Accounting. Silently cursing myself, I shifted in my chair and clasped my hands together upon my skirt. *Pay attention.*

The red-haired lady posed a question about what I would do in a specific situation, one about diffusing tension between coworkers. Time for the part of the interview where the three before me would evaluate my character. Gathering my thoughts, I opened my mouth to reply right as the *Eihalbe's* wispy voice eased its way into my left ear.

“You have forsaken those who count on you, and return to your roots solely to stock your financial coffer.”

What? No, no, that was not true at all! Why would the fairy accuse me of such selfishness? I blinked several times, clutching my hands tightly to quell my instinct to swat at the tiny spirit lurking near my ear. The HR manager began to unwrap a stick of gum, her fake nails

crinkling the paper far too loudly. Her wide brown eyes watched me in obvious curiosity from beneath bushy false lashes. I needed to answer her question. I wished I had a piece of gum.

Somehow I managed to blather something—hopefully the right something—as irritation welled within me at the fairy’s intrusion. This was *not* the time for it to spout its ancient wisdom, not with two outsiders and one other Teuton in the room. Was there a shade of misty blue enhancing Lukas’ irises? Was he staring at my left shoulder?

Thankfully, the gentleman beside him chose that moment to question me on how I would handle uncovering illegal activity during an audit. I relaxed a tad and responded right away, ordering my brain to focus on what was most important. The men and woman before me must appreciate my skills and experience as an auditor, not criticize how long it took me to answer a question. If the *Eihalbe* spoke to me again, I determined to ignore it. I could visit its tree this evening if it wanted to debate my reasons for returning home.

The fairy held its peace, and the interview reached its conclusion. Lukas and his older counterpart rose from their seats as I did the same, each offering one final handshake. “You’ll hear from us within two weeks, once we’ve interviewed all qualified candidates, Frau Scholz,” Lukas said in a suave voice, his mist washing over my fire in the spiritual realm as he shook my hand firmly, twice.

“Thank you. I appreciate your consideration.” The words slipped formally from my lips while my fire flared inside, reacting hungrily to Lukas’ mist and the deep tone of his voice. I backed away and slung my purse over my shoulder, then spoke a polite farewell to the HR manager before speeding out of the conference room. On my way out, the fairy breathed one final phrase into my ear.

“Your family needs you.”

Once I made it to the street, I shielded my eyes behind a pair of mirrored sunglasses and invoked my fire to enhance my vision. Flickering red veiled my sight as I looked up, down, and all around me, searching for my silvery, winged companion. I had finally worked out why it chose to rebuke me. I had returned home when my parents and brother were away from the house at work or school, and then scurried off to the bus without paying a visit to my family’s silver oak.

Well, if the fairy wished to be elusive now, then it could wait until after dark to speak with me. I headed toward the bus stop at a brisk pace.

It was time to soothe my muddled emotions with dinner and a drink.

Chapter Two:

WILDFIRE GOSSIP



The beer garden at Zum Weißen Hirsch contained a handful of patrons by the time I made it there from the city center. The warm September sun bathed me as I passed through the archway between the oaks that granted the urban beer garden a woodland ambiance. Once evening descended, the outdoor tables would cool and I would curse myself for not bringing a jacket.

If I were a regular human.

After my odd experience at the interview, my fire was unlikely to remain dormant. Magic hummed away within my spirit, acknowledging an essence of wind and water mingling around the middle-aged couple seated just inside the archway. Apparently I would be sensing my people everywhere I went now, whether I liked it or not.

That concept should have comforted me, but it set my nerves on edge.

A feminine voice called out to me from the corner by the street, and I began to grin despite my unease. Standing beside a two-person table tucked into the shrubbery, a young woman with short dark hair waved at me, her enthusiasm sending a gust of wind through her curls. Bianca had secured what used to be *our* table back when we lived across the street from each other. During our senior year of high school, we spent many Friday nights in that very spot, speculating on our lives, our classmates, and our futures.

We had spoken on the phone nearly every day since I left home, but tonight, we would immerse ourselves in nostalgia.

My own excitement bloomed when I drew closer to her, and finally I let go of propriety and sprinted the final steps to our table. “Gabi! It’s been far too long!” Bianca exclaimed, folding me in an embrace.

She claimed the element of whirlwind, and I sensed it winding around my fire in the intangible realm,

welcoming the prodigal daughter home. The scent of lavender tickled my nose as I laid my chin upon her shoulder, the roughness of her jean jacket awakening much better memories than the ones that dogged me during my interview. This was my best friend, our favorite restaurant. This was home.

“Smells like your lavender enjoys living on your balcony,” I said when we pulled back to hold each other at arm’s length.

Bianca laughed and let go of me, sweeping several curls away from her face in a casual gesture. “You know I couldn’t stand living at St. Johann without it.” She glanced to her right, where the towering apartment building stood across the street from the beer garden. She and her husband had lived on the tenth floor there, ever since they got married. Right before I left home.

We both sat down, and I hung my purse over the back of my chair while she took up the menu. “Any new entrées or is it the same old, same old?”

Bianca shrugged. “They offer a couple Italian dishes now, probably trying to compete with Isola Verde. Not worth it.”

“In that case, I’ll get the usual.” I flipped my menu over to read the list of drinks, my free hand tracing the wooden grain of the table. It looked like the exact same table from nine years ago, but the attached umbrella advertised Kitzmann Bier. That was new.

A waiter appeared before I decided which beer I wanted, so I simply ordered the same as Bianca—a tall glass of Kellerbier. She rattled off a story about one of her piano students while we waited for our drinks, and I sat back to observe those who occupied the tables around us. The Teuton couple near the archway had nearly finished their meal, their mannerisms reflecting a devoted relationship. A group of high school girls huddled around a larger table, murmuring and giggling. A young woman in professional attire sat alone near the doorway to the kitchen, her gaze on the flip phone in her lap. Likely waiting for her dinner date.

Though Zum Weißen Hirsch was one of a handful of restaurants in Alterlangen—the older district of the city on the western bank of the Regnitz—I did not recognize any of the other people in the beer garden. Yet.

Bianca ordered Sauerbraten with red cabbage while I chose the dish of beef Roulade with a bread dumpling and cucumber salad. After the waiter departed, I took a sip of beer and sighed, satisfaction carrying away my lingering tension. It was truly wonderful to be in a familiar place, sitting across from my best friend, a whiff of Teutonic magic drifting along the breeze. Maybe I ought to give my people another chance. Maybe those hurtful blood prejudices died off outside of high school. Maybe the community at large could accept me for who I was.

“How long can you stay tonight?”

Bianca's question pulled me from my reverie, and I turned my attention back to her. I noticed a few new lines on her face in the evening light, and a strange darkness seemed to haunt her blue-green eyes. Though we had kept up with each other's lives in my absence, my instincts told me that she carried hidden burdens now. Likely the type that would be awkward to discuss over the phone.

"It doesn't matter, really. My only plans for tonight involve you. I can walk home once we're done here. It's not that far." I took another sip, savoring the beer's sweet, malty flavor. I caught a hint of green apple as I swallowed.

"You're trying to put off talking to your mother."

I winced. "You got me." Bianca tended to sense my deepest doubts before I knew them myself. I rubbed at my chin with my index finger, restless.

"Well, you can't avoid her indefinitely, not if you're going to live in your parents' house," Bianca pointed out. "My mother says she's toned down a bit in the past few years. Dennis is the one you need to watch out for. Pretty sure he still hasn't forgiven you for running off to Freiburg instead of attending college here."

"Are you going to spend our entire dinner scolding me? Some reunion." I rolled my eyes at my friend, my earlier contentment having soured.

"Sorry. What I should be doing is asking about your interview. Do you think you're going to get the job?"

Bianca beamed at me, her fingers unrolling the napkin from around her bundle of silverware.

Hesitating, I took another sip of beer. I had not yet thought that far ahead. Lukas had said I would hear back in two weeks. Whether I was to be offered a job or not, I hoped the HR manager would call rather than him. I doubted I could maintain my professional stoicism if I heard his voice over the phone.

I glanced from the restaurant's side wall to Bianca's face, her interest clear in her eyes. She remained active in the local Teuton community, helping out with the festivals and aiding our city's elderly matriarch, Lady Erlanga. If Lukas and his buddies had renounced their blood prejudices during the past nine years, Bianca would know. So I drew a deep breath and released some of the tumbled emotions seething within me.

“They're still interviewing people, but I should know whether I get the job or not in a couple weeks. I think I did okay. Nobody asked me any questions I couldn't answer. The problem is that Lukas Felder was one of the people who interviewed me. Why the hell is he working in a no-name place like that instead of with his mother?”

My left hand tightened into a fist where it lay upon my lap. I drummed the fingers of my right hand against the table, my gaze shifting toward downtown. Lukas' mother held a senior management position at the largest industry in the city. It made no sense that he had not followed in her wake.

“Lukas Felder? He was one of the Toilet Brigade, wasn’t he?”

I heaved a sigh and frowned. “Yep.” The two of us had privately named his cadre of bullies after the portable toilets that lined our high school’s soccer field.

“Lukas Felder,” Bianca repeated, tapping one finger against her lower lip. “Which one was he? I can never keep them straight.”

“Because they never bullied you,” I supplied, brushing a fly away from my drink. Bianca’s Teuton blood was strong—ninety-two percent, according to the measurement ritual priests conducted on infants. None of our people would ever doubt her magical lineage or her aptitude with her whirlwind.

Her head tilted in sympathy, Bianca echoed my sigh, then gasped. “Wait! He’s the one in the rowing club, isn’t he? The smoking hot one!”

I swore. “So what, he joined the local rowing club after high school? Figures. I knew that’s why his body looked ripped.”

“You going to try your luck with a ripped bully?” Bianca grinned, her eyes shining with fun. Wind began to flap at the edges of the umbrella above us.

“Careful.” I kicked her foot beneath the table and pointed overhead. “You don’t want to ruin everybody’s dinner just because I had to play businesswoman in front of a jerk this afternoon.”

“Sorry. I’ll bet it’d be pretty fun to get something going with him, though. I think he still lives in that stone house along the canal.” The air around us stilled.

“Sure, it’d be ‘fun’ if he wasn’t a prejudiced asshole.”

Bianca bowed her head in acknowledgement. “All that shit they used to say doesn’t still bother you, does it? You’re just as much of a Teuton as I am. I can sense the heat of your fire from here.”

“Thanks.” I offered her a wavering smile, then took another drink. “I don’t know what to think. Actually, I’m kind of surprised my fire’s being so active today. I’ve been living like an outsider for almost a decade, and I met only one Teuton in all my years in Freiburg. Dirty old man tried to come onto me.” I sneered and set my glass back in its place. The waiter was coming our way with our dinners.

We fell silent until the waiter left, and I turned my attention to the Roulade on my plate. Thick and steaming, it smelled heavenly. I took up my knife and fork to cut it, while Bianca poked at her helping of red cabbage. “What if your fire is trying to send you a message? Bind with the misty jock and breed magical children. You could do worse, you know.”

I chewed on my Roulade without speaking for a moment, glancing at the tables around us. Most were occupied now, and the middle-aged Teuton couple had gone. While I had not returned to my hometown in search of a Teuton mate, Bianca had a fair point. Our

people's numbers had dwindled for years now, and if any of us chose to have children with an outsider, those children would be unable to invoke magic. The fantastical nature of Teuton blood kept us isolated even from our fellow Germans. One of many reasons I left home in the first place.

But my experience with my sole ex-boyfriend rendered me hesitant to put myself out there again, even with one of my own people. His narcissistic nature had escalated to assault, which was the primary reason I sat here at Zum Weißen Hirsch with my childhood best friend. Also why I had yet to get any more bites at my résumé. Just three weeks ago, I was content at my former job, never imagining I would flee my ex for the last time at the cusp of autumn.

Bianca mumbled a few observations about Lukas while we ate. Apparently, he was not yet married. His mother spent most of her free time at her penthouse suite in the city center, leaving her son to occupy the stone house on the banks of the Europakanal. I nodded along, not wholly listening, until Bianca said in a matter-of-fact tone, "His sister's a bitch."

Looking up from my plate, I saw pain on my friend's face as she sawed at her roast beef. "What has she done to you?" We both had more of a history with Nicole than either of us liked. Two years younger than Lukas, she had been on the cheerleading squad along with Bianca. And she mocked my bloodline just like her brother did.

Bianca scrunched her nose, excess moisture glistening in her eyes. “She married that big oaf from the Toilet Brigade a couple years ago. Jan. They’ve got two kids already, both with blood above ninety percent.” She sniffed, the hand that held her fork quivering a little. “Every time I get called on to play piano for the chamber orchestra, she drops hints about . . . you know.”

Anger coiled in my chest, and my fire reacted by shading my vision in red. “If she keeps that up, I’ll punch her in the jaw. Or break a couple fingers so she can’t play her beloved violin.”

A small smile appeared on my best friend’s face. “Thanks, Gabi. It’s just so hard sometimes. Oliver and I have been trying to get pregnant for at least seven years. Maybe eight. And nothing.”

I reached across the table to take her left hand in my right, giving it a gentle squeeze. Bianca shook her head and blinked at the tears collecting in her eyes. “The doctors say there’s nothing wrong with my body, that I’m fertile. They don’t know why we can’t conceive. I even went to see the forest witch in the Tyrol last summer, the one who’s friends with Lady Erlanga. She gave me some herbal remedies to try. Still nothing.”

I stroked her hand and my fire reached out to caress her element, which had begun to incite another breeze. “Is Oliver angry at you because of it?”

“No. He still loves me, thank God. We’ve nearly saved enough money to get out of St. Johann and buy a house,

but it's going to be pointless to get one with a bunch of bedrooms if my body won't work right. I feel like I'm failing him."

"You're not a failure, and he knows it," I assured her, squeezing her hand one final time before letting go. "Not everybody has to have kids, no matter what our people think. If Nicole gives you any grief about it again, tell me right away. Bet she wouldn't be too pleased if her family—her brother included—lost access to the only silver oak in Erlangen."

Bianca choked out a laugh. "You think the fairy would go for that?"

I would have responded with an immediate *yes* a few hours earlier; but after what happened at the interview, I was not so sure. "I could convince it," I said, not meeting my friend's gaze. I took a bite of cucumber salad and crossed my legs. No matter how I felt about the *Eihalde's* intrusion at my interview, I needed to patch things up with it tonight. Maybe before I dared to face my mother.

My fire cooled alongside my anger, and we ate in silence for a few minutes, alone with our thoughts. The group of girls at the larger table burst into gales of laughter, and my fiery spirit sensed the presence of one more Teuton in the beer garden. Looking over my right shoulder, I picked out an old man seated at the table that the middle-aged couple had occupied earlier. He had a mug of dark beer in his right hand, his element shrouding him in an imperceptible void. Darkness.

Bianca finished with her meal while I worked on the last of my dumpling. Her fork clattered onto her plate as she voiced a statement that prompted me to freeze mid-bite. “There’s been some crazy rumors going around for the past week or so, ever since your mother started spreading the word far and wide about your return. Now everybody thinks you’re destined to be the next Lady Erlanga.”

I ogled my friend as a piece of dumpling nearly lodged in my throat. “*What?*” A slight cough followed, and I reached for my beer.

Bianca’s curls bounced as she nodded, pity shading her face. “You know the last five Ladies of this city were chosen right after they came home from the lands of outsiders. The priests say Erlanga’s soul seeks a charitable avatar with an open mind, traits that quests tend to refine.”

A wicked grin had consumed Bianca’s sympathetic expression. All at once, she burst into giggles, while I sat statue-like with a mostly empty beer glass in my hand, horror twisting my stomach into knots. “You’ve got to be making that up,” I said, seizing denial’s lifeline. “I studied with Lady Erlanga just the same as you. I don’t remember her saying she came home from a ‘quest’ right before she became *Leitalra*. I wasn’t on a quest. I was *working*, earning a business degree!”

Bianca’s torso shook with laughter, and she drained her beer. “Tell the soul of Erlanga that when she chooses

you. Maybe she'll let you off." She winked.

I shuddered, then called the waiter to our table and asked him to refill our glasses. He cleaned up our empty plates and departed, leaving me grappling with a sense of helplessness. Maybe I had come back to Erlangen on a whim, a mad attempt to escape a controlling boyfriend and a city stained by memories of him. A clean slate, a new start, a chance to ease myself back into the Teuton community.

And now they expected me to become their fated matriarch, consort of the Keyholder. An image of the lean, aged priest bent over a staff wreathed in sparking energy arose in my mind. My fire retreated into my spirit at the memory. *I don't want to be that man's consort or anyone else's. If I'm going to attempt a new relationship, it'll be with a man I choose myself, not some predestined—*

"Lady Erlanga isn't sick or anything, is she?" My own question cut off my mental speculations, my eyes narrowing at Bianca's face. She raised one eyebrow as the waiter reappeared, setting two fresh glasses of Kellerbier on the table before us. We both thanked him, and I tugged my glass toward me, gripping it with both hands as I leveled Bianca with a glare. "She's not going to just drop dead now that I'm home, is she? Is that what fate demands?"

I had lowered my voice considerably, and Bianca did the same when she answered. "Physically, Lady Erlanga

is fine, but a cloud of sorrow has been hanging over her ever since her husband passed last Christmas. I think she longs to follow him, to dedicate her legacy to someone else.”

A minuscule hint of relief loosened my muscles; at least I would not have to grant my body to a withered old priest of energy. The current Lady had loved him dearly, but my youthful hormones steered me away from a partner sixty or more years my senior. And that meant . . .

“So who’s the new Keyholder?”

Bianca met my gaze, her eyes bright with possibility. “His name’s Henning Glossner. I’ve met him a few times. He seems really nice. Studies plumbing in trade school, which is a bit odd for someone with blue fire, but who am I to judge?”

Dread worked its way to the forefront of my mind. I took a sip of beer and steeled myself to learn the truth. “He’s still in trade school, huh? How old is he?”

My friend sighed and looked at the amber contents of her glass. “Nineteen. Some people have already started calling you a cougar, among other things.”

Grimacing, I pushed my chair a short distance back from the table, my fingers sliding away from my glass. “Among other things?”

Bianca hesitated one moment longer before admitting, “There’s been talk that you shouldn’t be qualified to

become *Leitalra*. That you're not worthy because your father couldn't wield his element yet when you were born. That as long as there's been a Keyholder and Lady of Erlangen, both claimed Teuton blood of at least ninety percent."

My wishes to find belonging in this wretched place dissolved at my feet. "I knew I shouldn't have come back here. Guess I'd better pack up my stuff and head for someplace where nobody knows about Teutonic magic. Maybe Berlin." Rising to my feet, I dug through my purse in search of my wallet.

"*Gabi!*" Bianca's hushed cry made me pause with my wallet halfway out of my purse. She stared toward the beer garden's entrance with a panicked look.

Just as Lukas Felder passed under the archway, a leashed pug waddling at his feet.

Chapter Three:

FAMILY TENSIONS



Of course that man would show up right here and right now, while I stood fully prepared to forsake this city for good. And of course my fire magic would perk up inside of me the instant I laid eyes on him, its heat stretching forth to invite him to sit with Bianca and me.

Oh no, you don't. Biting my tongue hard, I sank back into my seat and stifled that mystical flow, ducking my

head when I noticed Lukas scanning the tables. My fingers fairly crushed my wallet in my purse as I shut my eyes. *Please don't let him see me here. I can't handle any more of this tonight.*

Bianca jumped to her feet, and I opened my eyes as she slapped a fistful of Euros against my chest. “You pay. I’ll distract him,” she whispered.

I gaped at her as the bills fell into my lap. “What are you going to do, pretend you’re drunk? You’ve only had”—I glanced at her glass while gathering the Euros—“one and a half!”

“He doesn’t know that. We’ll catch up later.” Whirling away from me, she let loose a loud shriek and staggered in Lukas’ direction, her hips undulating in a practiced fashion. “*Lukas!* How long have you had this adorable puppy?”

In shocked amusement, I kept an eye on Bianca as she dropped to her knees in front of the pug, offering it one hand and patting its creamy flank with another. The pug gave a happy *woof* and licked her hand, its curled tail wriggling. I did not dare to lift my chin to gauge Lukas’ reaction. Bianca’s tight jeans hugged her butt like a swimsuit, leaving little to the imagination.

She was making a scene; quite a few of the other customers were giving her bemused looks. Perfect time for me to split. I rose from our table again, turning my back on Bianca and Lukas, and caught our waiter’s eye.

After settling our bill, I could escape onto the streets and head for my parents' house.

Once there, I needed to disengage from my mother as quickly as possible so I could collect all of my bags. I would take the train north this very night, before my ridiculous fire magic could convince me to stay. I did not belong in Erlangen. My people still viewed me as a mistake.

By the time I squared our bill with the waiter, Bianca had managed to steer Lukas and his pug out of the beer garden and into the restaurant itself. I owed her one. Part of me knew I ought to spend some more time with her before I left. Maybe I could call her once I found a place to stay overnight, ask her to meet me for a short vacation somewhere far removed from Teutonic prejudice.

I departed the beer garden, and my eyes met those of the aged Teuton of darkness as I passed beneath the archway. He nodded at me and nursed his mug of beer, appearing pensive. *Wonder if he's one of the ones who thinks I'm here to take Lady Erlanga's place? Time to dodge fate's clutches before this city shackles me with fond memories of magic.*

When I reached the sidewalk, I checked my watch and shifted my purse to a more comfortable position. Bianca and I had spent just over an hour together, thanks to Lukas' intrusion; it was six forty-five. I glanced at the sky as I turned left at the corner of the main street into

Alterlangen, its color deepening into a lovely royal blue. No stars yet to be seen, but evening lengthened the shadows the houses and businesses cast upon the street and sidewalks.

Regret pricked my chest as I passed by so many familiar storefronts. The hair salon, the bakery, the toy store. All symbols of my childhood, places I would have made time to visit, had my plans not crashed and burned. The coolness of the evening seeped beneath my blouse, prompting my fire to filter through my veins in mystic protection. I leashed it before it could heighten my vision and cast my irises in a crimson glow, for too many witnesses traversed the streets—people walking their dogs, riding bikes, sitting on porches with their cans of beer and soda.

This neighborhood held more positive vibrations than the one I had fled two days earlier. *If only I could stay.*

I rolled my eyes at myself as I turned onto my street, trying to push aside the muses that kept invading my brain. Lukas Felder. Handsome, intelligent bully. The jock who told his buddies a story about a man his grandfather had known, one whose Teuton blood was a mere eighty-five percent like mine. “His magic just kept fading away the older he got, until he couldn’t keep his garden alive anymore. The earth’s essence had forsaken him.”

Lukas’ statement, uttered dispassionately so long ago, haunted me to this day. It was a major reason I called my

element into my eyes every morning when I brushed my teeth before the bathroom mirror, to make sure my blue irises retained the ability to transform into flaming scarlet. And the dreams would come, frightful visions where I had to use a lighter to ignite a candle, where I could no longer keep myself warm in the winter without excess layers of clothing.

Would my fire eventually forsake me?

Seeing that I had reached my parents' driveway, I shook myself and took a moment to concentrate on the gentle evening air in an effort to calm down. Two cars sat in the driveway, so maybe my father could help deflect whatever criticisms my mother wished to toss my way. Would Dennis be home on a Friday night? A sophomore at the local university, he might be out with his friends tonight, basking in the privileges of youth.

I had been standing beside the mailbox for a good three minutes now, my gaze running over the house's shuttered windows as I endeavored to regain some courage. This would not get any easier no matter how long I delayed.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly, closing my eyes for a second while I sent a weak prayer heavenward. *God, please give me wisdom and patience.* Then I straightened my posture and marched toward the side gate, determining that I ought to make peace with the *Eihalde* before I bothered confronting my parents. I needed to find out why the fairy had accused me of

selfishness and greed. *I didn't come back here just to "stock my coffer."*

But . . . am I really about to run away again just because of some stupid gossip? Is that selfish of me?

I pursed my lips into a frown as I thought about that and reached out to unlatch the gate. Now guilt prodded at my spirit along with a host of tumultuous emotions. Great. I pivoted my torso around to secure the gate behind me, and just as I moved to advance into the yard, my fire detected a sizzling heat looming amid the holly bushes that lined the side of the house.

My heart leaped into my throat when my mother stepped into my path, her graying hair darkened with pitch black flames, her hands fisted at her hips. "Just what I can expect from you. Sneaking into the backyard instead of using the front door like a polite guest!"

Her eyebrows slanted downward, her tone hot with fury. All of my courage slipped away from me like water down a drain, and I took an unconscious step back. Clearing my throat, I attempted to answer. "The *Eihalbe* —"

"You care about trees more than about your family? You should be ashamed of yourself, Gabriela. Your brother came home right away when I called him about what happened today, but it's been nothing but silence from you! You piled all your rubbish upstairs and vanished without leaving a note, without having the

decency to come home for dinner. You're as selfish as your father!"

I had turned my phone off after confirming my dinner arrangements with Bianca this morning. Guilt speared me a second time, my mother's accusations cutting down my defenses. *You need to stop letting her jealousy control you*, my ex used to tell me—right as he settled himself into a similar position over me.

My fire simmered deep within, restive in the presence of a darker, angrier element. After a good ten seconds of silence, I finally managed to say in a small voice, "My phone died this morning. What . . . happened today?"

"Always excuses with you. Come inside this instant. Dennis is making hot chocolate, a luxury you hardly deserve!"

She turned her nose up at me and stomped off toward the back of the house, in the direction of the door to the kitchen. I followed, worry forming a brick in my stomach. My fiery spirit expanded itself to sweep the house and grounds, taking note of my mother's black fire and my brother's molten rock. The silver oak tucked away beside the cottage out back shimmered with enchanted life.

I caught no trace of my father's earth magic.

The fairy had told me that my family needed me, right before it left me high and dry at the end of my job interview. Was *this* what it was trying to tell me?

What had happened to my father?

In a haze of anxiety, I stepped into the kitchen, the sweet scent of fresh hot chocolate failing to soothe my tense muscles. My gaze fell upon my little brother, who stood at the kitchen table, his fingers placing a steaming mug onto a coaster before the chair I recognized as my mother's. A slight gasp escaped my lips as I took in his adult form—lean and wiry, straight black hair draping his head in casual disarray, thick brows and a chin dotted with stubble.

The last time I saw Dennis, he was a child, his wide gray eyes staring into mine as he begged me not to leave him. That child had transformed into a man who expelled a gasp when he turned away from the table to face me. “Gabi? You’re really here? I can’t believe it!”

I had not yet come to grips with how mature his voice sounded when he threw his arms around me, the solid strength of his element binding me in security. My fire embraced his molten rock joyfully, recognizing its former playmate. “Looks like my little mouse has grown up,” I said, my nose pressed into his polo shirt. The familiar scent of his smoldering element mingled weirdly with Axe deodorant.

My little brother had certainly attained young adult status.

“Don’t be so sure. I still don’t know what the hell I’m doing most of the time.” Dennis pulled back and looked me over, his cheeks darkening a shade. The dimple I

remembered appeared on his right cheek when he smiled. “You look the same. Except for” His voice trailed off as he gestured at my bun.

“I’m trying to look professional,” I rejoined with a wink.

“You’ve succeeded.”

“Gabriela, come to the table.” Our mother’s sharp command cut through our reunion, bringing my thoughts back to the current problem. *Where’s Papa?*

A strange expression crossed Dennis’ face, and he cocked his head toward our mother as if he expected her to share his enthusiasm about my return. Bianca’s judgment had been off, for sure. My mother would remain my bane until I left this place once and for all. Maybe I should try to convince Dennis to leave, too.

The two of us went to the table, where my mother sat stiffly in her chair, her darkened eyes chiding our camaraderie. She took a rather pointed sip from her mug as I sat across from her, leaving my brother to play the role of buffer. She had preferred him to me since the day he was born. No point in dredging that up now, not with my father absent while his car occupied the driveway.

“What’s happened to Papa?” I closed the fingers of both hands around my mug of hot chocolate, its warmth granting my element a touch of comfort.

Dennis’ lips parted, but our mother responded before he could speak. “He *left* us. Just like *you* did.”

Her fiery black eyes burned holes in me from across the table. Shrinking against the back of the chair, I shifted my gaze to my brother, who appeared just as perplexed as he did before we sat down. He shook his head and wrapped his left hand around his own mug before nodding at me. “He lost his job today, made some sort of design error that cost Finkgruppe millions.”

“And then he *left* us,” my mother interrupted in a scathing tone, while I sat in shock, reeling from the news. “He disappeared without a backward glance. Left his phone on the bed with his letter of termination.”

My fire churned within my veins, veiling my vision in red and heating the mug in my hands beyond the natural state of its contents. My father viewed himself as his family’s provider, a man who took pride in his work. Now that had been stripped from him, a job termination an indelible stain on his professional record. Had he seized a quick escape to drink away his troubles? He doubtless believed he had failed my mother, failed his entire family.

“I hope he hasn’t killed himself.” The terrible words spilled from my lips before I could call them back. My father’s voice arose in my memories, his sensible nature evident every time we talked on the phone. Suicide was irresponsible and selfish, two character traits far afield from the man who raised me. He would never.

My mother shot to her feet and began pacing, her fire summoning a dark void around her body. “He’d *better*

not do that. We'll be ruined!"

She started muttering curses, and I turned my attention back to my younger brother, whose eyes glinted with horror. "Papa would never do that," I assured him. "That was just me saying something stupid. He probably went off to drink, to get some distance from what happened. I'm sure he'll come home in a few days."

Our mother waltzed from the room right when I started talking, carrying her fiery cloud with her. Dennis sighed, a touch of orange evident in his irises as he studied my face, likely trying to determine whether my claim held weight. I sent a wisp of fire out to comfort his spirit, then brought my mug to my lips at long last. Thanks to my magic's agitation, the hot chocolate was still hot.

"I hope you're right," Dennis said in a low voice. "But whether Papa comes home or not, you realize you might be our only hope for survival now."

He looked nervous and I frowned, the hot chocolate soothing my stomach while my emotions continued to churn. "What do you mean?"

"Well, Papa might not be able to get another job in the city after this. He'll probably be blackballed at every engineering firm in Franconia. Mama's tutoring doesn't bring in nearly enough money to support her alone, or both of them. And I'm nowhere near being done with my degree. You're the one with business sense and experience."

I drank deeply from my mug while Dennis spoke, trying to relish the sweet taste of chocolate in an attempt to banish the clarity that coalesced in my mind. I had planned on leaving this place tonight, fair and square. But now my father may never be able to land another engineering position again. Did I want my younger brother to give up on his dreams and take a simple job to keep our parents afloat? Did I want my mother to sink her claws into me again, resuming the position my ex had left open? The one to control every step I took?

“Shit. This was *not* how this evening was supposed to go.” I slumped forward and rubbed my forehead, trying to pull back from the situation, to see it clearly. How much money did my family need to survive? This house had been paid off for years, since my great-grandfather bought the property and planted the acorn that sprouted the aged silver oak. Were my parents in any other sort of debt? Were their cars paid off?

“I’m with you on that. I was looking forward to catching up with you over the weekend. I ought to admit . . . I didn’t believe you were really coming home.”

Shame infused Dennis’ voice. Lifting my head from my hands, I saw that he looked away from me, toward the door to the backyard. “Why didn’t you ever come home for Christmas or for the summer?” my brother went on, his body rigid. “Papa would have given you money if you couldn’t afford train tickets. You just vanished into the Black Forest and never came out.”

I sighed, silently debating how much I should tell him. The boy was a mere ten years old when I left; he might have no concept of the cruelty I had experienced at my mother's hands—and from our fellow Teutons. “You heard how she talked to me tonight.” I kept my voice low in case our mother lurked in hearing range. “It's been that way my entire life. I'm not good enough for her and never will be. I left to prove to myself that I could make it on my own.”

Dennis drew a slow breath and turned to face me, comprehension dawning in his eyes. “I was wondering why she kept snapping at you. I figured it was stress related. You're saying she's always treated you like that? Why don't I remember?”

“Because you're her perfect little boy. She tore me down when I was alone, not in front of you. Papa witnessed a few of her tirades, though. You can ask him if you don't believe me.” I frowned and finished off the contents of my mug.

“I believe you. And now I'm not sure if you should have come back.” Dennis glanced toward the hallway. “I'm pretty sure she moved all your stuff into Oma's cottage after she passed away. Assuming she didn't just throw everything out. Your old bedroom is a study now.”

“I noticed. She even got rid of my bed. Apparently I'm a 'guest,' not part of the family. Maybe you're right about the cottage, if the fairy judges me worthy.” I needed to go

to its tree and offer my apologies, whether it wished to communicate with me or not.

“The fairy adores you. It’s never spoken to me once.” Dennis’ lips quirked, his element withdrawing into himself.

My chair rubbed against the tile floor as I rose to my feet and stretched. “I’d better go out there and visit the tree now. I’ve made enough mistakes today already, and I don’t need the *Eihalbe* to cast some sort of bad luck hex upon me.”

Dennis snickered and carried both of our mugs to the sink. “Do you want me to bring your bags down to the cottage? No one’s lived there for a while now, but I think it’s in pretty good shape. Oma’s bed is still in there, and so is her loom if you’re wanting to take up a new hobby.” He washed out both mugs and then opened the dishwasher, putting them inside.

“I’ll probably pass on that. But you can bring my stuff down if you want. It’s only two bags and a suitcase.” I paused with my hand on the doorknob and added, “Give me ten minutes in private to contact the fairy.”

“As you wish, *Leitalra*.” I jerked in surprise at my brother’s words, pivoting just in time to catch the tail end of his awkward bow before he vanished down the hallway. *So Dennis is one of many who thinks I’m about to become Lady Erlanga. Lovely. Doesn’t anybody believe I can choose my own path anymore?*

When I reached the silver oak not long afterward, I laid my palms against its silvery bark, offering it a taste of my spirit's uncertainty. I had come here to start over, to free myself from a taxing relationship and find the belonging my fiery spirit craved. Was I doomed to find that belonging with the Keyholder of Erlangen, a kid the same age as my little brother? Would I have to take a job with Lukas Felder to ensure my family could pay the bills?

Whether the tree understood my insecurities or not, I could only guess. But I did murmur sincere apologies in Teutonic dialect, assuring the tree's spirit that I would ultimately choose the path that seemed right. I followed the light, not the darkness of selfish greed.

I waited patiently for several minutes but sensed no response from the oak.

Until I passed between two of its boughs, their silky leaves reaching out to brush my neck. Shimmering magic delved into my core, awakening my fire.

Chapter Four:
FATE OR CHOICE?



“Your apology is heartfelt and true, *Zoubaraera Teutona.*”

The silver oak fairy greeted me with the Teutonic words, *Teuton witch*, like it always did. My elemental gaze zeroed in upon it as it shimmered into being atop the branch to my left. The genderless creature used the leaves as its cloak, its winged torso, kaleidoscopic eyes, and silvery face and hair catching traces of starlight,

making the air around it sparkle with enchantment. The squirrel-sized tree spirit had been a part of my life for as long as I could remember, my father having introduced us when he held my infant body against his chest.

The sense of homecoming that had comforted my unquiet spirit several times today arose anew as I met the *Eihalbe's* mesmerizing gaze. When I opened my mouth to thank it for understanding, it lifted a finger and went on. "I, too, must apologize to you. I misjudged your intentions earlier this day. Your heart remains pure, your fire a blazing light in the darkness."

"Thank you so much," I murmured, touched by the fairy's graciousness. Calling my magic to the fore, I created a fingertip-sized flame from the deepening twilight, my spirit guiding it toward the fairy. "In case you have need of it."

The *Eihalbe* took the red flame between its palms and rolled it into a sphere before vanishing it with its own brand of magic. "This shall warm the heart of my tree as the cold seasons summon nature's sleep. Thank you, *Zoubaraera Teutona.*"

"You're very welcome. Please let me know if you need any more fire. I've had a very complicated day . . . and it looks like I might be here longer than I'd hoped." It took effort to speak Teutonica properly when I had done so only rarely during the past decade. Thank goodness I had not forgotten the dialect completely.

The fairy cocked its head at me, its fingers stroking the edge of the leaf that concealed its lower half. Its silver luster discernable under the starlight, I knew that in a few weeks' time the tree's leaves would surrender to autumn's yellow. Would Erlangen retain its hold on me when spring returned?

"Not all of your people despise your blood," the *Eihalde* said in a grave tone, its eyes never leaving my face. "Unfortunately, those who do speak the loudest."

"Typical of humanity. Spread hate, not love," I grumbled, reaching out to stroke an oak leaf myself. It offered a breath of magic for my trouble.

"Your father shall return within two days." My eyes widened, and I clasped a hand to my chest. "One of my kind has seen him in Wertheim. He seeks peace to think and plan. He fears for his family's wellbeing."

I sighed, tension draining from my shoulders at last. "Thank you for telling me. I believed he'd come home, but sometimes people need reassurance."

The *Eihalde* disappeared into the branches overhead without answering. An instant later, Dennis called out to me from the cottage's threshold, ten paces from where I stood. "If you're done being a fire witch, I could use an extra hand to unlock this door. You may travel light, but I'm not an octopus."

I laughed and rushed to join him, seeing that he toted my purse along with my bags and suitcase. I must have left it at the kitchen table; I had been too focused on

seeking the fairy that I had not missed it. “You seem more like a squid to me.”

Much later, I stood beneath the showerhead, inviting its scalding water to relax me after a mentally trying day. The cottage’s small bathroom looked just like it had my entire life—a style straight out of the 1950s. Yellow toilet, sink, and tub, floral wallpaper, a too-bright light over the sink and its mirror, a window granting anyone who sat on the toilet a pleasant view of my grandmother’s hydrangeas. It was a familiar place, a safe place. One where I could look back at this day’s events and try to make sense of them.

Dennis helped me clean up the bedroom and kitchen, both of which had collected heaps of dust. Although the kitchen held its own in the dish department, we discovered that its cabinets and fridge were bare of food. Dennis returned to the main house to scrounge some snacks, while I wrote a grocery list to tackle tomorrow. Since my mother made it clear that I was a mere guest, I would ensure that I fed myself and paid any bills my stay at the cottage produced.

While we worked together to tidy the kitchen, I buttonholed Dennis about the title he had given me earlier. I was not a *Leitalra*—not of Erlangen or anywhere else. I had no desire to fall prey to a fated relationship with Henning Glossner. After our father found himself a lucrative job, I would leave this city for good.

“Are you sure that’ll be enough to spare you from fate, if tradition’s been set in motion?” Dennis had asked as I folded and hung a pair of kitchen towels. “The only way to avoid becoming *Leitalra* is to find a Teuton husband.”

His words troubled me as I worked conditioner into my hair, their truth sounding a death knell upon my plans for escape. Lady Erlanga had confirmed that years ago, when Bianca and I learned our people’s history and magic from her. If a Lady of a Teuton city passed away, any unmarried woman born in that city became eligible to take her place. The otherworldly entity that comprised the city’s soul would make her choice within days, sometimes hours.

Living on another continent would not be enough to shield me if fate chose me to represent Erlangen’s Teuton community.

But you met an extremely eligible Teuton bachelor this afternoon, a mad corner of my brain reminded me. A successful man, one with connections. A man whose watery essence has entranced your fire for years.

Disinclined to admit it or not, I had been attracted to Lukas since I first met him, before he dredged up a community of bullies with Teuton blood too strong for their own good. At the interview today, he had shown interest in my professional experience, his strong handshake at the end reflecting approval. His mist had acknowledged my fire in that moment without censure.

“Gabi, don’t be a fool,” I told myself as I turned the shower off and slid the glass door open. Grabbing my towel from the toilet seat, I tried to talk myself out of my hormonal longings. “If his sister ridicules Bianca for not being able to have kids, then Lukas is probably just as small-minded. I’ll bet he’s one of the ones who thinks I’m not qualified to be *Leitalra*.”

I knew I was qualified. I just preferred to have a choice. I did not want some ancient form of destiny to chain me to this city and its community, or to brew lust where it did not exist.

Once I put on my pajamas and wound my damp hair into a bun, I rooted through the plastic bins in my grandmother’s closet until I unearthed a clean set of sheets and a thick comforter printed with artwork of gems and crystals. A twinge of regret pricked me as I made the bed, for my grandmother had adored her crystal collection. I should have come home for her funeral, had my ex not demanded my undivided attention that weekend.

As I burrowed beneath the comforter not long afterward, I closed my eyes and made a list of tasks for myself in the days to come. Grocery shopping. Search all the local job postings for other auditing positions, and maybe some in engineering for my father’s sake. Send my résumé to all potential employers in the city and in neighboring towns. Search through all of the boxes stacked in the closet to see which of my personal items

my mother had not yet discarded. I wondered whether my bike was tucked away somewhere.

On Saturday, I spent the morning stocking the kitchen with enough food to last me a couple weeks. Dennis wandered out to the cottage around lunch time, informing me that our mother had shut herself into her bedroom to sulk. So we ate together in my humble abode, piling sandwiches with cold sausage, cheese, onions, pickles, and mustard. I learned more about the person my brother had become, as we sat at the round wooden table in the center of the kitchen, sharing the stories of our lives.

“Some of the other Teutons bullied me too, in high school,” Dennis said after I related the story of my interview and history with Lukas.

“They did? But why? Your blood is stronger than mine.”

“I don’t know. I’ve never been good at fitting in, I guess.” Dennis gave a derisive snort and took a bite of his sandwich.

“Fitting in is overrated. I like hanging out with weird people. It’s a lot more interesting.” Seeded rye bread spiced with caraway granted my sandwich a unique combination of flavors. Pity I had nearly finished it.

“So aside from being a fire witch who talks to fairies, how weird are you?” My brother raised black eyebrows at me, his jaunty grin presenting a challenge.

“Hmm. I have a secret crush on Alan Rickman.” I winked at Dennis.

He scoffed. “That’s not weird. I’ve heard lots of girls say he’s hot in *Sense and Sensibility*.”

“Okay then. I’ve got my entire music collection stored on six USB drives. Thank goodness, since I’m sure my ex has tossed all of my CDs by now.”

My brother’s eyebrows came together in a dismayed look. “He threw away all your CDs? That son of a bitch!”

I shrugged it off and looked away, toward where the window over the sink revealed the tangled brush that bordered my family’s property. “It doesn’t matter. I brought everything I cared about with me.”

Dennis looked incensed, but thankfully averted his attention to the ‘weird’ aspect of my statement. “Six USBs? Why don’t you have an iPod?”

“Because I’m cheap. Now it’s your turn. How weird are you?” I got to my feet and carried my plate to the sink.

My brother muttered something about me being technologically challenged before admitting he still wore Tigger pajamas to bed. “Don’t laugh!” he burst out, and a fond smile curled across my face as I washed my plate. Dennis was still my little mouse, even if his size implied reversed roles.

I spent the afternoon unpacking some of my things in an effort to make the cottage feel homey rather than

forgotten. I dusted each crystal my grandmother had left atop her desk, then set my laptop and printer among them in a union of ancient with modern. Like my brother, she had claimed the element of molten rock, and the minerals found in crystals and gems always helped her focus. Whether my fire had an affinity for their mystic presence remained to be seen, but they brought color to the bedroom if nothing else.

My cell phone rang as I cleaned and rearranged furniture in the snug parlor. Bianca greeted me when I answered, inviting me to eat dinner with her and Oliver. “He’s going to grill sausages out on the balcony, and I’m working on a potato salad right now,” she related.

“I’d love that,” I said, running a dust cloth along the front windowsill. “I pretty much forget what Oliver looks like, I haven’t seen him in so long.”

“He said the same thing about you!” Bianca giggled for a second, then said, “He had to come rescue me last night from Zum Weißen Hirsch. Apparently Lukas fell for my hopelessly drunk persona. Once I got him to the bar, he bought me a gin and tonic. Downed that while gushing about his pug. His name is Winston!”

Bianca paused for breath while I stood gazing blankly out the window, my fingers tightening upon the dust cloth. “Winston? Like Churchill?”

“I didn’t ask. But he told me all about Winston’s antics, how he tangles the leash up every time he chases

falling leaves. It was so funny! He says Winston's a pure-bred pug, and his mother's been in shows—"

"Pure-bred, huh?" I interrupted, my forehead wrinkling in irritation. "He's still all about perfect bloodlines then, in both animals and human beings. Not sure why he pulled my résumé out of the stack, when he knows I can hardly call myself a Teuton." Heat swept over me as my fire rejected my words. *You're a Teuton witch no matter what other people say.*

"Hmm. About that, Gabi. Lukas came to the restaurant to meet a girl for dinner. Somebody named Rosemarie. She's a student at the university."

Bianca's tone hinted at her disappointment; she wanted to play matchmaker between me and my high school bully. "Good to know he likes younger women. Did you see her or did Oliver come rescue you before she showed up?"

"He called Oliver with my phone after I downed my drink and tried to sit on his lap. He didn't take that well." My best friend snickered, entertained.

"A married woman fake flirting with a prejudiced hunk. Wish I could have been a fly on the wall for that. I've missed having you in my life." I grinned, for while the two of us had been friends for ages, our personalities nearly clashed. She loved to perform for the public, a cheerleader and an accomplished pianist. I preferred to maintain order in the background.

Bianca offered a few more details about her chat with Lukas before dropping a question that brought me up short. “Have you called Lady Erlanga yet?”

“What? No.” I plopped onto the sofa and tossed my dust cloth aside.

“Well, you might want to get on that. She knows you’ve come home, and she also knows what the last five Ladies of our city have in common.”

My eyes rolled up into my brain. “*Really*, Bianca? Since you can’t match me with a swaggering jock, you’re going to try to turn me into a cougar? What if I’m looking for a break from men altogether?”

Bianca made a sympathetic noise, then said, “You deserve a break after what happened with Kyle. Still thinking about setting a tornado over his property, next time I’m in the Freiburg area.”

“We lived in a ground floor apartment, you goofball. You couldn’t destroy his place without collateral damage. And why exactly would you bother going to Freiburg now that I’m not there?” Unlike my immediate family, Bianca had visited me four times during my years away from home.

“Yeah, yeah. But if that brat ever shows up here, I’m expecting a text right away. Then we’ll see how he likes getting his oxygen sucked away. This is Teuton territory. We don’t tolerate abusers here.”

How I wished there was truth to her declaration. No matter how tough my best friend acted, she had no power to shield me from my mother. Bianca played a pivotal role in my decision to leave town after high school, though. And I had led a peaceful life in Freiburg until I met Kyle. Then everything unraveled.

I wondered whether I could ever build a life without having to tiptoe around people who stoked their self-esteem by putting others down.

After I finished cleaning the parlor, I checked the shed beside the cottage's kitchen, the place where my grandmother had stored her gardening equipment and hung herbs to dry. Way in the back, behind a lawnmower and an unplugged freezer, I found my bike. It took me longer to unearth an air pump; but by five p.m., my bike was ready to go. So I rode it north toward the St. Johann skyscraper, clad in jeans, a Pepsi T-shirt, and a tight leather jacket.

On the way to Bianca's apartment, my mind replayed the brief conversation I had with Lady Erlanga over the phone. As much as the thought of a fated mate prompted my stomach to tie itself in knots, I recognized that I ought to at least visit my city's *Leitalra* now that I was back under her jurisdiction. She had mentored Bianca and me during our teen years, teaching us how our magic could enhance everyday tasks without rousing the attention of outsiders.

I smirked as I thought of the apartment Kyle and I shared in Freiburg, which had a heater with a pilot light run not by gas, but by me. Since I had kept Teutonic magic a secret from him, he would have no clue why the pilot light “went out” after I left him.

Served him right.

I would swing by Lady Erlanga’s house tomorrow afternoon for a quick snack and an in-person chat. Her friendly voice assured me over the phone that Henning would be there, but that she would send him off on some sort of errand while we talked woman-to-woman. Such a prospect warmed my heart, for I longed to ask her advice on whether I ought to search for belonging among our people or turn my attentions elsewhere.

But nervousness swirled in my spirit at the idea of meeting the Keyholder. A kid the same age as Dennis. A kid who could potentially become my fated mate within a few years’ time.

But then what about Lukas? What if I end up having to work with him?

I shook my head and tried to banish that niggling interest coiled deep inside my spirit. At this point, I needed to keep my options open and enjoy dinner with Bianca and Oliver. I ought to ask whether he had any leads for a financial auditor. He worked in continuous improvement at Erlangen’s largest industry. If anyone knew the pulse of the local job market, Oliver ought to have some insight.

Much later, when I rode my bike home beneath the starry sky, a sense of purpose fueled my feet as they worked the pedals. Oliver had given me the names of eight local companies that might show interest in my résumé. He even said that his own employer might need an extra engineer or two at the start of the new year, because several older employees were set to retire soon. Bianca had confessed that she and her husband were about to try IVF, to see whether science could give her womb the kick that herbal magic could not. She was nervous but hopeful, and I promised to join her for a girl's night before and after her first procedure.

Both of them talked up Henning when I admitted my mixed feelings about meeting him tomorrow. He had passed the initiation into the Teutonic priesthood at the age of eighteen, something Oliver admired. "He's a tough kid for sure, and he's always really personable at the festivals. Seems to want to move our people forward," Oliver said, earning an approving murmur from Bianca.

But at church the next morning, my eyes kept straying to where Lukas stood in the choir loft, singing a perfect bass along with the congregation. My element detected the presence of multiple Teutons occupying the sanctuary, but somehow Lukas' mist seemed to stand out above them all, a beacon to my fiery spirit. Certain he caught sight of me during the first hymn, I tried to focus on Bianca at the piano instead, internally berating myself. *You're attracted to a bully when you could*

become this city's next Leitalra, cougar or not. Gabi, you're ridiculous.

I slipped out of the church as soon as the service ended, not wanting to suffer through shallow introductions with people I had not seen in almost a decade. My mother had not made an appearance, likely preferring to keep my father's disgrace on the down low, so I had no wish to entertain questions. Back at the cottage, I swapped out my skirt for a pair of studded jeans, then went to the kitchen and built myself a sandwich. This time I left off the onions, foreboding pulsing along my nerves while I ate at the counter, staring out the window.

“Henning and Lukas can't be the *only* single Teuton guys left in this city,” I muttered to myself as I checked my face and hair in the bathroom mirror before setting out to visit my elderly mentor. Just a few strays had escaped my bun, and I tucked them behind my ears, then brushed my teeth. When I finished, I stepped back and set my hands upon my hips, taking inventory of my black blouse splashed with autumn-hued flowers. Henning was about to see a fairly attractive version of me, whether destiny wished to thrust us together or not.

Hopefully if my wary heart felt no camaraderie with him, Lady Erlanga would keep her word and send him off on some errand so I could question her on the likelihood of fate choosing me to take her place. I could not be the only single Teuton female born in Erlangen

who had spent some time away from home, for college or other purposes.

Could I?

Chapter Five:

**THE KEYHOLDER OF
ERLANGEN**



Lady Erlanga lived southwest of the city center, in a house that sat along the banks of the Regnitz River. I rode my bike there, like Bianca and I had always done during our teen years, my muscles working hard in an attempt to squelch my anxiety. This kid Henning claimed fire just like me. I did not know any Teuton couples in which both

spouses claimed the exact same element. This would never work.

But if Erlanga's soul erased my power to choose

By the time I rolled into Lady Erlanga's driveway and parked my bike beside her Volkswagen, my emotions were a tangled wreck. I actually bent down to sniff the marigolds blooming beside her front door in one last attempt to gather myself. My fire coursed through my veins in a belligerent fashion, sending pointed hints about the two people waiting for me inside. Familiar light, unfamiliar blue fire.

Blue fire plus red fire equals purple fire.

That idiotic realization made me laugh, and I pressed my lips closed as my sides shook, as the light blue front door of the house before me slid open. Seconds later, I found myself looking into the dark blue eyes of Frieda Dahlhausen, my city's beloved *Leitalra*. Her white hair fell in gentle waves down past her shoulders; her withered hands reached out to welcome me, her wayward daughter.

"My dear Gabi, it's such a joy to see you at long last." Her voice quivered with age as she wrapped me in a gentle hug, her soft sweatshirt carrying the sweet scent of cookies.

I returned her hug, then pulled back to look at her, silently asking myself whether she appeared as strong and feisty as I remembered. My lingering smile from the thought of purple fire widened, mirroring hers. "Thank

you so much for inviting me to see you, Lady Erlanga. I'm so sorry I stayed away for such a long time." I scuffed my shoes on the threshold and cast my gaze downward.

"Ah, chin up, my girl, and come inside," Lady Erlanga urged, stepping back so I could enter her parlor. "You were off exploring the outside world, something not enough Teutons do. I can't wait to hear all about what you've learned. I've just finished up a batch of cookies with Henning's help. He'll bring them out soon."

Her parlor awakened fond memories of years long past. My feet carried me automatically toward the teal green couch that sat before her front window, its back and armrests hung with knitted blankets. Incense curled upward from a votive poised between a set of crystals upon the windowsill, and the old piano Bianca and I used to toy around with stood against the right wall, two hymnals balanced above its keys. The TV sat beside the piano, a bookcase across from the couch, and the Lady's overstuffed chair right beside the doorway to the dining room and kitchen. A soft golden glow draped the parlor with ambient light, one of my mentor's most prized forms of magic.

The smile remained upon my face as I sat on the couch beside the armrest closest to the door. "You're teaching the new *Leitaeri* how to bake?"

"Might as well make sure he's a useful specimen, once my time here is up." Lady Erlanga settled herself into her chair with a sigh, then quirked a grin at me.

A nervous giggle pealed from my lips. “Don’t hurry along,” I said in a low voice, tucking my purse between my left hip and the couch’s armrest. I suddenly imagined fate hovering overhead in spectral fashion, waiting to siphon the city’s soul into my rebellious heart.

“Oh, don’t you worry,” Lady Erlanga responded with a casual wave of one wrinkled hand. “I still have a few things to accomplish before I leave this world for good. Some debts I haven’t settled yet with supernatural entities.” Her dark eyes seemed to sparkle with latent traces of her light magic.

Curiosity ignited within me, but before I could question my mentor on what mystic entities owed her debts, a lean young man entered the parlor. He nodded once at me before turning his attention to his *Leitalra*, offering her first dibs on the cookies. “They’re still warm and deliciously perfect, thanks to you.”

I tensed when the young man spoke; his voice sounded like James Earl Jones. But he hardly looked the part. Clad in black jeans and a royal blue long-sleeved shirt with three stripes across the center, his straight brown hair fell to his shoulder blades, tied in a ponytail at the base of his neck. His lips appeared pink and youthful as he and the Lady exchanged a few phrases about the cookies, her fingers removing three from the bowl. When he turned away from her to set the bowl upon the coffee table, I saw the keys of Erlangen clipped to the left side of his belt.

As someone who had grown up under a stoic, elderly Keyholder, I found myself unable to speak or otherwise react to this teenager who held the highest authority over the Teutons in Erlangen. He raised smooth eyebrows at me while I sat staring blankly at him. “I’m Henning Glossner. My Omi and I worked hard on these cookies. Please try at least one. I’ve got a kettle on the stove. Would you like tea or hot chocolate?”

My thoughts in a whirl, I tried valiantly to remember how to present myself as cool and courteous. Hot chocolate prompted me to think of Dennis, who was the exact same age as this deep-voiced kid. My fire seemed to have vanished into thin air, and I shook my head once. “I’m Gabi Scholz, and tea is fine. Don’t want to go overboard on the sugar.”

“Can’t argue with that.” The brass keys clanked noticeably as he turned on his heels and exited the room, his brown ponytail standing out against the fabric of his shirt.

I would have to sort my feelings later. “He’s your grandson?” I asked my aged friend, whose expression revealed interest mingled with entertainment. Was she hoping to play matchmaker just like Bianca?

“Henning’s actually my great-grandson. A respectful young man.”

“Just what the Teutons of this city need. A young man willing to push back against outdated customs.” The cold truth that had troubled me since childhood spilled forth

with no filter, but Lady Erlanga maintained her pleasant smile as she nibbled on a cookie, light dancing in her irises. It was time to find out whether she had heard any local gossip about me.

I lifted a single cookie from the bowl and saw that it was peanut butter, my favorite. Leaning against the back of the couch, I savored the warmth of my first bite before saying, “I didn’t come back here in search of a Teuton mate, or because I want to be the next *Leitalra*. But Bianca tells me people are kind of predicting it now, and they’re not happy about it.”

My mentor chuckled softly. “No human being can direct the whims of a city’s essence. Not you, not me, not Henning, not any of the priests on the council. Unrest is common whenever the natural shift occurs, but we must all accept and respect what choice Erlanga makes.”

Sorrow shaded her face as she touched her left hand to her chest, rubbing her peach sweatshirt as if her heart troubled her. Guilt crept into the forefront of my mind. Here I sat bewailing a fate that might not belong to me, when my elderly friend had lost her lifelong companion less than a year ago.

“I’m so sorry about your husband,” I murmured belatedly, her pain calling my fire from its sleep, seeking solace. “My father told me about his passing. I should have sent a card.”

A weary smile curved her lips as her light acknowledged my fire’s sympathy, her spirit twining

invisibly with mine for an instant. “He lived a long and fruitful life, put an end to some of our people’s viler traditions. I try to honor his memory, but I’ll admit that it was hard, very hard . . . when he first left me alone . . . and the bond between us shattered.”

Lady Erlanga sniffed, then took a bite of a cookie in an obvious attempt to overcome her grief. Henning reentered the parlor at that point, this time carrying a tray with the kettle, several teacups, spoons, and a jar of honey. He set the tray down beside the bowl of cookies and went to pour a cup before I could do so myself. “It’s nettle tea with lemon balm and elderflower. I hope that’s okay,” he said.

I caught his eye for a second and noticed that his irises were a striking blue, possibly enhanced by the magic of his fire. “Nettle tea sounds lovely, and it smells even better,” I answered, my civility having reasserted itself. Our fingers brushed when he handed me the teacup. My fire withdrew in absurd fashion.

Whether Henning noticed my element’s reserve or not, I could only guess. He poured two more cups of tea for his Lady and himself, while I added a spoonful of honey to my cup. The silence was on the verge of becoming awkward when the young Keyholder said in an apologetic tone, “I’d sit with you on the couch, but my *Leitalra* could use some support, I think.”

I laid my spoon onto a napkin upon the tray, watching as Henning placed Lady Erlanga’s teacup on a TV tray

beside her overstuffed chair. Then he sat upon the green ottoman at her feet, the fingers of his right hand sliding through those of her left. My fire, despite its current shyness, sensed the blue glow of the young man's magic reaching out to soothe my mentor's mourning light. The Lady sighed and shut her eyes, her expression smoothing into one of gratitude.

Stories from my people's history arose in my memories, the ones of priests having to perform complex spells upon the hearts of Teuton women whose bonded mates entered eternity without them. The heart-bonds that standard Teuton priests formed with their chosen ones were nothing compared to the potent bond between Lady and Keyholder. Sealed by the blood sorcery of the Teutonic wedding and enriched by a city's collective soul, its destruction doubtless left my mentor lost and confused. Now her great-grandson had taken her husband's place.

"Did the two of you . . . complete the city bond?" I asked after a long silence. Henning seemed truly moved by his Lady's sorrow, yearning to offer her respite.

Lady Erlanga chuckled, startling both Henning and me. She extracted her fingers from his and advised him to tend to his tea, then shifted her gaze to me. "I would never demand that of my dear boy. He deserves to learn of love from a girl closer to his age, not from a withered old crone."

“Omi!” Henning complained, putting a hand to his forehead, his cheeks as red as a cardinal’s feathers.

I could not smother a snicker at the young man’s embarrassment. “I can’t be the *only* Teuton female in Erlangen who’s lived somewhere else for a while. Am I?” I needed some clarity.

“Oh, you’re not the only one,” Henning assured me, red lingering upon his face. He managed to meet my gaze when he said, “You’re the fifth girl she’s invited here since the spring. I’ve asked her to stop, but she won’t listen. She claims I’m supposed to feel a latent attraction to the girl who’ll be my next Lady. No luck yet.”

“Oh? No latent attraction to me?” The dam confining a giant flood of relief cracked, about to break.

Henning looked stricken, and he took a sip from his teacup to cover it, his free hand reaching back to scratch beneath his ponytail. “Where are your manners, my dear boy? Answer her question,” Lady Erlanga prompted.

“I . . . well . . . the attraction won’t happen right away. It takes time to build a lasting relationship, Lady and Keyholder or not.” Henning covered his gaffe with finesse, displaying wisdom beyond his years. Nodding, I took up another cookie, and he asked, “You’re in your late twenties, right?”

I eyed him while I chewed on a bite, his inexperience returning to the fore. “You’re the same age as my little brother, Dennis.” I avoided his question.

“Oh, right. Dennis Scholz. Yeah, that could get awkward.” Henning grimaced, and then looked toward the piano while taking a sip of tea.

Obviously, he was no more interested in me than I was in him. Hopefully the city’s soul would take that into account when she chose her next avatar. “So there’s at least four other single women who could become *Leitalra* aside from me. That’s a relief,” I said, shifting my gaze back to my elderly friend. “I’m sure the city won’t pick me. My blood is only eighty-five percent, hardly strong enough to call myself a Teuton.”

“Your fire suggests otherwise,” Henning remarked, leveling his gaze upon me once more. His deep voice coupled with his youthful face continued to give me pause. *He sounds like a bullfrog, not a nineteen-year-old kid.*

“It is rare for a city’s soul to choose a woman whose Teuton blood is close to the threshold of elemental control,” Lady Erlanga conceded, not looking happy about that fact. “There are twenty-four Teuton cities with Ladies and Keyholders at present. Each representative claims blood above ninety percent, although the Lady of Straubing was at eighty-eight before marriage.”

“Then I have nothing to worry about, and that means the local gossip chain can find someone else to complain about. I’m no threat to the established order.” I took a drink from my teacup and held the liquid in my mouth

for a second, taking time to appreciate each taste: nettle, honey, lemon balm, elderflower.

“Why don’t you tell us about Freiburg? What sort of life lessons have you learned in your years away from home?” Lady Erlanga smiled at me from around her teacup, inviting me to delve into more pleasant topics. Reminders of our people’s prejudice had agitated my fire; it licked at the edges of my vision and kept my teacup toasty warm. Grateful, I took up the new subject.

Instead of heading straight for home after I parted ways with the Lady and her Keyholder great-grandson, I rode my bike to the Europakanal and took the path northward along its eastern bank. That particular stretch was always a lovely place to ride, bordered by a forest on one side and the canal on the other. The autumn breeze rustling the leaves along the path caressed my face, calling my fire to its task of protective warmth. I thought about both Henning and Lukas as I rode past the rowing club with my fire coursing lightly through my veins, assuring me that despite my misgivings, I was destined for more than a regular human’s life.

I didn’t come here to find a replacement for Kyle. I’m going to need some time to myself before I take a chance on another guy. Whether I start working at Werndl Accounting or some other place in this city, I’ll have to decide if I should try it with a Teuton or another outsider. Would any of the Teuton men around here be interested in a girl with a tainted bloodline? Henning and I certainly didn’t hit it off that way, even though he

seems like a nice guy. And Lukas? Well, he's perfected his professional persona, if nothing else. And he takes an effort to keep himself healthy, along with his pug. Winston.

And my fire insisted upon flirting with his mist at every opportunity. If his employer offered me a job, how long could I squelch my foolish attraction? Maybe if we had to work together and Lukas proved himself a certified jerk, my fire would behave itself. Maybe.

When I reached my parents' house, my element sensed the presence of earth and black fire in close proximity to each other. That meant my father had returned home, like the fairy predicted. Although my love for him urged me to run to his side, I knew that my mother would interfere if I showed my face. So I bit my lip and guided my bike through the side gate toward the cottage, sending off a tiny thread of red fire to greet my father's spirit.

He knocked on the front door while I sat on the couch in the parlor, eating a microwaved meal and watching a soccer match on my grandmother's boxy TV set. I set my food aside and hollered for him to come in, then reached for the remote to mute the volume. My father stepped into the cottage and closed the door behind him, wiping his shoes on the mat before giving me a rueful look.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here for you when you came home," he said before I could get a word in edgewise. He

stuffed his hands into the pockets of his windbreaker, his expression ashamed.

“Oh, Papa, I’m a big girl. I can handle myself,” I assured him as I stood up and stretched.

“That may be, but you shouldn’t have to stand alone. I probably ought to take these shoes off. Might have gotten a bit carried away on my walk over here.” As he bent down to undo his shoelaces, I noticed the dirt caked into his treads. My mother must have given him a hard time if he needed the earth’s comfort.

“Are you hungry? I’ve got some pretzels in the kitchen, along with soda and beer.” I turned for the kitchen, recognizing that a hug would not be the right thing to offer my defeated father. He showed his love through gifts and provision, not with physical affection.

“I just had a fairly sizeable meal, but I’ll take a beer. Thanks, Gabi.”

I fished a can of Paulaner out of the fridge and brought it to my father. He was in the process of making himself comfortable on the opposite side of the couch from where my half-finished meal sat on the side table. I met his gaze when I handed him the beer, and he nodded as he cracked it open. “You look like you’ve made a pretty good life for yourself,” he commented.

“Professionally, maybe,” I said with a shrug, sitting down beside him. “My personal life could use some refurbishing.”

“Refurbishing.” My father chuckled. “That’s why you came back here.”

“Could be. My interview with Werndl Accounting went pretty well, but I’m going to put my résumé pretty much everywhere in the next couple weeks.” I set my tray back onto my lap and ate another bite of stroganoff.

We discussed my father’s mistake that had gotten him fired while I finished my meal. After he explained the entire situation, irritation clawed at me. “Honestly, what happened wasn’t your fault at all,” I told him. “You had no experience with that type of project and none of your superiors did, either. Nobody wanted to take the time to research what was needed, and they blamed you for the fallout.”

“You’re right. I’ll admit I’d rather not work for Finkgruppe anymore after all of that. I think my boss was just waiting for a ‘reason’ to get rid of me, anyway. We didn’t work well together.” My father took a swig of beer, his eyes fixated on the athletes moving silently across the TV screen. His frustration fueled my own.

“I think we ought to go job hunting together. I got my résumé streamlined pretty good, so if you need any help getting yours in order, just let me know. Oliver gave me a few leads, you know, Bianca’s husband? He even says his company will need some new engineers early next year.”

My father cringed. “I doubt they’d deign to even look at my résumé after the debacle with Finkgruppe.”

“No harm in trying, though, right?” I leaned back and took a drink from my can of Fanta, offering my father an encouraging nod.

“Ah, we’ll see. I’ve missed having you around, Gabi. It would have been nice if you’d been there for dinner with Mama and Dennis.”

“I would have liked to be there for you, but Mama made it clear that I’m just a guest, now. She got rid of my bed and turned my old room into a study. I’m trying to keep my distance, since it’s obvious she still thinks I’m not good enough.” That familiar sense of inadequacy pricked my chest, and I focused on the TV.

My father muttered something that may have been a curse. “I’ll talk to her. And I’ll bring my résumé over here in the morning for you to peruse.”

“Sounds good. We got this.” I smiled at my father, certain we could get his misfortune sorted. Our family would push forward with us at the helm.

Chapter Six:

**WERNDL
ACCOUNTING**



Day one at Werndl Accounting. A Wednesday morning in mid-October 2003, complete with a heavy layer of fog that clung to the streets as I rode the bus to my latest office environment. I had not slept well the night before. For some reason, memories of my ex looming over me while I huddled on the kitchen floor haunted me when I

woke around four a.m. The silence of my bedroom became oppressive, and I stuck a USB stuffed with pop music into my laptop and turned the volume up in a vain attempt to banish Kyle's ghost.

On the way to work, my thoughts swung from him to Lukas. In Freiburg, I had lived and worked with a charismatic abuser, an American military brat whose friends and family adored him. None of them would have believed me if I had asked for help. So I fled to Erlangen, a poor haven for a witch whose blood hovered at the non-magical threshold. I had caught the tail end of a conversation just last Sunday at church—three middle-aged Teuton women muttering that elemental magic would go extinct in the city within two generations if I became *Leitalra*.

And now I must seize my newfound path at a company where Lukas Felder worked. Whether his old prejudices would eventually come to the fore or not, I had to take this job to support my family. My father had assured me his savings would last a few months, but I did not want him to burn himself out in a desperate bid to undo his mistake. So I accepted the first offer that came my way. Professionally, I felt no qualms about my new position.

Personally? Emotionally? I would have to suppress all of that. The German corporate world held no place for such frivolities.

I could do this. I could do this.

The red-haired HR manager guided me to my cubicle and reintroduced herself as Frau Tanja Knopp. “Everyone calls me Tanja, so feel free to do the same. I’ll stop by in an hour with some paperwork. The IT wizard will get your computer set up as soon as he brews a pot of coffee. You can find some for yourself, along with water and tea, in the canteen.” Tanja offered me a hospitable smile, nodding at an open doorway along the wall near the lobby.

I thanked her for her help and set my purse and bag upon the desk before me. Once Tanja had gone, I took a moment to gaze around at my personal cubicle. Cream-colored portable walls that rose to my shoulders enclosed the space on three sides, already an improvement over my former workplace. There, I had shared a cubicle with a gruff accountant. Sometimes I wondered if my ex set things up that way to make sure I had constant oversight.

A desk stretched the length of one and a half walls, locked filing cabinets poised along the last half. An overhead compartment hung above the half section of desk, while the computer’s monitor and tower sat to my left. Trash and recycling bins stood beneath the desk, and a thin closet to store coats and bags was tucked between the cabinets and the empty wall. I scanned the cubicle again, knowing that I needed to add some decorations to brighten things up. Some of my grandmother’s crystals should do the trick, along with a candle or two.

I opened the closet door and set my bag inside, then worked my way out of my leather jacket. The tapping of fingernails upon the flimsy wall beside me caught my attention while I hung my jacket inside the closet. Turning toward the sound, I found myself facing a blonde woman about my own age, her face heavily painted, her earth-hued eyes taking in my every movement.

“Greetings, new neighbor and fellow auditor! I’m Johanna, and you must be Gabi.” The young woman beamed and offered her right hand over the wall. Silver nails stretched at least five centimeters out from her fingertips.

“I’m definitely Gabi. It’s nice to meet you, Johanna.” I smiled and shook her hand, her weak grip prompting me to internally cringe. “You’re an auditor too?”

“That I am. We’ll be working together for the first week or so, while you get into the swing of things here. I’m going to go get some coffee. Want to come?”

Johanna quickly proved a bubbly sort, one I would never entrust with any secrets. We ran into the “IT wizard” in the canteen, a stocky man with a comb-over and a nerdy voice. He nodded once at me when Johanna introduced me as her “new partner in crime,” assuring me that he would come by my cubicle in a few minutes to get my login and permissions sorted. Then he eased his way out of the canteen, leaving me alone with my chatty

companion, who was in the process of dumping five packets of sugar into her coffee.

I took mine black and leaned my hip against the counter, listening while Johanna spouted off random factoids about the office environment. The corporate manager was the squeaky-voiced older gentleman I had met at my interview, and she loved him to death. So polite and personable, away semi-regularly reaching out to clients new and old. He bought lunch for the entire office every Friday.

The IT wizard was friendly and married with kids. Two of the accountants were living together, and Tanja had a side gig as a travel agent during the spring beer festival. “But just wait until you meet our boss, Lukas Felder. All business, that one.” She rolled her eyes and pretended to fan herself.

“Wait a minute. Lukas Felder is our *boss*?” My fire sizzled in my blood, and I lowered my eyelids as I mentally ordered it to stand down. *Not here, not now.*

“Ah, you met him at your interview, didn’t you? He’s eye candy, that one. Especially if you take a stroll along the canal while the rowing club is practicing.” She winked and blew on her coffee while I valiantly attempted to regain my sanity. It had shattered to pieces all around me.

“I’d better get back to my desk, get my computer set up.” And I needed two or three seconds to myself, so I could toss some rocks at my ex’s ghost. Why had I

imagined I could escape the constricting bubble my life had become? In Erlangen, my mother would belittle me and my high school bully would dictate my career. But I needed this job for my father's sake. For Dennis' sake.

“Don't waste your time with our boss,” Johanna whispered in my ear as she trailed me back to our desks. “He shows zero interest in merging his love life with his work life. No interest whatsoever.”

Sour grapes, but who could blame her? Lukas was a stud; my fire certainly agreed with that. A small hint of relief touched me as I settled into the rolling chair at my desk. If Lukas had perfected his businessman's persona, then I should have no reason to fear his opinions on my weak bloodline. Right?

Lukas stopped by my desk shortly after I finished filling out tax paperwork for Tanja. He introduced himself again—unnecessary, but polite—and described a bit about what would be expected of me. He admitted that there would be a lot of paperwork, but I was used to such things. Johanna rolled her way over about one minute into our conversation, her head tilted up to stare at Lukas' face while she nodded along, interjecting occasional words of agreement.

This time I happened to notice Johanna's boobs. They were substantial, her blouse low enough to show cleavage. She positioned herself with one arm draped beneath them, an effort to draw attention. Lukas glanced her way now and then, but kept his focus primarily upon

me, where I sat struggling to keep *my* focus on business-related issues. My fire insisted upon flecking my irises, and I kept having to blink and look down as I leashed it again. And again.

Lukas' irises are staying as hazel as they come. His mist isn't making a fool of itself in front of an uninterested female. Stop making me look stupid! Coming back to Erlangen had turned me insane. I had never chided my magic as if it were a separate entity from myself back when I lived among outsiders. My fire had proved willing to confine itself to my spirit there, an inactive observer.

Damned magic should have broken its chains when my ex tormented me. Useless waste of mysticism.

Overall, the first day went as well as could be expected. Once Lukas left my flirtatious coworker and me alone, Johanna invited me to her desk and walked me through a set of daily reports that her former partner compiled. She looked forward to passing those off to me once I felt comfortable, remarking that things were so much more manageable with two auditors instead of one. Tomorrow we would work together on a package for a regular client.

Lukas passed through and checked on me shortly after lunch, asking in a pleasant tone whether Johanna had overwhelmed me yet. "She's a bit much sometimes, but she's usually respectful if you wear headphones," he said.

“Oh, don’t listen to him. I don’t chatter when I’m working on projects.” My coworker made a pouty face at him. His expression remained impassive.

“Looks like we might land the big one at the start of 2004,” Lukas noted. He mentioned the name of the city’s largest industry—his mother’s employer—which prompted Johanna to pump her fists and squeal.

“I don’t have any experience with auditing larger corporations,” I blurted. Anxiety warred with excitement within me at such a prospect.

“I’ll guide you every step of the way, if the contract goes through,” Lukas pledged, his hazel eyes meeting mine. The corners of his lips curled into a trace of a smile.

Johanna mumbled something about needing to use the restroom, then strutted away like a forsaken hen. Had she read into Lukas’ comment? He was our boss; of course he would give us direction if we ended up auditing his mother’s mammoth employer. From what I had observed thus far, Werndl Accounting’s management took responsibility for its employees, a positive trait my father’s former company lacked.

“You know how to respond if a client ever tries to bribe you to fudge their records?” Lukas stood at the left wall of my cubicle with one elbow propped upon the barrier, his expression appraising. Not one word about Johanna’s departure. All business, like she had said.

“Of course. Offer a polite refusal and report it to you.” I had dealt with that sort of issue once at my previous job.

“You’re going to be a great addition to our team,” Lukas said, turning his attention away from me as one of the accountants appeared at his side.

The lean man wore a severe scowl, his buzzed silver hair shining strangely under the florescent lights. He ran his gaze over me from head to toe, then spoke to Lukas in Teutonic dialect, his tone wary. “This is the one they think might usurp our maidens of purer bloodlines.”

My lips parted in shock and my fire raged to the fore, veiling my vision in red as it judged the older man’s aura. He claimed metal, his potent element casting his own irises in steel-like gray when he sensed my fire’s agitation. “You should know that Erlanga’s soul can’t be bent to anyone’s will,” I snapped back at him in perfect Teutonica. His eyes widened as I went on; he doubtless assumed I did not understand our people’s ancient dialect. “But you should also know that if I had a choice in the matter, I’d never agree to represent a city full of intolerant bigots.”

The silver-haired man cleared his throat, his fingers leaving impressions on the wall of my cubicle. Before he could respond to me, Lukas clapped a hand on his shoulder. “Enough, Rafael. Your prejudices don’t belong here or anywhere else. Gabi’s just as eligible to become our next *Leitalra* as your own daughter.”

Rafael grumbled something foul under his breath and stomped toward the canteen. My sass evaporated in an instant as a familiar sense of inadequacy arose in my blood, carting my fire back into my spirit. I put a hand to my forehead and shut my eyes for a moment, trying to regain my poise. *I knew I shouldn't have come back here. Everyone in this city sees me as weak, a mistake.*

“Gabi. Hey.” Lukas’ concerned voice pulled me from my downward spiral. I reopened my eyes and looked up at him, thanking heaven above that my element had kept my tears at bay. That was one useful thing about fire.

“Don’t listen to that old bastard, okay?” he murmured in a voice so low I had to strain to catch the words. “He has a bean up his nose because he’s hoping his daughter will get chosen when she comes home from college. She doesn’t graduate until next spring, so naturally he feels threatened.”

I shook my head and laid my hand down in my lap. “Lady Erlanga doesn’t look like she’s about to leave this world. I’ve visited her twice in the past few weeks. She’s fine. Perfectly healthy.”

Lukas glanced toward the restrooms and favored me with a quick nod before making himself scarce. I would have liked to discuss the issue further, but Johanna had returned, carrying a handful of cookies from the canteen. *Life’s a lot less complicated for outsiders*, I thought as we got back to work, the soothing taste of soft cookie dough granting my spirits a needed boost.

By Friday that week, my time at Werndl Accounting started to fall into a standard routine. Johanna and I were in the midst of an auditing project for a local newspaper, one that ought to wind down by the end of next week. Afterward, she intended to “turn me loose” on a smaller project for the Catholic church and school in Alterlangen—my first solo task. I found it a relief to bury myself in paperwork, for it kept my brain too occupied to fret over what destinies my people envisioned for me.

Rafael was the only Teuton in the office aside from Lukas and me. He had been on vacation the day of my interview, or I would have sensed his solid element lurking in the distance then. Thankfully, the two of us did not have to collaborate on any projects. But his cubicle was right near the restrooms, and I caught his eye every time I headed back to my desk after relieving myself. The lanky man never smiled, his metal-infused eyes seeming to criticize everything about me.

His regard rattled my anxiety, the only negative aspect about my new work environment. I brought it up to Johanna on Friday morning right before lunch. “What do you think of that guy, Rafael? Kind of standoffish, right?” I asked after a quick restroom break.

“He seems like a grouch, but it’s all a smokescreen. He makes a really great stew in the winter months. Takes the edge off when you’re feeling sick.”

“Hmm.” As much as I wanted to believe her, I found myself imagining tiny flakes of metal sprinkled into a

dish of stew, an attempt to poison me. Johanna could keep Rafael's culinary creations to herself.

Like Johanna had predicted, the corporate manager, Herr Albert Werndl, bought lunch for everyone that day from a Turkish bistro. I took my Döner Kebab outside to eat beneath the chestnut trees in the office building's small inner court. Tucked away from the public, it offered a little taste of woodland surrounded by urban growth; one could choose a picnic table or a bench under the trees, amid the hedgerows, or beside the trickling fountain. I had found a stone bench just large enough for two people the day before, lowering branches of autumn foliage hiding it from casual observers. An excellent place to get away and regroup.

I had nearly finished my Döner when I heard the crunch of fallen leaves beneath someone's footsteps along the stone pathway on the far side of the hedge from where I sat. Pausing my chewing in an attempt to remain unnoticed, I saw a pair of polished black loafers come to a halt upon the path, then turn toward me. Before I could rewrap my food and scurry away, Lukas Felder ducked his head as he entered my glade, taking in the near-invisibility of the stone bench. "So you come here to get a break from Johanna. Nice."

"I come here to get away from everyone," I corrected, irritation clawing at me alongside my fire, which sizzled like a horny elemental dragon. Typical.

Lukas raised his eyebrows and took a step back toward the hedgerow, still hunched a bit thanks to the low branches. “Fair enough. I wanted to ask whether you’d like to have lunch with me on Monday. It’s not easy to catch you alone.”

Chapter Seven:

**UNWANTED
ATTRACTION**



A bundle of nerves tightened in my gut as I gawked up at Lukas, bemused that he would interrupt my lunch to ask such a thing. “If it’s for business purposes, feel free to join Johanna and me at our desks anytime,” I blurted, internally recoiling at the distinct possibility that his request had nothing to do with our jobs. He stuck his

hands in the pockets of his gray dress pants, his posture appearing uncertain.

Lukas looked away from me, his forehead wrinkling. “Actually, I like to get to know new employees one-on-one, so I can find out how to best support them.” He glanced at what was left of my Döner, then focused on my face again, shuffling away from one of the tree branches to stand up straighter.

“I’m pretty sure that can be done during a meeting. If I have any questions Johanna can’t answer, I’ll be sure to come to you.” I broke away from his gaze and wrapped my remaining lunch back in its paper. My boss’ mist had infused the air in the glade with unwelcome humidity. My fire, meanwhile, ran hot through my blood, inciting a lust I had no wish to explore.

“I appreciate that.” Lukas breathed out a sigh as I rose to my feet, prepared to vacate the glade before my magic compelled me to do something stupid. When I moved to step past him, he brushed one hand against my jacket as if to hold me back. I halted and twisted around just enough to glare at him. He backed away immediately, lifting both hands and knocking his head on a branch.

“Sorry, Gabi. I didn’t mean to intrude. But there’s some things you need to know, things best discussed someplace outside of work.” He grimaced and rubbed at the back of his head, shooting the offending branch a scowl.

“There are zero *things* I need to know about you that I don’t already know,” I spat at him, memories from our high school years sweeping my courtesy away in a rolling tide. “We have to work together and that’s fine. But I don’t need you or anyone else to remind me how weak my blood is, how nobody wants me to be the next *Leitalra*. Invite Rafael to lunch so you can gripe about it.”

I made my way through the hedgerow without looking back, but I heard my boss expel a louder sigh and mutter something like, “Not what I meant.”

I marched back into the office with my chin raised, refusing to entertain thoughts on what exactly Lukas wanted me to know. No doubt he had heard the rumor mill and wished to add his own two cents on how time would weaken the magic in my blood. Maybe I should have gone to college in some other Teuton city, like Nürnberg or München. Then I could have found myself a boyfriend willing to help me improve my blood status through elemental sex. It had worked for Oliver; he had been at eighty-six percent when he first met Bianca. Now they were both at her level, safe from any censure.

Before the end of the day, I asked Johanna if she had gone to lunch with Lukas when she first started working for him. She answered with a resounding no and gushed that it would be a privilege to get to know him outside of the office. He and Herr Werndl occasionally invited clients to group lunches.

That meant Lukas had fibbed about why he wanted to eat with me. Had that been his attempt to ask me out on a date? Had he forgotten what his Toilet Brigade had done to me during my teen years? I could never consider him as anything more than a necessary part of my career, no matter how intriguing my fire found his mist. Besides, Bianca claimed there was a girl in his life already. Rosemarie.

Interestingly, the boss remained incognito for the rest of the afternoon, and I sent Johanna to turn in our reports so I would not have to see his face. Bianca planned to meet me at Zum Weißen Hirsch for dinner, and I hoped like hell Lukas would not make an appearance. I needed my best friend's advice on the situation, to help untangle the confusion in my brain. Memories of how I first fell under Kyle's thumb cooled my fire's ridiculous hunger. Another workplace romance, this time with a Teuton? Bad idea.

Bianca had picked our usual table beside the beer garden's shrubbery, her dark curls tucked beneath a knit hat. She commented that we would have to eat inside next week, for her whirlwind did not offer fire's protection from the evening chill. "That's fine with me, as long as we sit far enough away from the bar. In case of invasion by a certain party." I rolled my eyes on Lukas' behalf as I sat down and hung my purse over the back of my chair.

"You haven't fallen into his arms yet after three days of working together?" Bianca smirked and glanced at the

menu, then set it aside.

“It’s been an interesting week. I’ll need your advice on some things,” I said, reading the list of entrées again. A burger and fries seemed an appropriate comfort meal for tonight.

Once our beers had come and we placed our orders, I spilled the beans about Lukas’ potential interest in me, about Rafael’s blood prejudice. Bianca had never heard of the older gentleman and noted that she could not think of any men around his age who claimed the element of metal. “Either he’s not originally from here, or he doesn’t come to any of the festivals,” she guessed.

“But he gets around enough to know what our people are expecting of me.” I sipped from my glass, silently asking the alcohol to soothe me. Though I was not cold, my fire had retreated into my spirit in response to my restlessness.

“And Lukas told him off when he criticized you? Sounds like he’s matured a little since high school.” Bianca’s blue-green eyes glimmered with possibility, as if all of his previous sins could be wiped away with a sponge. But my wariness of him hinged upon more than his opinions of my bloodline.

“I don’t know. Maybe he has. And maybe he was trying to ask me out today in the glade. But I just . . . can’t start going out with a coworker again. Not so soon. What if he’s as bad as my mother? Looking for a weak-willed woman to control?”

“Give it a few weeks and observe what he’s like at work,” Bianca suggested. “His management style should give off red flags if he’s anything like your ex.”

“I guess so. But some people are really good at putting up a front. Polite at work but a terror at home.” Both my mother and Kyle fell under that category. And I was the sole target of my mother’s frustrations.

“You realize Lukas is probably the most eligible Teuton bachelor out there, if you’re trying to take yourself off the market for Erlanga’s soul. Do I hear wedding bells in the distance?” Bianca nudged my foot with her own, her element reaching out to swirl around my head, toying with my hair.

“What?” I feigned ignorance, though that very thought had occurred to me weeks ago. Five single Teuton maidens in the city who met tradition’s requirements, myself included. Ritual marriage was the only way to ensure that Erlanga would not steal my free will.

“I heard one of the others got engaged last weekend. Unless you’re expecting our elderly friend to live to be a hundred, you might need a contingency plan.”

She was right. I slumped against the table and rubbed my forehead, shutting my eyes as the world seemed to shrink around me. A bubble with Erlangen at the center. I cowed from that sort of destiny, but

“Not with my high school bully. Doesn’t matter how hot he looks. He can’t undo what he and his buddies did to me.”

“You could bring that up to Lukas if he asks you to lunch again. Tell him how you feel about the things they used to say. He’s a guy. He probably has no clue how much his taunts hurt you.” Bianca expelled a dramatic sigh.

I groaned, and our food came a moment later, a welcome distraction. We ate in silence for a few minutes, and I ran my gaze over the other patrons at the beer garden. Fewer people braved the deepening cold of an autumn evening, but I noticed a young woman sitting with a man several tables away. She stared directly at me, her lips forming a sneer. Summoning my fire from its sleep, I stretched a trace of it in her direction, wanting to check.

The young woman’s aura was thick with smoke. Nicole, Lukas’ snotty sister. The brat who played violin and gave my best friend grief about her infertility. I called my fire into my eyes and bared my teeth at her, a warning to stay away from us. My element could vanquish her smoke without help.

“Who are you snarling at?” Bianca questioned, as I turned my attention back to my burger. She made to look over her shoulder, but I stomped on her foot.

“Don’t bother. It’s just that bitch who thinks all Teuton females ought to be breeding hens. Wonder if Lukas is stuck with the kids tonight?”

Bianca wilted, dropping her gaze and poking her salad with a fork. “I start the injections on Monday,” she

whispered, sliding a piece of cold sausage around her plate. “Oliver’s going to help me do them, but I’m scared. They have to go right in my stomach.”

“You can do this. I know you can. You’re a lot stronger than Nicole or anyone else I know. You and Oliver are going to have the cutest little baby.” Reaching across the table, I took her free hand in mine and gave it a warm squeeze.

She met my gaze for a second and managed a smile, her whirlwind twining with my red fire in the spiritual realm. “Thanks, Gabi. I keep telling myself it’ll get easier the more I do it. But can you pray for me? Can you pray this works? I’m so tired of seeing everybody else having babies when I can’t.” She let go of my hand and dabbed at her nose with her sleeve.

“I’ll pray for you every morning and every night. And I can’t wait to be your baby’s godmother.” I grinned at her and dipped a fry into a patch of curry ketchup.

We talked about baby names for a while, and Bianca’s outlook brightened. By the time we finished our meals, she brought the conversation back around to my plight—that I had no desire to become the next Lady Erlanga. “If you don’t want to take a chance with Lukas, you realize the Taubenball is coming up next spring. There’s bound to be loads of sexy Teuton guys on the hunt.”

“Not like we’d be able to tell with everybody masked up,” I said with a snort. Bianca referred to a masquerade ball held every five years in Nürnberg, the closest Teuton

metropolis. The event had started in the late 1800s to honor a former Lady of Nürnberg, one who had taken the nickname of “Dove.” In the modern era, many young Teutons found lifelong partners at the ball, Bianca included. Anyone who could wield their magic was permitted to attend for an evening of feasting, games, and elemental dancing.

While a senior in high school, I had missed the Taubenball because I came down with bronchitis just days before it happened. I remembered Bianca shrieking at me over the phone late that night, telling me all about the handsome young man she had met. Of course I had not attended the one four years ago, either. Kyle had lured me into his gilded cage around that time.

“Seriously, though, you need to go, whether you want to hunt bachelors or not. The food is divine, and it’s so amazing to dance out on the grounds.” Bianca beamed, clasping her hands together and swaying her body as though she listened to a private melody. “That’s the first time I realized how wonderful it is to dance with energy.”

“Did you and Oliver go last time it was held?”

“Yep. One of the only places you can dance openly outside. The castle grounds are huge, lots of places to get lost. Oliver’s made some business contacts thanks to the Taubenball.” Bianca nodded rather pointedly, as though that should seal the deal if I had no interest in a suitor. Maybe I could find a few employers who needed a new financial auditor. But to be honest, the prospect of

mingling with my people while hiding behind a mask aroused excitement within me.

“We’re going to need dresses,” I said to Bianca. “Both of us.”

During the next few weeks, I observed Lukas’ behavior at the office, like my friend had suggested. I tried to judge him against how my ex acted at work. Lukas seemed far more up front and down to earth; he did not put on a glowing façade to impress clients or his manager. He was all about getting projects done right the first time, not hesitating to grant help or direction when needed. When I visited his desk to deposit my daily reports, I saw that he displayed a photo of his pug and one of him and his mother at his college graduation.

No pictures of his sister and none of the alleged Rosemarie.

I made some discreet inquiries to find out when the rowing club practiced, then rode my bike on the path along the Europakanal while he sat amid his peers, his strong arms pulling the longboat in perfect sync with the other athletes. I rode by again when he and his teammates had finished, watching him joke with them in sporting fashion. He even helped carry the boat back to its place and gathered the oars alongside a skinnier athlete that looked fresh out of high school. He did not seem arrogant or conceited, and I began to wonder if he had left that part of himself behind permanently after high school.

But I hesitated to act on my smoldering attraction. Even if Lukas no longer considered me beneath him where Teuton blood was concerned, his mother was a corporate executive. He had grown up in luxury, while I was the only one in my family earning a consistent income, currently. My father's job search had not yet sprouted any leads, and my mother tutored only part time. She apparently felt no ambition to search for extra pupils.

At first I hoped that living in my grandmother's cottage could work out for everyone. I arranged to pay the utility bills myself and made use of the side gate each day, so my comings and goings would not bother anyone in the main house. But during my fourth week at Werndl Accounting, my mother cornered me on a Tuesday night the same way she had done when I first came home. Her expression screwed up in disdain, she barked that my father and brother missed me at dinner. If I was to reside on our family's property, I should at least be courteous enough to eat meals with them on occasion.

As usual, I bowed to her will, promising to appear for Sunday dinners unless other duties waylaid me. Then, before I managed to excuse myself, her eyes flared with black fire as she stated, "You may not be eligible to become this city's next *Leitalra*, but you should at least make an appearance at the New Year's festival so people stop saying I raised a non-magical child."

Her words sent me floundering all over again. I spent most of the night awake on the couch, my music

collection thrumming from my laptop's speakers, my eyes blinking at the crimson flames I had set upon the batch of logs in the hearth. For weeks now I had lit a fire at night, feeding it with my magic so I need not change out the wood. The radiators in the bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen ran on the power of my fire, as did the towel warmer. My element had not given me any cause to believe it planned to crumble away, but now my own mother declared I was not eligible to take the mantle of a Teuton Lady.

I did my best to conceal my troubled emotions when I went to work, throwing myself into my current project with gusto. Last week I had finished with the Catholic church and school, and now Johanna and I were in the midst of a government contract. She seemed to notice my weariness and, for once, she did not pry. She brought me a mug of coffee from the canteen shortly after I sat down at my computer, and she bent down to whisper, "Rafael's out today. Score!"

His absence granted me a wisp of relief, though I could not get my mind off of my mother's words as I worked on my client's financial report. Lunch break did not come soon enough; I fairly sprinted out to the stone bench beneath the now-bare chestnuts, hoping for a chance to lose myself in nature's peace.

I had gotten through half of my sandwich when my boss sauntered along the path. Meeting my gaze over the hedgerow, Lukas remarked that my fire must keep me cozy in winter. Before I could devise a reply, he said,

“Gabi, I wanted to ask again whether you’d eat lunch with me. Not for business purposes.”

Chapter Eight:

LETTING OFF STEAM



“Not for business purposes,” I repeated, laying my sandwich onto my napkin as I considered his offer. At least he decided to be honest this time, but I gazed at him with narrowed eyes while I pondered his ulterior motive. “I certainly hope you’re not asking me out just so you can throw my blood status in my face.”

“Not at all. I’d actually like to get to know you as a person, apart from work.” Lukas raised his eyebrows at me, his black leather jacket emphasizing his sculpted torso much more than his dress shirts did. To his credit, he remained on the path, leaving me to enjoy my glade in peace.

“I wouldn’t get my hopes up, if I were you,” I said, a blush encroaching on my cheeks as I looked down at my sandwich. While I had no desire to bare my heart before this man, he needed to understand that I had been damaged by a workplace romance once before. “I had some . . . unfortunate life experiences before I left Freiburg. And it’s already clear that most Teutons in this city aren’t happy that I came back here.”

“About that. I don’t know how much you’ve heard, but . . . some people are feeling incredibly threatened by your arrival and what it could mean. I’ve been trying to diffuse things, but I’m only one person. We need to talk about it.” Lukas ran a hand through his hair, his expression aggrieved. He no longer looked at me. He fixed his gaze upon a set of windows overhead on the building behind the chestnut tree, his jawline firm.

Okay, so maybe he’s not interested in romance. Maybe he just wants to let me in on whatever mischief our people might be plotting against me. I definitely should have gone anywhere but here when I left Kyle. But I was here now, and my family might need some of my income within a few months. Unless my father hit the jackpot with his job search.

So I straightened my spine and lifted my gaze to Lukas. “That sounds like a discussion that ought to happen over dinner rather than an hour-long lunch.” My voice quavered a little, belying my attempt at valor. Fire boiled in my blood, urging me to claim my misty boss for myself. *Cool down. This isn’t about romance.*

“I was thinking the same thing. Are you free for dinner tomorrow night? I could drive you to Isola Verde after we get off work.”

“How did I not know you drive here every day?” I asked more of myself than of him. I never saw him on the bus or waiting at the bus stop. I should have known he had his own set of wheels. Wealthy stud.

“Because I park at a garage in the next block. Should I take that to mean you accept my invite?” Lukas cocked his head at me, a hopeful glint in his eyes. I caught a hint of cerulean mist enhancing his irises’ natural hazel.

I allowed myself the faintest of smiles. “Yes. I’m looking forward to it. I love Isola Verde. I don’t eat there often enough.”

The two of us left the office at the same time the following day, melting easily into the rush hour pedestrian traffic on the sidewalk. Johanna got out earlier than us, for which I was grateful. I had no wish to shoulder misplaced jealousy if she uncovered my itinerary, especially since Lukas had not yet made his intentions clear. We might just be going to dinner to discuss unrest among our people, nothing more.

Once inside the parking garage, Lukas led me to a sleek silver Mercedes C-Class sport coupe and opened the passenger door for me. I paused for a moment, taking in his stance beside the door of a very sweet ride. Tan leather interior and not a trace of grime visible on the outside. My dinner date wore a long black trench coat over his navy blue dress shirt and black trousers, a striking ensemble. For an instant I envisioned him as a Teuton priest, keeper of our people's mystical secrets. In that outfit, he could nearly pass as one.

"You sure about this?" I asked as I made my way into the passenger seat. Shooting a grin at Lukas, I clarified, "Taking a broke underling out to dinner?"

"You're hardly broke. Erlangen's sacred silver oak resides on your property." Lukas favored me with a half-smile and gently shut the door, then walked around to the driver's side.

Despite his reassurances, I felt incredibly unworthy and underdressed. I had worn basic professional gray pants and a V-necked crimson blouse to work today, and I caught sight of every flaw in my leather jacket when I stashed my purse and bag on the floor by my feet. Lukas' attire was impeccable, while my jacket had been new before I met my ex. My fire magic simmered silently in my blood, but I begged it to remain on the down low, no matter how entrancing it found Lukas' mist. When he eased himself into the driver's seat, I sensed the freshness of his element, reminding me of an early morning bike ride along the canal.

He invited me to choose a radio station as he navigated rush hour traffic, his knuckles tense on the steering wheel. I found a station that played raucous metal music, just because I wanted to see Lukas' reaction. In high school I listened only to pop, but my tastes had expanded since then. While I relaxed in my seat and bobbed my head to the music, Lukas barely smothered a curse and swerved to avoid a cyclist.

“Not a fan of traffic?” I asked, grinning.

“Never. If I could, I'd live in a small town with a winding riverbed. My career insists I stay in the city, unfortunately.” He rolled his eyes as he turned right into the lower portion of Alterlangen, leaving the city center behind. Then he shot me an odd look and asked, “You actually like this stuff?”

He gestured at the radio, which currently played “Love 'Em Or Leave 'Em” by the Scorpions. “You'd be surprised. I like pretty much everything. Except rap. Brings back memories I'd rather forget.” I shuddered at the mental image of Kyle shouting out awful lyrics with his cap on backwards and shot glass raised high.

“There are a couple songs I can't stand because my sister played them incessantly in her bedroom. The kind cheerleaders danced to before they screwed you over.” Lukas shook his head, tolerant amusement on his face as he kept his eyes on the road.

I burst out laughing, envisioning my high school bully suffering through Nicole's ditzy music choices after a

long day at school. Served him right. “My best friend was a cheerleader. Don’t hate on all of them,” I said.

“Judge the individual, not the group? I like that viewpoint.” Lukas turned into the restaurant’s parking lot and pulled into one of two empty spots. “I actually made a reservation for us earlier today, just to make sure we wouldn’t have to come up with Plan B.”

His foresight was impressive. I opened the car door myself this time, leaving my bag behind. I hung my purse over my left shoulder and closed the door, trying to discern Lukas’ expression as he waited for me to join him. November twilight shaded his face, but he seemed truly happy to be here with me for a shared dinner. My fire refused to relinquish its hold upon my blood, arousing desires best left contained. We would talk about Teuton issues at dinner, not the stupid yearnings that had dogged me since high school.

But you know you want the bully to like you, to respect you, to choose you over everyone else. He already said he’s pushed back against strife in the Teuton community. Why would he bother if he doesn’t see you as an equal now?

Inside, a hostess led us to a two-person table in one of the smaller dining areas, a cozy spot beside the doorway to the section reserved for private gatherings. The hostess lit the tea light on the table and said our waiter would be with us soon. I chose the seat that faced away from the other tables, figuring that Lukas would like to

keep an eye on our surroundings, as a man. He seemed relieved at my choice as he removed his trench coat and settled into his seat against the wall. I hung my purse over the back of my chair and took off my jacket, laying it aside.

“Get whatever you’d like. Dinner’s on me. Even if you want to sample one of the pricier wines.” Lukas turned his menu over to read the wine list.

“I’m usually a beer girl, but maybe I’ll be adventurous tonight. Which wine do you recommend?” I took up the menu and read the list of entrées, listening as Lukas rattled off descriptions of the wines. He could just order a bottle and be done with it; I was not picky. I told him so, and when the waiter appeared, he requested a bottle of Bardolino, a light red wine with a fruity taste.

“How often have you been here since you came back?” Lukas inquired while we waited for our drinks. He had already laid his menu down, implying familiarity with Isola Verde’s offerings.

“Just twice. Once with my father and once with my little brother, Dennis.” My brother and I always split a pizza whenever we came here. Tonight I decided on the spaghetti dish with salmon and shrimp in cream sauce.

Lukas seemed to be thinking along the same lines. He began unwrapping his silverware as he said, “The pizza here is spectacular, but since I’m with you I ought to get something more refined. We can even share an

appetizer, if you'd like that." He met my gaze briefly, looking somewhat shy.

"You're the one whose family's loaded. I'm just going to get a dish of pasta." Why he implied pizza was beneath me was anyone's guess. Maybe he was trying to impress me. *He doesn't need any help on that front.* I smirked a little.

After we placed our orders, Lukas raised his wine glass to me, the varying hues of color in his eyes captivating my attention. "To vanquishing prejudice once and for all," he stated in a low voice.

An unusual toast that hardly fit with the Lukas I remembered from high school. Maybe Bianca was right. Maybe he had matured and expanded his mindset. "To vanquishing prejudice," I repeated, touching his glass with mine. I took a sip of the wine, moving it around my mouth in an effort to catch each hint of flavor. I still preferred beer, but I could handle the Bardolino.

Lukas smiled as he watched me judge the wine. His lips parted, likely to ask my opinion, but I spoke first. "So what exactly have our people been plotting against me? Are they really that angry to have a potential Lady whose blood stands at eighty-five percent?"

Lukas leaned back in his chair and sighed, irritation creasing his forehead. "The main issue is the Heising family. You might remember Callen. He was one of my buddies back in the day."

I did remember Callen. Bulky oaf in the Toilet Brigade who played goalie for the high school soccer team. Along with berating my blood status on the regular, he used to try to grope me by the lockers. “Right,” I said, studying Lukas’ face.

“Herr Heising expects his daughter to ascend as *Leitalra*. He’s been training Sandra for that position ever since she spent a year in the Peace Corps. And since he’s a priest on the city council, a lot of people expect she’ll be chosen. She’s been pulling her own strings, too. She made sure one of the other girls—I think her name is Monika or Miriam or something—found someone else. She set her up with that priest from Linz. Now they’re engaged.”

This was a lot of information at once. Lukas fell silent, and I considered what he had said. “So let me guess. Sandra’s going to try to set me up with some Teuton priest so he can weave the heart-bond and make me fall head-over-heels for him. I wish her luck. We never spoke once in high school, and I’m not planning on starting now.” I curled my lip, irritated that people refused to let me live my own life.

Lukas snickered and took a sip of wine. “Problem is, there aren’t that many single Teuton priests left around here. The guy from Linz is here for grad school, and after that he’ll cart Monika-Miriam off to Austria. Callen’s a priest, but . . . I don’t recommend you start a relationship with him.”

“That’ll never happen. He was always trying to grope me in high school.”

“He did *what?*” Lukas looked stricken.

I scowled and turned my glass around in circles on the table. “Don’t act like you had no clue. You were always there egging him on along with Jan. Feeble fire. Tainted blood. Good for nothing except a quick screw. Sure to steal magic from any Teuton guy dumb enough to stay with me too long.”

Mist clouded Lukas’ irises as he gawked at me, his jaw hanging open. “Shit. Gabi, you still remember all that nonsense?”

“Why do you think I’ve lived outside Teuton lands for the past nine years?”

Lukas took the Lord’s name in vain and slumped over the table, splaying his right hand across his forehead. “I never realized . . . you left because you *believed* all of that? You believed your Teuton blood is weak? You don’t still think that now, do you?”

The waiter brought a dish of crostini before I decided how to respond, and Lukas straightened, his expression haunted. Once we were alone again, he heaved a sigh and managed to meet my gaze. “You can eat all of that if you want. I don’t deserve to be here with you. I didn’t know you took us seriously.”

“Even my mother doesn’t think I’m worthy to be *Leitalra*. I spent my entire childhood facing Teutonic

blood prejudice, and I've had enough. I probably won't stay here once my father finds another job. I'm sick of being treated like a disgrace." I snatched a crostini topped with ham and tomatoes from the dish and bit down hard. My fire had veiled my vision in red, reminding me that I could indeed wield magic, no matter what my people assumed.

"Ah, Gabi. I'm so sorry. I really didn't think—"

"No, you didn't," I interrupted, glaring at my dinner companion. "Didn't think about how we're all super impressionable and vulnerable as teenagers. Just figured it'd be a great idea to tell me my magic will disappear one of these days. I still have nightmares about that occasionally."

Lukas' shoulders sagged and he muttered something I could not catch. "If I could go back and fix what we did to you then, I would. I honestly have no excuse. If you want to leave me to eat all by myself, feel free. I'm the disgrace, not you."

My fire detected sincerity infusing his misty essence. Either he was telling the truth, or he was a really skilled liar. While I was not quite ready to forgive him just yet, I forced myself to take a mental step away from my turmoil. And I came up with a snarky reply. "Not on your life. I'm hungry and you're paying. I might take my plate over to a different table once our meals come, though."

I waited until Lukas lifted his gaze from his hands in his lap to meet my own. Then I offered him a tiny smile.

His eyebrows quirked in an absurd fashion as he asked, “Why exactly did you agree to have dinner with me, when I hurt you so bad in the past?”

“Because you have insight on how our people are moving against me. Now I know I have to watch out for Sandra trying to smack me together with some stupid oaf. Anything else?” I finished my second crostini—one topped with shrimp and gorgonzola—and pushed the plate toward Lukas. He could have the other two.

He glanced down at the plate and fingered the other crostini with tomatoes and ham. “Thanks. There is something else, and this is what worries me. Callen has been talking with his father, trying to convince the council to do something about your silver oak tree.”

“*Do* something about my silver oak tree? Like what? Chop it down?” Horror prompted my blood to run cold despite my fire. My great-grandfather had planted that tree’s acorn shortly after he bought my family’s house in the 1920s. The tree was old but still healthy, at least judging by the fairy’s appearance. I had gotten into the habit of visiting the tree most nights to tell it about my day, whether the *Eihalbe* chose to appear or not. The oak’s presence offered healing to my spirit.

“I think Callen might try to steal an acorn, even though we all know that’s forbidden. If the fairy catches him doing it, his family will be ruined. But he’s been raising talk that the fairy needs to present an acorn to a Teuton soon, so the tree’s successor can take root and

grow. And none of the priests in Erlangen want any more silver oaks springing up on your family's property. Some believe your great-grandfather didn't earn the acorn he planted."

"My great-grandfather's blood was at ninety percent, and he was a priest. He would never have planted an unblessed acorn. That tree has served this city well for decades. And my brother will probably inherit the house, not me. As long as he finds himself a girl with 'strong blood,' the 'problem' will be solved." I used air quotes twice and scrunched my nose.

"Still. You might want to figure out some way to protect the tree, or at least let the fairy know to be on guard. Callen might try to swipe an acorn in spirit form. He puts too much trust in his darkness to hide him. Or he might bribe someone else to do it."

"Shit. You're not wrong. I'm going to have to think about this." I crossed my legs and picked at a hangnail, gears turning in my brain as I tried to discern how best to protect a silver oak tree. Tell the *Eihalbe*, that was a definite. Should I try to set up some sort of elemental shield, too? Could I manage that type of feat?

Our entrées came while I thought about it, and we ate in silence for several minutes. People began to trickle into the private suite beyond the doorway beside Lukas, several toting balloons and a cake. Happy birthday to someone.

“Gabi, I want you to know . . . and I’m not saying this because I’m trying to justify how my buddies and I treated you,” Lukas began, his tone hesitant, his fork hovering over his plate of fried octopus. I raised my eyebrows, waiting as he cleared his throat, as he drew a shuddering breath. Finally, his hazel eyes locked upon mine while he voiced his confession.

“I probably wouldn’t have bullied you at all—or anyone else for that matter—if I hadn’t been trying to hide some things about myself. About my family. You know my mother doesn’t have the . . . best reputation among our people. The only thing that keeps the gossip quiet is her corporate position. But she’s still known for her . . . sexual exploits. My sister Nicole and I had different fathers. And you know one thing teens don’t do is keep their own gossip quiet.”

Lukas stopped talking, a pleading look in his eyes as they stared into mine. I could taste the remorse pulsing from his spirit, infusing his misty essence with a quality similar to dense fog cloaking a city street at night. My fire stretched out to comfort him, but I reined it in. Not yet. Forgiveness must be earned, though his apology was a welcome first step.

“So you projected your insecurities onto me, to protect yourself and your sister,” I translated, keeping an eye on him while I gathered another forkful of spaghetti. “Can’t say I’m happy about it, but it makes sense. And I’m glad you warned me about the Heising family’s plots. Thank you for that.”

Lukas ducked his head in acknowledgement, unhappiness still evident upon his face. I spouted off a few extra lines to clarify that while our working relationship could continue undamaged, that was all I could offer him at this point. Before he responded to that, I changed the subject. “So how’s Winston doing with—”

My query would remain unfinished as an incensed gasp pulled us from our discussion. I looked to the right and saw Johanna standing before the doorway to the private party, her mouth agape as she stared from Lukas to me.

Chapter Nine:
INVISIBLE MAGIC



Johanna looked fully prepared to make a scene, spots of red burning on her cheeks, her hands balling into fists at her sides. Thankfully, a toddling child broke away from her parents and wound herself around Johanna's legs with an enthusiastic squeal. "Tante Hanna! Tante Hanna!" The father scooped up his wayward daughter seconds later, his family resemblance to my

coworker quite evident as he herded everyone into the private suite.

I released the breath I was holding and shifted my gaze back to Lukas. He looked abashed. “I’d better get home,” I said, taking it upon myself to act since my companion seemed dumbstruck. I flagged our waiter and asked for a to-go box, then lowered my voice to address my boss again. “She’s going to assume we’re on a date, but if I leave you here to finish your dinner by yourself, maybe she won’t make my life at work a living hell.”

I tugged my leather coat over my blouse, and Lukas finally shook himself. “I’m so sorry, Gabi. I’ll talk to Johanna first thing tomorrow morning. Let her know that what we do outside of work is none of her concern.”

“Not sure whether that’ll be good enough for her. She has the hots for you, in case you hadn’t noticed. And unfortunately, we’re working on the same project right now. Just when I thought life in Erlangen couldn’t get any worse.” I sighed and transferred the rest of my pasta into the to-go box, prepared to default to my usual response to drama. Escape.

“Please, at least let me drive you home.” Lukas rose to his feet when I did, a pleading expression on his face. “I’ll get this smoothed over tomorrow.”

I lifted one finger and pointed at his chair. “No. You sit back down and finish your dinner. My house is literally three blocks from here, and this way you can start your damage control tonight instead of tomorrow.

If you do it in front of her family, she'll have more reason to listen." I nodded toward the doorway beside him, then said, "Thank you for dinner and for the wine. It was lovely. Now I need to go figure out how to protect a silver oak tree from bumbling Teuton priests."

To Lukas' credit, he did not pursue me.

When I entered my family's property and shut the side gate behind me, it occurred to me that I had left my shoulder bag in Lukas' car. Just my luck. There was nothing terribly important in there, but the racy romance novel I borrowed from the library last week sat on top of my other paraphernalia. Now I would have nothing to read on the bus tomorrow, and my boss would know I read books about girls bedding vampires. Wonderful.

Would Lukas be able to diffuse whatever jealousy Johanna nurtured toward me, or would my affable coworker become my latest bane?

Once at the cottage, I stuffed my leftovers in the fridge, then changed into casual clothes before heading to the silver oak tree. No matter what trials awaited me at work tomorrow, I needed to erect some sort of protections around the tree tonight. Whether Callen would try to steal an acorn or send someone else to do the dirty deed, I must warn the fairy of his nefarious plots.

The *Eihalbe* showed itself soon after I called for it, infusing my words with the protectiveness I felt for its tree. The silvery fairy settled itself upon a low branch and

studied me as I explained what Lukas told me, its lips pursed in disdain. “This season’s acorns are tucked away in my storehouse,” the *Eihalbe* told me, its voice reassuring my spirit.

“So you got them all already. Thank goodness.” I leaned back against the oak’s trunk and raised an eyebrow at the fairy. “I gathered some into piles amid your roots last month so no one would step on them.”

“Your help is much appreciated, *Zoubaraera Teutona*. Do pass my gratitude to the male who respects my kin. Unfortunate that humankind twists the wisdom of elder generations into ignorance.”

“Humans are good at forgetting what’s important. It’s too bad parents can’t pass their memories directly to their children, like trees do.” The *Eihalbe* had shared that tidbit with me years before. Silver oaks communicated with those at great distance through the currents of the winds, and sires passed their experiences and knowledge directly to the young. I was convinced that if humans could do the same, we would not perpetuate sin and failure.

“But now we’ve got at least one young Teuton priest who’s spreading unrest about your presence here on my family’s property,” I went on, crossing my arms and looking toward the main house. “I can let my father know, so he’ll be on guard whenever a priest or herbal witch wants access to your leaves. Not sure whether my mother will grant you the same deference. I’m thinking

maybe I should raise a fiery shield around your tree, one visible only in the spiritual realm.”

“Such a barrier would slow a trained priest, not stop him,” the *Eihalbe* said. It caught a portion of the autumn breeze in its fingers, fashioning it into a sparkling cloak. The fluctuating colors in its eyes darkened as though thoughtful.

“True. And I’m not sure if I can focus my magic well enough to do that. I usually create fire in the mortal realm, not the invisible realm. But I’m willing to try, if you think it’d help. An elemental barrier ought to give you advanced warning if a priest or some other Teuton tries to harm your tree.”

The fairy agreed that extra magical protection would be welcome. So I sat cross-legged among the oak’s roots, shutting my eyes as I delved deep into my core, seeking the numinous source of my fire magic. When Teutons conjured an element into the physical world, that sorcery stemmed from a person’s blood. But to invoke fire in the ethereal realm, I must call the magic of my spirit, that sizzling essence free from aging and death. I rarely tapped consciously into that sort of magic except to sharpen my senses or search for other Teutons.

But tonight I intended to raise a barrier of spiritual fire to shield my fairy’s home from evildoers.

The first few times I tried to summon invisible fire, a standard handful of red flames appeared above my right palm, casting light into the night. My element seemed

eager to breach the mortal veil, reminding me that the mystic qualities of my blood had not yet faded. I kept snuffing physical flames as my irritation grew. *This is supposed to be a spiritual barrier, invisible to the naked eye. I can't plant actual flames in a circle around the tree, or firefighters will extinguish them.*

The *Eihalbe* offered guidance after multiple failures, its voice opening my mind to an infinite expanse that spanned dimensions and fostered all life. I could grasp its wonders for myself, since Teuton blood held the key to powers outsiders imagined impossible. After over an hour of meditation, fire's aura curled invisibly around my fingers, casting light only for eyes augmented by elemental vitality.

The fairy and I worked together to expand my spiritual flames into a vibrant circle anchored into the tree's roots. That way the barrier could expand or contract as needed. I set a corner of my subconscious brain to offer the shield a continuous flow of magic, but I admitted to the fairy that I knew not whether I could maintain such a flow indefinitely.

"Please let me know if its power starts to fade," I requested as I stood back from the oak, observing the ethereal flames through a crimson haze.

"I shall indeed. Thank you for your kindness, *Zoubaraera Teutona*. Now I must inform your father of our enchantment, so he may continue to access leaves without fear. You ought to rest and rebuild your

reserves.” The *Eihalbe* favored me with a single nod before tossing its hair over one shoulder and fluttering off toward the main house.

“Thank you,” I called out belatedly, satisfaction warming me deep inside. The silver oak fairy never once treated me as a lesser witch on account of my blood status. Tonight it supported me as I proved to myself that I could summon flames mortal eyes could not see. While the process had tired me, it also lightened my mood. Who cared if my mother thought me unworthy to be *Leitalra*? I could create flames just as skillfully as the next fiery Teuton.

I heated up my leftovers from Isola Verde and gorged on them before taking a shower and crashing in bed. Weaving complex spiritual enchantments rendered me both tired and ravenous, so I sated my hunger first. Then I slept soundly, no lingering ghosts intruding upon my peace. Just before I drifted off, I realized that maybe I was ready to take a chance on another man after all. My hesitation resulted from fear, a sentiment I could conquer given proper drive.

Nervousness tingled along my spine the next morning as I rode the bus to work, unsure what awaited me in the office. Could Johanna set aside her jealousy and work together with me on our current project, or would she let her emotions get the better of her? If she did not bring up our chance encounter at the restaurant, I would have to do it myself, tell her that yes, I was interested in Lukas, but so far we were simply getting to know each

other as friends and colleagues. I could even mention that I knew him in high school. That might clear some things up.

Johanna had not yet arrived when I reached my desk, but Lukas had left my bag on my chair. I breathed a sigh of relief and opened the thin closet to hang my leather jacket and set the bag inside. When I did, I caught sight of a plastic sheen among my things that had not been there yesterday. Curious, I knelt down for a closer look, then lifted an unopened *ABBA Gold* CD from beside the romance book.

“I meant to give you that last night.” Lukas’ voice cut into my bewilderment, and I rose to my feet as I turned to face him. He stood beside my cubicle’s far wall, his forehead creased in regret. “I heard you and Johanna talking about music a while back and how you need to rebuild your collection. I hope that helps.”

He nodded at the CD I still held, his expression hinting that he feared I might throw it at him after last night’s debacle. I did like ABBA’s music, but should I accept his gift? He would not have bought me such a thing if he did not wish to transform our working relationship into something more. Last night, I realized I was ready to try again . . . but with my boss?

“Thank you. I really appreciate this,” I said, deciding I needed ABBA’s music in my life more than I needed to keep my professional and personal lives separate. I stuffed the CD back into my bag, then questioned in a

low voice, “Did you talk to Johanna last night? Is that why she’s not in yet?”

“She called out today, so you’re on your own,” Lukas answered, laying his left hand atop the portable wall and running his fingers along the edge of my white board. “But yes, I did talk to her, in front of her family like you suggested.”

My lips parted in shock as I shut the closet’s door. “And?”

Lukas seemed to be fighting a smirk. “I informed her that we’ve known each other for years and that I have no romantic interest in her. Then I invited her to come meet some of my buddies at the rowing club tomorrow afternoon. I gave her names of three who’d be thrilled to get to know her.”

My jaw dropped further and I plunked down onto my chair. “That’s . . . just . . . brilliant. I hope the guys you mentioned like chatty women, though.” I shook my head slowly as a grin spread across my face. Lukas had shot Johanna down and directed her attentions elsewhere, potentially sparing me from misplaced wrath.

Lukas grinned back, a slight flush coloring his cheeks. “I know you said last night that you’re not interested in romance right now. But I was wondering if you’d like to stop by the rowing club tomorrow, too, so we could walk along the canal after practice. I’d like to see if we can be friends . . . and find out how I can fix all the damage my buddies and I did to you in high school.”

He lifted his hand from my white board, his posture shifting as though he prepared to flee to his office the second I rejected him. Lucky for Lukas, my success with the enchantment the previous night combined with his efforts to protect me from local conspiracies loosened the grip Kyle's ghost held upon me. It was time to find out where this would lead.

"I'm having lunch with my brother, but after that I'm free. I can ride my bike to the canal and meet you at the club once you're done on the water."

"In that case, I'll ride my bike there, too." Lukas caught Herr Werndl's gaze from the corner office. "Now, though, I think we both have projects to finish."

He walked away before I could answer, but excitement surged through my blood on the heels of my fire magic. I allowed traces of its flames to manifest along the edges of my vision as I booted up my computer, ready to tackle this day.

The following afternoon, I ruminated on my lunch with Dennis as I rode my bike toward the Europakanal. We had walked to Isola Verde and shared a pizza, and he admitted he was struggling in some of his classes. Dennis studied premed, but had little interest in scientific formulas. "I just want to help people stay healthy, but sometimes it's like my professors view the human body as a machine. It's all about how these enzymes influence those cells and stuff like that," he groused, his shoulders sagging in fatigue.

I told him I would not judge if he chose a different path, for there were many ways to improve people's health. He could go into nutrition or athletic training, or even switch gears entirely to the arts. "We'd all be depressed if we lived in an artless world," I observed, "and your molten rock sculptures are awesome."

Dennis had laughed and said he would rather sculpt in his downtime. If his income relied upon his artistic output, his inspiration would fizzle. That prompted a discussion on popular artists, musicians, and actors—how the quality of their art tended to decline or grow predictable once they achieved fame. I thought about how that might apply to romantic relationships, as I turned left onto the path along the canal. Some fell apart after the honeymoon phase, like one-hit wonders, while others thrived and still others eased into a stale routine.

It took me four years to accept that my relationship with Kyle was not worth saving. The man imagined himself flawless, pointing his finger at me for anything that went wrong. Exactly like my mother. Over the past few weeks, I had wrestled with myself, trying to figure out if there was some flaw in my genes that drew me to narcissists. I had kept my distance from my mother since I came back to this city, but was there another male figure waiting in the wings to take her place?

So far, Lukas had shown no signs of a destructive personality. In fact, he had helped me with projects on several occasions and encouraged me when deadlines aroused my frustration. The Keyholder seemed to be a

respectful man, too. I had visited Lady Erlanga four times since my return home, and Henning supported her each time, offering humorous insight in his frog's voice every now and then. While I recoiled from the idea of representing this city's Teuton community and binding myself to a fated husband, the future *Leitalra* could certainly do worse.

But my fire smoldered with longing in Lukas' presence, not Henning's. And Bianca texted me just last night, informing me that another young Teuton woman born in this city had gotten engaged. Sandra Heising pulled her collection of strings, cutting her competition down to three. If my fire had any say in the matter, Lukas would claim my heart long before Lady Erlanga passed away.

Johanna's voice called out to me when I reached the rowing club, and I saw her perched upon the grassy slope above the path. "Hey, Gabi! You here to ogle the rowers? Lukas is going to introduce me to a few of them once they've finished!"

She beamed at me, her blonde hair shining golden in the sunlight. I climbed off my bike and wheeled it over to where she sat, laying it onto its side as I settled to her left. "Sounds like a great way to spend a Saturday afternoon."

Johanna handed me a container of mints, and I popped one into my mouth while she slid closer to my

side. “Are you here to ride with our boss?” she asked in a stage whisper.

“I guess so. You’re not mad, are you?” I reached back to fiddle with my bun, ensuring no strays had escaped. I avoided her gaze and whispered a silent prayer of thanks for my mirrored sunglasses. If she was about to tear into me, my element might appear in my irises. I did not need an outsider noticing my magic.

To my surprise, a shout of laughter burst from Johanna’s lips. “I was, at first. I’m sorry about how I behaved at the restaurant. Lukas told me a few things, and there’s a lot of other male fish in the sea. Most of whom are in boats right now.”

I chanced a glance at my coworker, who was watching one of the longboats gliding toward the shore. My fire sensed Lukas’ mist situated among the rowers, two seats back from the bow. “He told you a few things, huh? Like what?”

Johanna leaned toward me and spoke out of the corner of her mouth. “He *likes* you.”

My heart jumped into my throat, and I could not form an appropriate reply. “When he kisses you, I want to hear all about it. I want to know how skilled he is with his tongue.” Johanna made smooching sounds.

I shoved her lightly and bit into my mint, its burst of freshness granting me an extra dose of courage. “He’s our boss. I’m not going to talk about stuff like that.”

Lukas noticed us as he and his buddies vacated their boat and carried it up the bank. He beckoned us to his side, and Johanna squealed under her breath and squeezed my arm before leaping to her feet and sprinting toward where the rowers stored their longboats. I followed at a measured pace, wheeling my bike along and waiting by the path for Lukas to finish introducing our coworker to several of his buddies. Eventually, Johanna strode off toward the nearby café with two men in tow, and Lukas retrieved his own bike and came my way.

“Johanna’s a metaphorical ball of fire, but literal fire is more my type,” he said in greeting, situating himself atop his bike. He had thrown his leather jacket on overtop his athletic shirt, his fingers flexing on the handlebars.

“That’s the silliest pickup line I’ve ever heard,” I shot back, though I knew my cheeks were burning. I swung my leg over my bike and pushed off onto the path, turning south and leaving him in the dust.

Lukas caught up with me in seconds, choosing to ride on my left side. “Hey, I know you’re not ready for anything serious. But I get tired of holding back what I really think of you, when we’re at work.”

“You really think my bloodline’s so weak my fire will crumble away into embers by the time I’m fifty.” I stuck my tongue out at him and pumped the pedals harder, pulling ahead.

“You remember *that*, too?” Lukas huffed a bit as he reached my side again, and then we split apart for an

elderly couple on a stroll. When he guided his bike back toward mine, he said, “Gabi, I made that story up. It’s not possible for a Teuton’s element to waste away when they get old.”

“Hmm. I’ll have to tell my anxiety it needs a new subject.” I eyed my companion from behind my sunglasses, appreciating his remorseful look. “If it’s true that the adult version of Lukas Felder is far more mature and respectful than the high school version, I might be curious to see where this leads.”

My heart fluttered when I spoke the truth and waited for his response. Sure, Johanna claimed he liked me, but he also seemed content enough to continue a simple friendship. But then he confessed something that shocked me all over again. “I’ve had a crush on you since we first met. That’s part of why I bullied you, to try to escape it. Your fire lures my mist like a siren’s song.”

Chapter Ten:
A PENTHOUSE GALA



My bike tires screeched as I came to a halt just before the bridge at Kapellensteg. Lukas rolled past me at first, then swung around, his bike's slow pace implying he knew not how to take my reaction. I glared at him from behind my sunglasses, red veiling my vision as my blood erupted with heat. *How could he just spit that out*

as an excuse for convincing teenage me that my blood status made me weak?

“You bullied me because you liked me. That’s disgusting,” I snapped at him when he stopped his front tire about ten centimeters away from mine.

His regret smacked into my aura a second time, his mist attempting to calm my fire. “You’re right. It was disgusting. The actions of a coward. I shouldn’t be pursuing you after what I did. You deserve a lot better than me.”

Lukas looked down at his hands curving around the handlebars of his bike, his mist pulsing with shame. It had begun to summon a cloud of humidity around us, one that might grow obvious if he kept wallowing. At least he was willing to own up to his mistakes, no matter how cruelly they had cut me years ago. The same could not be said about my ex or my mother. Signs that Lukas had an honorable heart and sought to improve himself.

“You’d better quit groaning about your past failures, or people might notice the fog you’re gathering.” When he looked at me, I gestured in the direction we had come. “Why don’t we ride back into town and get something to eat? I’m still curious to see whether I can manage a romance with a Teuton. I’ve only been with outsiders so far. It’d be nice not to have to keep my fire under wraps.”

Lukas appeared mystified by my response, but he shrugged. “Lead the way. I’ll admit I’m famished after rowing for almost two hours.”

“At this hour, ice cream might be all we can get unless we crash Johanna’s party at the club café.” I glanced at my watch, then turned my bike north and started riding again. “That might be a good idea, though. Keep her honest.”

“Greek food would hit the spot right about now. I usually eat at the café after practice, anyway. But you’re a welcome diversion, no matter what my stomach’s telling me.” Lukas snickered as he rode to my left.

“Far be it from me to deprive a strapping young man of food.” I kept my gaze on the path ahead, my eyes passing over the skyscrapers on the opposite side of the canal.

“Strapping young man? That implies I’m not alone in my attraction.”

“Never said you were.” I winced when the words left my lips. *Should have kept that under wraps a while longer.*

“Well, if we’re done pretending we’re mere coworkers, I could use your help with something.”

“What sort of something?” I studied Lukas’ profile as we neared the rowing club. His upper lip formed a slight grimace.

“My mother’s birthday party is next Friday night at her penthouse downtown. I haven’t gotten her a present yet, because I’m having trouble deciding between two sets of earrings.”

“You’re asking a girl whose ears aren’t pierced to help you decide which pair of earrings to get for your mother. As if I’d know the first thing about her tastes.” We got off our bikes and rolled them toward where Lukas and his teammates had stashed their longboats earlier.

“I could use some female advice on the subject, either way. I could also use a female guest to join me at the party.” Lukas opened the door of the café for me and held it, hopefulness animating his hazel eyes.

I had to actively squelch my fire as it flared to life in my blood, curtailing it before it could turn my irises from blue to red. I deliberately looked away from Lukas while I took my sunglasses off and stepped into the café, checking to see how Johanna fared with her two rowers. They sat at the bar with mugs of beer and an appetizer sampler, engrossed in conversation.

“Let’s take that corner table and leave them to their fun.” I headed for the two-person table without waiting to see if Lukas would follow, thinking about the café’s beer list and salad menu. I was not famished yet, since Dennis and I shared the pizza just three hours ago.

Lukas’ uncertainty poured off of him like water from a hose, but he sat across from me without pressing the birthday party issue. I held back my response until we ordered our meals—a gyro salad for me, and souvlaki with garlic potatoes for him—and our beers came. Then, after I took my first sip of frothing wheat beer, I met Lukas’ gaze with the mug still held to my lips. “I can’t say

no to a rich gala. There's bound to be sumptuous food and drink."

Lukas' shoulders sagged in relief as he made his way out of his jacket. "Oh, there will be. I might have to explain what some of the dishes are."

"Right, because I'm a broke peasant. You realize, though, that if we attend something like that together, your mother and sister will assume we're dating." I was not entirely sure I wanted to run into Nicole. I might not be able to hold back the curses I longed to spew at her for bullying Bianca.

"That could be a good thing. My mother's been begging me to settle down with someone for years now. I know she'll like you. A passionate businesswoman with drive and a reliable character."

I blushed at his compliment and muttered something dismissive. Anxiety crawled to the surface of my brain at the idea of meeting Lukas' successful mother. I was so used to vitriol on that front; I could not imagine she may actually like me.

When the time came to prepare myself for the party the following Friday, I was out of sorts. Bianca had called me in tears during my lunch break, for she and Oliver just learned their first attempt at IVF had failed. Two embryos implanted, but her body had rejected both. I offered to meet her at Zum Weißen Hirsch as soon as I got off work, the penthouse party be damned. But she said she would spend the evening seeking solace with her

husband, so I promised to stop by their apartment on Saturday afternoon.

I planned to run by the library and the bakery first to retrieve a feel-good movie and some coconut macaroons, but that would have to wait until tomorrow. At work that afternoon, I could hardly concentrate on my current audit, my emotions shifting from sorrow on Bianca's behalf to fury at the prospect of meeting Nicole at the party tonight. Hopefully, I could convince Lukas we should stay away from her and her arrogant husband, Jan.

I ended up throwing on a basic black dress with a scoop neck and a skirt that fell just above my knees, adding a single splash of red for my fire's sake—a garnet pendant on a silver chain, one of my late grandmother's creations. The affluent guests may consider me far beneath them, but I was too melancholy to expend much effort on my appearance. Gathering my brown hair back, I secured it away from my face with a black clip, then put on a touch of black eyeliner and lipstick that matched the garnet necklace. I completed the outfit with a pair of black tights and heels that added a handbreadth to my height.

Earlier that week, I had helped Lukas settle on blue topaz earrings set in white gold for his mother's birthday present. Her element was snow, so she wore and decorated with creams, silvers, and blues. That meant I would have to stay sober tonight so I would not spill anything on her white carpeted floors. Thank goodness

Lukas thought to warn me about that, because I had a strong urge to binge on hard liquor as an ode to Bianca.

I met him at the curb in front of my parents' driveway just before seven p.m. Lukas insisted upon walking around the front of his Mercedes to open the passenger door for me, an ocean-scented cologne seeming to merge with his misty essence when he took in my outfit. "No jacket?"

He wore the black trench coat I remembered from our dinner date. "My fire will keep me warm enough tonight," I answered with a careless wave of my hand. "The party's taking place indoors, after all."

Lukas chuckled and shut the passenger door behind me. I laid my purse in my lap and reached back for the seatbelt, surprised when my companion took his place beside me and said, "My mother's penthouse has an expansive patio with a magnificent view of the city. And a heated pool that extends into the suite."

I blinked at my boss as his car carried us toward the city center. "A heated pool that extends into the suite. Really. Totally didn't think to stuff a bikini into my purse."

"Don't worry about it. We can enjoy the food and dancing and mingling among my mother's contacts without bothering with the pool. Or the Jacuzzi." A wicked grin spread across Lukas' face.

"I am *not* ready to 'mingle with the rich,'" I complained, using air quotes. "The punch bowl is calling

me, especially if it's strongly spiked. And we need to avoid your bitchy sister if at all humanly possible."

Lukas held his peace for a moment and braked for a red light. After shifting his car into neutral, he turned to look me in the eye. "What's wrong, Gabi? Please don't tell me it's nothing. You've looked heartbroken since this afternoon."

I sighed, not wanting to share Bianca's situation with a man I still barely knew. "One of my close friends got bad news today. I almost decided not to attend this party, but I figured it'd be a good distraction."

Lukas moved the gearshift back into first gear and hit the gas the moment the light turned green. "I'm sorry. If you want to just get drunk tonight, I promise I'll get you home safely. And I'll make sure none of my mother's acquaintances try to hurt you."

"Thanks." I directed a half-smile at Lukas and said, "I don't really want to spend all night throwing up or greet the morning with a pounding headache, so I won't go overboard. But don't expect me to hold intellectual conversations with a bunch of swaggering executives."

"I can do all the talking, and we'll do our best to give Nicole the slip. Jan, too. I'm not sure how many Teutons my mother invited, but there'll likely be a few priests in attendance."

"Ugh. Let's just gorge and drink and ignore everyone." I leaned my head against the headrest and closed my eyes to concentrate on breathing steadily and deeply. My

element's warmth flowed through my blood in soothing fashion.

“Fine by me. I might talk to some of my mother's colleagues about job-related stuff, though.” I acknowledged this with a nod, basking in the darkness' peace. He probably needed to talk up Werndl Accounting again, so we could secure more auditing clients for next year.

Apparently Lukas had access to a reserved garage under the skyscraper that held his mother's penthouse. He parked his Mercedes between a sky blue Rolls Royce and a white Maserati convertible. “Your mother has expensive tastes,” I remarked as I stepped out of his car, not waiting for him to get my door.

“She uses the convertible whenever she's looking to impress a new partner,” Lukas noted, his expression one of tolerant acceptance. He offered me his arm and led me to what appeared to be a private elevator. Two heartleaf philodendrons curled upward from round marble planters on either side of its copper-hued doors.

This is definitely going to be an experience, I thought as we stepped into the lift together. Frau Felder is a multi-millionaire in her own right, and I'm about to waltz into her penthouse dressed like someone Lukas picked up at a pub. I should have gotten her a birthday present, too. Will she and her guests notice that I have nothing but her son's reputation to endorse me?

I would have to stay close to Lukas the entire time, even if I needed to use the restroom.

When the elevator stopped at the top floor, we entered a vestibule where a suave doorman waited to take Lukas' coat and my purse. Alluring scents of steamy food beckoned us further inside, and Lukas grinned at me as he held his arm out once more. "Pretty sure the good stuff is this way," he said, steering me into a spacious chamber.

The white carpet he had mentioned before squished beneath my shoes, and I cut a quick glance at my companion. I stood nearly as tall as him thanks to my heels, but his chest and shoulders were almost twice as broad as mine. Lukas wore a long-sleeved royal blue polo shirt with the Ralph Lauren insignia, his black jeans and thick leather belt granting him a relaxed appearance. I did my best to copy his confident stance even though the chamber's furnishings were way over my pay grade. Silver filigree ornamented the baseboards and crown molding, and I counted three types of philodendrons stretching forth from planters situated at each corner and beside the floor-to-ceiling windows along the far wall.

I walked beside Lukas in a daze, overwhelmed by the classiness of both the penthouse and its current occupants. At least a dozen men and women gathered around a long mahogany table near the windows, filling plates with food. Some of the men wore three-piece suits and ties, while others had dressed casually like Lukas.

Form-hugging dresses seemed the norm among the women. I congratulated myself on the instinct that told me to choose my black dress over a pair of jeans.

Lukas spoke greetings to several others on our way to the buffet table but kept moving, thankfully. My stomach had begun to protest its emptiness, and the dishes on that table smelled heavenly. When we reached the stack of plates at one end, I noticed a young man with long brown hair tied back in a ponytail, casting his gaze over the hors d'oeuvres with a bemused expression.

My fire chose that moment to contract into my spirit, leaving me blind to the other Teutonic magic hovering in the chamber. But I recognized the Keyholder right away and a portion of my insecurity evaporated. “Henning? Frau Felder invited you to her birthday celebration?”

He turned to face me and I beamed at him, letting go of Lukas’ arm so he could retrieve plates for us. Henning’s blue eyes brightened in recognition. “Hey, Gabi! She invited me along with three of the other priests on the council, so I guess she’s not as conceited as her situation implies.”

Lukas gave a single snort and handed me a weighty plate with golden leaf designs lining its edges. “Be careful. She might try to lure you into her bed.”

My eyes widened at Lukas’ frankness. He laid a pair of artichoke puffs onto his plate, while Henning gaped at him, stricken. “Seriously?”

“My mother esteems those with power and influence. Like Teuton priests. Especially Keyholders.”

I looked up from the shrimp bundles I was laying onto my plate in time to watch Henning’s cheeks turn beet red. “I’m planning on saving myself for my Lady, actually. I’ll point your mother to my colleagues if she expresses an interest.” The young man cleared his throat and moved further down the table, obviously trying to put distance between himself and Lukas.

“You just mortified the Keyholder. Way to go,” I chided Lukas, smirking as I added a sausage-stuffed mushroom to my plate.

“How do you know him? You called him by his first name.”

I detected a trace of jealousy in his tone, so I laid it on thick. “His great-grandmother’s trying to set me up with him. Not sure whether Erlanga’s soul will go for it, but at least Henning’s cute and respectful. I could do worse.”

“Cute.” Lukas sounded vexed now, and I had to turn away to hide my grin. Henning had made it to the side dishes, unaware of our conversation. My element smoldered back to life as I shifted my attention to the stuffed turkey an attendant had begun to carve—and it set off alarm bells in my brain when it sensed smoke.

Nicole stood watching me from the entryway, her lips pursed in a sneer.

Chapter Eleven:

THREATS AND DOUBTS



“Somebody’s giving me the evil eye,” I muttered to Lukas while the attendant laid a slice of turkey onto my plate. I nodded toward the doorway to the vestibule, where Nicole stood whispering to her husband, another bully from my teen years.

Lukas cast them a pointed glance and laid a hand against my back. “I don’t think she’ll confront us both. And I know of a few hidden nooks tucked away from the crowds. One or two of them might still be unoccupied if we hurry.”

“Great idea.” I poured a bit of gravy over my turkey, then laid a pair of rolls onto my plate, deeming myself finished for now. “Just need a cup of punch and we can leave the gossiping Teutons to themselves.”

I waited while Lukas added a spinach and Swiss egg soufflé and a scoop of Mediterranean vegetables to his plate. Then we walked side by side to the separate table that held an extensive collection of drinks—the crystal punch bowl, a keg from a local brewery, intricately shaped wine bottles, hard liquors, and champagnes. A female attendant poured each of us a glass of punch, and Lukas asked her to follow behind us with an extra pitcher and a bottle of sparkling water.

He greeted several other people as we threaded our way through the throng, ultimately slipping into a short hallway that led behind the kitchen. I caught a whiff of pool chemicals when we entered a new room with tiled floors. For a moment, I stood still and gawked at what lay before me—two enclosed saunas, a hot tub with stilled waters, and a pool with an artificial waterfall spilling from the mouth of a marble dolphin. Blue lights ran along the walls and the base of the pool, gas flames flickering along the hanging wall that opened the pool to

the rooftop patio. None of the other guests had invaded this place yet.

Now I really wished I had brought a bikini. As freeing as it would be to swim naked in a penthouse pool, I had no desire to fend off a gaggle of posturing males.

“This place will be packed once everyone’s done stuffing themselves,” Lukas commented, a wry smile upon his face. “But we can enjoy our meals in the alcove behind the sword ferns. There’s a little fireplace back there, too.” He led me into a cozy nook and asked the attendant to place our drinks on a dinette table.

We sat together at the dinette and ate in silence for a while, the flames in the gas fireplace providing ambient light that whispered to my element. Splashing water from the dolphin statue on the other side of the thick collection of ferns gave off an oddly restful atmosphere. I could easily spend hours here reading beside the fireplace, taking a dip in the pool whenever I needed to expend some energy. The natural yellow-orange glow gradually took on a more crimson hue as my element eased into relaxation.

“Does that happen automatically to any fires near you?” Lukas’ question cut into my reverie, turning my attention away from the rich flavor of sausage mingled with mushroom. I met his gaze and he nodded at the fireplace, its flames flecked with vibrant scarlet.

“Only if I’m feeling safe enough to allow my element free rein,” I said.

“I’m glad my hideaway meets with your fire’s approval,” Lukas responded, taking a bite of soufflé and chewing slowly, his expression thoughtful. “I like to curl up here sometimes with a book and a blanket. The pool introduces a humid touch that my mist seems to relish.”

“Makes sense.” I kept my gaze riveted upon my plate, concentrating on my food in an attempt to ignore the growing camaraderie I felt with my boss. So Lukas liked to read, too, and bundle up before the fireplace. My intuition drew me toward him, assuring me that he was nothing like my ex.

“Do you want to be the next Lady of Erlangen?”

Caught off guard, I stiffened and looked up from my food. Lukas studied me as though he wished to read the depths of my soul. My mind wandered back to Henning’s delight when he recognized me at the buffet table, remembering how my element always sensed his status as Keyholder. From all I had seen of him thus far, I liked and respected Henning, but my interest ended there.

“Honestly? Not really. I didn’t come back here hoping to get chained to this city with a bond I can’t break. I have a few friends among the Teutons here, but I’m well aware of how the majority views me. Tainted blood. Feeble fire. Only eighty-five percent. They’d all expect Henning to pound my ass over and over until I reach his level. And I am *not* into that stuff. At all.”

I paused to take a swig of punch and saw that Lukas was gaping at me. I likely should have kept that last

tidbit to myself, but he had asked. The frustrations I had long held close to my chest clawed their way to the fore, striking at the one who exacerbated my mother's antagonism into something far worse.

“I don't care what you bastards think. My fire magic is just as strong as your mist, just as strong as Henning's blue fire. I've heated apartments with it for nine years and light candles without a match. I figured out how to conjure an elemental shield in the spiritual realm to protect my family's silver oak. I sense the presence of seventeen other Teutons among the guests in this penthouse right now. And you know what happened to the guy I lost my virginity to?”

Taking another drink from my glass, I dragged out the pause to see if Lukas dared to counter my fury. But he held his peace, mist veiling his irises in pale blue, his skin ashen. I picked up my roll and took a giant bite, narrowing my eyes at my former bane, this gorgeous jock who had introduced me to Teutonic prejudice. Right as I swallowed my bite of bread, Lukas prompted in a low voice, “Did you burn him?” He sounded fearful.

I laid my roll down and set both hands on the dinette. Staring directly into his eyes, I answered, “When he brought me to climax, I lost my grip on my fire. It sizzled into my aura like a stream of molten lava. I burned him, and he pulled out moaning. He told everyone I gave him herpes. A second-degree burn, and the son of a bitch thought it was herpes. So I spent most of my adult life suppressing my magic with dusky spurge to protect the

men I slept with. You know what that feels like, to lock an intrinsic part of yourself away like it's a shame, a menace?"

Lukas sighed and rubbed his forehead as if to smooth the lines of anguish sketched there. "It must be awful, debilitating. I've never slept with an outsider."

"But even if you did, you'd just get them wet," I reminded him. "But not me. Not Gabi Scholz. Not the one whose fire is weak because her blood status is weak. All Teutons are equal in elemental power. Lady Erlanga taught me that when I was a little girl. And yet people stand around mocking those of us at the threshold. It's so ignorant. Teutonic blood prejudice is just as stupid as racism."

It occurred to me when I stopped for breath and took up my roll again that maybe I should quit while I was ahead. The hard liquor in the punch might be influencing my judgment along with my filter. I glanced at the unopened bottle of sparkling water as I chewed on the roll. I ought to drink some of that next.

"Gabi, I really don't know what to say," Lukas admitted at length, seeming to realize I had finished my rant. He fingered an artichoke puff, twisting it around his plate while his free hand tapped nervously against his thigh. "You've faced the dregs of the Teuton community, and I truly admire you for coming back anyway. I hope you don't get your choices taken away by Erlanga's soul, but I do think you'd make a great *Leitalra*."

Sincerity infused his misty essence with an enchanting sparkle, and I could not fight the smile that broke across my face. “Thanks, Lukas. Hopefully we won’t have to worry about that for a few more years, anyway. Lady Erlanga’s as tough as nails. She’s not going to leave this world anytime soon.”

Lukas leaned toward me over the table, his eyes taking in every aspect of my face before focusing on my garnet pendant for a second. “I hope you’re right,” he said, his gaze shifting back to my own. “And I’d love to spend some time with you here in this alcove, wrapped in a pile of blankets and pillows with the fireplace lit, a bottle of wine and a charcuterie board sitting on this table alongside a pile of books on Teutonic magic and history. It would be a privilege to study together with you, to find out what sort of spells our mist and fire could weave.”

I leaned toward him as he spoke, my gaze drifting from his mesmerizing eyes to his smooth lips forming each word. I imagined walking with Lukas along the canal on a foggy morning with the dew clinging to each blade of grass, the fresh scent of his element luring me forward. Our faces mere centimeters apart, I looked up at him through my eyelashes and murmured, “I would love to do that with you.”

Lukas leaned closer, the tip of his nose brushing mine just as the door to the hallway burst open. A group of hooting young men charged into the room carrying a mostly-naked female, her tinkling voice urging them on. “I’m ready! I’m ready!”

Lukas and I straightened instantly, watching as the men tossed the giggling woman into the pool, each of them proceeding to strip and follow her. An amused snort breezed through my nostrils, and Lukas said, “Looks like our peace and quiet has ended. It’ll only get worse from here.”

“We can go back to the party if you want. I’m pretty much done.” I rose to my feet and stretched, popping the last bit of roll into my mouth in the process. The warmth that bloomed within my spirit at the prospect of kissing Lukas had waned, and part of me wanted to find out what had become of Henning. He might need company; he had looked like a fish out of water when we met earlier.

Lukas retrieved the pitcher of punch, while I took up the bottle of sparkling water, intending to cart our wares back to the drink station. On our way back to the primary chamber, he pulled one of the attendants aside and asked him to take care of the dishes we had left in the fern-lined alcove. “I’m going to have to do some job-related socializing whether we like it or not,” Lukas reminded me.

I tagged along with him for a while as he drifted from one batch of executives to another, introducing myself and sharing my experience as a financial auditor. I sipped on the sparkling water in my glass between conversations, and eventually my bladder started sending me barbed messages. At that point, we had managed to elude Nicole, my fire magic keeping tabs on

the location of her smoke. I sensed it loitering on the patio alongside her husband's warm wind and deemed it safe to separate from Lukas to take care of business.

On the way out of a small restroom along the hallway that led to the pool, I almost ran smack into a hefty oaf clad entirely in black, tie included. The dim light in the passage seemed unable to touch the man, who stood a head taller than me despite my heels. Shadows concealed his face as he drained a champagne flute and moved to block my path back to the main gathering.

"Back in town and still unattached, I see," the man observed in a voice that was vaguely familiar to me. When I tried to sidestep him, he tossed his flute aside and snatched my left wrist in a firm grip. Darkness crept along my skin, prompting all of my senses to tense, on guard.

"Callen," I hissed, my mind racing back to those endless schooldays when the Toilet Brigade harassed me. This one was the worst of them all, the only one among them who escalated verbal taunts into physical acts.

"Ah, you still remember me," he crooned, his darkness squelching my efforts to summon my fire in defense. He backed me against the wall as his right hand crept forward to prod my left breast before resting itself upon my heart. "You're wearing my color, Gabi. Your feeble fire yearns for a master of darkness to tame it. I sense it calling to me."

I tried to arch away from him as his potent magic sank into my chest to curl around my heart, numbing its incensed pattering. He breathed heavily and bent his head to my face, his lips parting to kiss me—or maybe bite my neck. Teuton priests had an unusual habit of drinking their partners' blood on the regular.

“Callen Heising, that’s enough.” A female voice ringing with authority cut through the miasma his darkness had cast upon me. My fire flared to life, and he dropped my hand and took two steps back. Red enhanced my vision, rendering Callen’s gloom useless. I bared my teeth at him, fully prepared to set his clothing ablaze, even if witnesses lingered nearby.

A dignified matron wearing a stylish white dress dusted with silver stepped directly in front of Callen, her black hair piled into intricate braids atop her head. Blue topaz earrings dangled from her ears, winter’s chill knocking the hallway’s temperature down several degrees. Frau Astrid Felder, Lukas’ mother.

“I’ll not have you chasing after unaccompanied Teuton witches on my property,” she told him in a no-nonsense tone, frown lines creasing her cheeks. “If you need an elemental romp in the sheets, you know where to get it.”

Callen withdrew again, glancing toward the doorway to the pool. “I have no desire to screw my best friend’s mother,” he grumbled.

Frau Felder raised her eyebrows at him and set her hands upon her hips. “My son no longer considers you

his best friend. He explores gentler waters these days.” To my astonishment, she looked directly at me, approval radiating from her snowy aura. Her irises were a pure white.

Callen muttered something unintelligible and lumbered off toward the pool, leaving me in the hallway with Lukas’ formidable mother. I had no idea what to say to her; my thoughts whirled like autumn leaves caught in a breeze. After we looked at each other in silence for several seconds, I managed to say, “Thank you . . . Frau Felder. I should have burned him when he first grabbed me. I don’t know why I hesitated.”

“He caught you by surprise. His advances are no fault of yours. Come, let’s go find my son. Your date, I do believe. He told me you helped him pick out these earrings. Splendid taste.” She touched one with a fond smile, her irises darkening from snow white to a striking blue. Then she pivoted to march back the way she had come, and I hurried to follow.

“Oh dear!” She halted abruptly before Callen’s discarded champagne flute. Bending down to retrieve it, the scowl returned to her face. “That ridiculous priest left this here, didn’t he?”

“He did,” I confirmed, my voice still sounding much smaller than normal. I took a deep breath of the crisp air in Frau Felder’s aura, trying to ease the belated shock that kept my heartrate elevated. I funneled my fire magic

back into my spirit, not wanting to freak out any guests with my red eyes.

The hostess—and birthday girl—declared she would visit the kitchen first to have the flute washed, striding forward with a confidence that intimidated me. Why had I not resisted Callen's assault? Why had my fire succumbed to his darkness? I felt like a failure, a weak-blooded disappointment.

Frau Felder parted ways with me at the doorway to the kitchen, promising to meet Lukas and me in the main parlor within minutes. Once she had gone, I wandered through the chamber that resembled a ballroom, a DJ playing love songs from a massive stereo in the far corner as guests thronged the dance floor. When the music first started playing some time ago, I considered asking Lukas to detach himself from his colleagues and share a dance with me. Now, I just wanted to go home and burrow in my bed to cry.

I reached the doorway into the main chamber, where my fire sensed Lukas' mist in the company of three empty spirits—his non-Teuton business contacts. Just as I stepped through, Nicole appeared out of nowhere, her smoke condensed into a knot near her heart, as though she knew my element tracked her whereabouts. She stared up at me with an expression of disdain, her golden dress hugging her waist and boobs, her eyes an exact match to her mother's. Not a single hair on her head was out of place, a gold butterfly clip situated amid her short black locks.

“It’s so sweet you think my brother actually likes you,” she said, pity cloying her voice. “He doesn’t want you to be *Leitalra*. That’s why he’s playing with you.”

Chapter Twelve:

**DEEPENING
ATTRACTION**



Callen's assault had demolished my confidence. I blinked at Nicole for a second, my brain unable to craft an appropriate comeback. Brushing past her, I headed for where my fire detected Lukas among the crowd, a hard lump forming in my throat. When I reached his side, I touched his upper arm and softly asked him to drive me home.

When we crossed the Regnitz into Alterlangen, I finally managed to choke out Nicole's terrible claim. While I believed what Lukas told me a week before—that he had fought an attraction to me since we first met in high school—his sister's statement introduced doubts into my mind. They ate away at my certainty, aggravated by my inability to counter Callen's potent darkness. I was not worthy to be *Leitalra* of Erlangen or any other Teuton city. Maybe Lukas had decided now was the time to act on his attraction, just to spare his home from a weak-blooded matriarch.

Lukas shot down my fears without delay, declaring that his sister told lies. She thrived on discord and drama, and doubtless wanted to do her part to support Sandra Heising's bid for the position of Lady. Nicole always tried to stir up trouble whenever Lukas dated, he added through clenched teeth. She liked being the only one in their family with a spouse and children of her own. It gave her a sense of superiority.

His explanations passed through me without sticking, although the rational corner of my brain acknowledged their validity. But age-old dubiety had pulled me under and I needed solitude. First, I would have to release the sobs pent up inside; and then I must reconsider my path all over again.

Once we reached my family's house, Lukas asked me to call him if I needed anything over the weekend. He even offered to walk me to my cottage, but I shook him off and said I would see him at the office on Monday. He

sat watching me from his car until I shut the side gate behind me and sped into the yard, tears working their way free from my eyes. I did not think to check the magical shield around the silver oak before I shut myself into the cottage, misery overtaking me.

I did not fall asleep until late into the night, curled beneath my blankets with helplessness' specter stalking the shadows. Why had I imagined I could find joy and belonging here in Erlangen, when this place had brought me nothing but grief? While my mother seemed willing to maintain the distance between us for now, I faced the judgment in her gaze every Sunday evening. My father had not yet found employment, though he had interviewed at two firms earlier this month. He tried to maintain his natural lightheartedness, but I tasted anxiety in his spirit whenever we spent time together. Dennis was struggling in school but doing his best to hide it, our family contentment nothing but a sham.

And tonight, a sneering Teuton priest had stifled my fire beneath his dark magic, reminding me that I was no match for anyone with deeper training. To earn the robe of a Teuton priest, a male must master types of sorcery I would never dare to invoke—like summoning the demon lord, Wuotan, controlling the blood flow of another while drinking the truth from their necks, and dousing an outsider's blood in elemental mysticism through the most grotesque ancient ritual known to our people. Callen had trained to do all of that, and now he wanted

to enchant me into becoming a mindless scion pining for a priestly guide.

I would much rather become *Leitalra* than yield to Callen's influence.

There were three single Teuton females left in Erlangen who had lived in another land for a year. Sandra Heising, myself, and one other woman whose name I did not know. The two who had gotten engaged planned to marry at the start of 2004. Unless more Teuton maidens returned home from afar sometime soon, the pool would remain frighteningly shallow until my mentor passed away.

Did I want Henning to end up stuck with Sandra, a haughty bitch who likely wished to alter his kind heart into a gofer for blood prejudice? Was Erlanga's soul prudent enough to choose a more charitable avatar? Should I break things off with Lukas before it got any further, to protect us both in case this city raised me up as its next matriarch?

My fire churned rebelliously in my blood at the thought of that. My element wanted me to bind its magic with Lukas' refreshing mist, not with another of its own kind. Lukas seemed willing to follow my lead as we explored our relationship, but my intuition told me he would leap at the chance to enter serious territory. He had wanted to kiss me in the alcove just hours ago. I would have let him.

Would my mother deem me worthy if Erlanga's soul inhabited my heart?

Bianca and I spent Saturday afternoon lounging in her parlor, bingeing on coconut macaroons and watching a cheesy action adventure movie from the '80s. She said she would take a break before trying IVF again, maybe ask the forest witch for further aid. "Oliver and I could try using a surrogate if nothing else works," my best friend sighed, "but I want to be able to carry a baby myself, you know? And it'd be hard to find a compatible surrogate with our blood being so rare."

She had a fair point. Teuton blood was type AB, unusual even without the magic enhancing its properties. Lady Erlanga once told us that was what made it possible to transform an outsider's blood into Teuton blood. Aside from the strong sorcery that ritual invoked, type AB was the universal recipient, able to subsume other blood types if pushed to do so.

"Don't give up yet," I urged Bianca, longing to take her pain away, though it was not within my power. "Maybe mingling science with sorcery would work."

"Maybe." Bianca did not sound convinced, but she noted, "If nothing else, I can be godmother to your kids with Lukas."

I winced. "Or with Henning," I muttered, still unsure of my ultimate destiny.

Oliver put my fears at ease about one thing, at least. When I shared the story of my humiliation at Callen's

hands the night prior, he perked up after I said the brute grabbed my wrist and sent his darkness into my spirit. “That’s a trick Teuton priests learn to subdue a person’s element. If you put enough pressure on the median nerve or the tibial nerve, an element can’t breach the surface. That’s how outsiders chained Teuton prisoners back in the Middle Ages.”

“So he snatched my wrist right away to snuff my fire,” I translated, incensed and relieved at that truth. “Sounds like I’m going to have to practice summoning fiery swords and daggers to keep these nasty priests at bay.”

“Oooo, let’s practice right now!” Bianca bounded to her feet and grabbed the remote to pause the movie. “It’s been forever since I last made a windy sword. It’s so much easier for you, since fire’s more substantial than whirlwind.” She stuck her tongue out at me, teasing.

“Hey, you’re the one who can steal people’s oxygen. Swords are just for show when you’ve got that kind of magic.” I climbed to my feet and stretched, shaking my hands out and focusing on the flames lurking deep within.

“I can help, if you want,” Oliver offered, energy snapping along his fingertips as he grinned at us. So we shifted the furniture around to clear a space in the middle of the parlor, then spent a half hour swiping at each other with elemental blades, the magic raised among us truly spectacular. This was what being a

Teuton was all about—working together to enhance the glory of this world.

By Monday, I had decided to continue seeing Lukas as long as fate allowed and as long as he proved himself mature and respectful. He informed me at lunch that he spoke with Nicole after the party, demanding that she treat me with proper esteem and stop interfering in his personal life. He told her she would have to find someone else to babysit her children on Sunday afternoons if she refused to treat me with courtesy.

“She’ll never go for that, because my nephews adore me. And she’d rather meet up with her cliquish friends after church than entertain kids.” He shook his head and took a bite of his sandwich, our hips nearly touching since we sat together on the stone bench in the inner court. My fire magic preserved a radiant warmth around us, for November drew to a close, winter’s breath on the breeze.

“I’d like to meet your nephews,” I said. Lukas had recently added an extra picture to his desk, one that showed two small boys climbing on his back.

“I’d like that, too. And you need to meet Winston. I’ve told him all about the fire fairy who’s fluttered away with my heart, and he’s been loving on me after our dates. Pretty sure he likes your scent.”

I chuckled, remembering the one time I had seen Winston thus far—on that first night at Zum Weißen Hirsch when Bianca lured Lukas away from me with her

drunk persona. “How about I come home with you after church this Sunday? You’ll have to bring me back to my parents’ house for dinner, but it’d be fun to spend most of the day romping with your nephews and pug.”

It was a fun day, indeed. Lukas’ family property backed up to the canal with a swath of woodland in between. We played tag with his nephews, laughing when they picked certain trees as “base” the instant one of us nearly caught them. The pug enjoyed our games as much as the children, woofing and bouncing around as he tried to determine which human to chase. When we all piled into Lukas’ car—Winston included—around five-thirty, I found myself dreading my return home. Lukas’ family dynamic seemed so much healthier than my own, even with Nicole and Jan as a factor. His mother was at the house today and we had stolen a few moments to speak one-on-one. My admiration for the Felder matron rose when I learned of her innate gentleness and desire to help the less fortunate.

I knew that one day I would have to introduce Lukas to my own family, if our relationship progressed. But I wished to delay as long as possible. Maybe after my father obtained a new job, I could invite Lukas to join us for Sunday dinner. Our traditions of meeting for meals and bike rides spared me for the time being, although Lukas occasionally asked questions about the cottage. Thus far, I explained that I wished to live near the silver oak tree in case the *Eihalde* had need of me, a true enough reason. The fairy and I reinforced my fiery shield

at the start of December, ensuring no priest could harm its tree.

On the second Sunday in December, my mother declared at dinner that she expected me to bring my “little boy toy” along to Christmas dinner. “I’ve seen you sneaking in and out with that young man. About time you found one of your own kind instead of wasting money on dusky spurge so you can play with outsiders.”

Her words cut me to the quick like they always did. Before I could fabricate a reply, Dennis nudged my arm from his place at the table. “I’ve been kind of curious about your new boyfriend myself. Seen him open the car door for you. A rare show of chivalry.”

My mother scoffed, her sharp eyes boring into me, the silent message clear. If I wanted to show my face at Christmas dinner, Lukas’ presence was required. I feared he might choose to break things off with me once he saw how dysfunctional my family was. Hopefully my father would put his foot down and demand that my mother act like she actually cared about me.

Lukas accepted my invitation to Christmas dinner and asked whether he could meet me at the cottage first so we could exchange gifts. I agreed, but noted that my mother might want my help preparing the meal. She had been grumbling off and on about how I never cooked for the family anymore. During my high school years, my mother dumped that task upon me whenever she had students to tutor, about three out of five weeknights.

Since my return home, it appeared Dennis had taken over for her on the weekends. I avoided the main house on weeknights, so I knew not whether she cooked then or simply ordered out.

Bianca and I went shopping the Saturday before Christmas, accumulating presents for our families. Lukas had dropped hints that he planned to get me some sort of “big surprise” for the holiday, so I bought him a variety of gifts in an effort to keep our exchange somewhat even. A bottle of Calvin Klein cologne, a collection of classic novels by Dostoevsky, and four tickets to an FC Nürnberg match, plus a knotted rope for Winston and Nerf guns for Lukas and his nephews. I bought gift cards for my parents and Dennis, concluding it would be best to let them decide how they wished to spend them.

Christmas dawned with a sky layered in heavy clouds, the promise of rain evident in the atmosphere. I clad myself in a pair of basic jeans, a cream sweater, and the garnet pendant, which Lukas seemed to admire whenever I wore it. Putting my hair up in its usual bun, I wandered out to the kitchen to make coffee, my nerves humming with uncertainty at what this day might bring. Christmas dinner for the Scholz family took place at two p.m., but we would exchange gifts before that around the tree in the front parlor. My mother had behaved civilly last Sunday, but whether that trend would continue was anyone’s guess.

Around eleven that morning, as I sat on the couch in my parlor with my gaze riveted on the crimson flames in

the fireplace, the crackling sound of wheels upon dirt extracted me from my tense reverie. Rising to my feet, I peered out the front window, astonished at the sight of Lukas and an unknown man wheeling a metal dolly cart toward my cottage, a positively massive wrapped box poised atop it. My mouth dropped open slowly as I stared, and then I lunged for the front door, swinging it open.

“Merry Christmas, fire fairy!” Lukas called from behind the box. I moved to the side so the two men could roll their package into my parlor, which abruptly felt incredibly small. Dennis and I had carted my grandmother’s old loom out to the shed two weeks ago, making room for the Christmas tree beside the fireplace. But this box came up past my waist, even after the men heaved it off the cart and onto the floor. The curling red bow centered on top looked as big as my toaster.

Lukas thanked his companion for his help and wished him a lovely holiday, then turned to beam at me after the other man departed. “You look like Christmas morning,” he said, though he appeared polished, himself. He wore crisp dark blue jeans and a turquoise-patterned flannel shirt beneath his leather jacket, his face freshly shaved and his black hair slicked with gel.

“That might be because it *is* Christmas morning,” I teased, eyeing the giant box before me. “I guess I should have known I was in for it with your ‘big surprise.’ You can hang your coat over there by the door.”

He did, and I offered to bring out some hot chocolate and gingerbread cookies while he got settled on the couch. As I headed for the kitchen, Lukas said, “Those flames were orange when I first came into this room. Now they’re red.”

“Red-orange,” I corrected from the doorway, grinning. “I’m not brainless enough to let outsiders see my favorite color of fire, even in my own home.”

We sat together on the couch for a while, enjoying the hot chocolate and cookies. Lukas related the tale of Christmas morning with his family and admitted that his nephews rebelled when they found out he had to leave them for most of the afternoon. “Good thing I got them a special set of presents to share with you,” I said with a smirk, imagining them chasing Lukas through the forest with their Nerf guns.

“Really, Gabi? You didn’t have to.” He finished off his hot chocolate and raised his eyebrows at me, appearing perplexed.

“Of course I did. How about we start opening our presents now? That giant box is sitting there brewing suspense.”

I insisted that Lukas open his gifts first, delighted to watch his face light up as he viewed the contents of each package. When he retrieved the tickets for the soccer match, he asked whether I planned to arrange a double date with him, since there were four total. “We could if

you want, but I was thinking of your nephews, actually,” I responded with a blush.

Upon tearing away the wrapping paper from the giant box, I discovered Lukas had gotten me a brand-new stereo with light-up speakers and a ten disc CD changer. It took vinyl records and had inputs for an iPod or USB, along with a radio and clock. I stood back and stared at the box with my hands clasped before me, gratitude warming my spirit at the privilege of filling this cottage with music. My USBs and laptop speakers had nothing on this.

“I figured it was time you had a stereo that outshines anything that bastard took from you,” Lukas murmured in my ear, placing a hand against the small of my back. “And you don’t need to worry about me ever taking it away. I’ve got my own at home, the exact same model.”

Emotion overtook me, and I turned to fold Lukas in a tight embrace before I could stop myself. “Thank you,” I whispered, deeply moved. I had opened up to him about my history with Kyle during the past few weeks, sharing more and more details each time. Like my brother, Lukas grew irritated at my ex’s decision to toss everything I could not bring with me when I left him for the last time. Now I could finally rebuild my music collection and banish the haunting silence.

One of Lukas’ hands gently stroked my back while I buried my face against his chest, inhaling the refreshing scent of his aura. His other hand brushed my cheek,

trailing down to my chin to tilt my head up so our gazes met. “You deserve it, Gabi,” he said huskily, entrancing hues of mist veiling his irises. He bent down to kiss me, our lips molding perfectly together.

My entire body shuddered as my element drank in his essence, the savor of hot chocolate and gingerbread mingling with his natural freshness. I shut my eyes and wound my arms around his neck, leaning into the kiss with a hunger that smoldered like embers. In Lukas’ arms, I was safe, worthy, accepted. The sense of belonging that eluded me my entire life appeased itself with this magnificent man.

True joy rendered my earlier worries meaningless when we walked hand-in-hand to the main house shortly thereafter. Lukas held his umbrella over us both, though he confessed that the rain inspired him to frolic like his silly nephews. While I did not despise rainy weather, excess moisture in the air inspired my fire to coil itself deep inside, showing its respect for the power of water. Lukas chuckled when I told him and said we needed to share an elemental dance at some point soon, maybe through the woodland on his family’s property.

My parents and brother greeted Lukas with appropriate enthusiasm, and my mother accepted his dish of Linzer cookies with a tight smile. I almost believed we could fulfil this family obligation with no trace of negativity. My father engaged Lukas in conversation about professional soccer, and Dennis told me he had gotten an A on a recent exam in microbiology.

It was starting to click for him at last. Part of the lingering weight lifted off my shoulders as I settled in beside Lukas on the two-person couch near my family's towering Christmas tree, its tinsel sparkling in the candlelight.

Lukas and I handed out holiday cards to my parents and brother; he, too, had decided gift cards were the way to go. Dennis exulted about buying more games for his Xbox, while I used my fingernail to loosen the wrapping paper around a thin, rectangular package from my father. Inside, I found an aged dagger with a jade hilt resting in a felt case, its blade polished to a mirror-like shine. I lifted it into my hands, recognizing it as the knife that sealed my parents' marriage.

"Your mother and I decided it was time to pass this down to you," my father said from the opposite couch, running a hand through his graying brown hair as a cautious smile quirked his lips. "In case you happen to find yourself a partner while you're back among our people."

My father's blue eyes, their color so similar to my own, shifted from my face to Lukas' for a split second. Then he cleared his throat and looked down at the half-wrapped package in his lap, while I turned my attention back to the dagger. It had been in the Scholz family for two hundred years, sealing Teutonic marriages and testing the blood of each child born. The head of this household chose to pass it down to *me*, not my younger brother. Gratefulness stoked the fires simmering in my spirit at

my father's meaningful gesture. Lukas touched my right arm and gave it a gentle squeeze, understanding how important this was for me.

Then my mother ruined the moment with a biting statement. "Don't feel like you need to hurry to find a husband. It's not like you have to worry about becoming *Leitalra*, after all."

Pain shot through me as I raised my eyes to my mother's, black fire licking at the edges of her iron gray irises. That expression of disdain I knew so well lined her face, her fingers tapping the new study Bible in her lap with pointed thumps. Any words I could have said to counter her claim died before they reached my lips, and suddenly Lukas began to speak.

"Would you mind explaining why you believe your daughter to be unworthy of this city's greatest honor, Frau Scholz?" The studied courtesy in Lukas' tone cut me anew. How could he sound so controlled when my mother sat there primly ripping me apart?

My mother gave an insolent sniff. "It's not that she's unworthy, my dear boy. She's unqualified. She wasn't born anywhere near this city." Her eyes moved from Lukas' face to mine, scorn evident in the curl of her upper lip.

"Elvira, please. This isn't the time or place." My father lifted a restraining hand toward my mother, but she shoved it away.

“Now’s as good a time as any. We’re all adults here, and there’s no point in keeping up the façade any longer.” Her black-fired eyes bored into mine, freezing me in place. “Gabriela, you are your father’s daughter. Not mine.”

Chapter Thirteen:

UNMOORED



Everything froze in the parlor for several seconds. My lungs began to gasp for air as my entire world crumbled to dust. My mother . . . was *not* my mother? I had not been born in Erlangen? But her name was on my birth certificate alongside my father's name and the name of the hospital downtown. This made no sense.

“Let’s go in another room and talk about this. Gabi.” My father rose to his feet with a grunt, his face ashen as he held out a hand to me.

“You mean . . . we’re only . . . *half* siblings?” Dennis asked in a broken voice, a dress shirt and tie lying forgotten in his lap. He sat on the floor beside the tree like he had during our childhood, his face crumpling when his gray eyes caught hold of mine. I had frozen on the couch, my fire extinguished. Unmoored.

“Dennis, you and your mother can continue opening your presents. The rest of us will join you shortly for dinner.” My father seemed the only anchor in this storm, taking charge of the situation despite the distress evident in his mien. Our gazes met, and he bobbed his head toward the hallway, his hand still stretched out.

Lukas slid the fingers of his left hand through my right, somehow sensing I needed a foundation to cling to in this unforeseen moment. He helped me to my feet and guided me toward where my father stood, prepared to stand with me while I confronted the unknown. I could not gather the courage to take my father’s hand, betrayal adding itself to my inner tumult. Why had he lied to me for twenty-eight years? Why had he not told me the truth before I left Erlangen so long ago?

We followed my father up the stairs and into the study, the room that had once been my bedroom. No wonder my “mother” had thrown my bed away and boxed up all of my stuff the instant I moved out. I was

not her child. She wanted me gone. My entire life was a lie.

When my father closed the door behind us and turned on the overhead lamp, I released my first question, my fingers claspng Lukas' in a death grip. "Who is my real mother?"

Pain shot across my father's face as he slumped into the leather armchair, the fingers of his left hand reaching out to stroke the aloe vera plant growing from a pot on the side table. Seeking comfort in earth's bounty. Nice for him. This room had no fireplace to soothe my element, which had retreated into my spirit like an exile.

"Her name was Rita," my father said at length, his voice soft and tormented. "I knew her for only a short time, but she was lovely. Her fire a boiling crimson, like yours."

My brain had begun to piece some things together, and my eyes narrowed. "Every Teuton in this city knows you couldn't summon your earth until after I was born. My mo—Elvira—" I corrected myself "—couldn't have awakened your earth. Not when she's fire. Now you're saying my real mother is also fire. It's not possible to have elemental sex with fire unless you have an element of your own. *Who* was it that pushed your blood over the threshold?"

A sense of foreboding descended upon me as I stared at the man who had given me life with a red-fired woman named Rita. My real mother. Just how many Teuton

females had my father screwed in an attempt to awaken his magic? He had been born at eighty-three percent. I knew that for a fact; it was on his Teutonic birth record. A gasp fell from my lips as another piece of the puzzle fell into place.

Unless he had sex with a man, it would take years to push his blood to the threshold of eighty-five percent. Our people's records claim it's a slow process to improve anyone's blood status through standard sex alone. He was twenty-two when I was born, and he seized his earth soon after. That means

“Your mother Rita . . . was in a situation.” My father shifted around in the chair, obviously uncomfortable. “She was the victim of . . . an ancient tradition . . . that never should have existed in the first place. She was bound to a powerful Teuton priest . . . without her consent. He used her to breed Teuton children.”

I clutched at my throat and took a step back, putting Lukas between myself and my father. “You’re saying she had me without her consent? You *raped* her with permission from her priestly master? That’s *disgusting!*” The gingerbread cookies roiled in my stomach.

“I didn’t rape her. I explained the situation to her first, how Elvira and I had been unable to have children, how our families arranged our marriage in an effort to preserve the silver oak tree. Elvira was the last of her family line and the tree had grown ill under her care. The fairy needed a Teuton who claimed an earth-centered

element to heal it. And her parents demanded we bear a child to continue the line.”

I felt sick. “You ‘explained’ it to her. Right. Hoping a red-fired woman and an earthen Teutonic man could conceive a child of earth. That worked really well.” I flexed my fingers in Lukas’ hand, my fire crawling its way out of hiding. It flared in my blood, anger fueling it.

“Having Dennis nearly killed my wife. You know that.” My father looked weary, his fingers tracing their way through the earth in the aloe vera’s pot. “And I’m not the villain you’re constructing in your head. Rita agreed to bear my child, and her priest made love to her heart when I gave her my semen. I didn’t—”

“I’m going to be sick,” I interrupted, pressing my hand to my mouth and leaning into Lukas. “Get me out of here. I can’t take any more of this.”

Lukas scooped me into his arms and charged out of the study in seconds. I heard my father call, “Gabi, please!” but my stomach had started to heave.

“Hold on. We’re almost outside,” Lukas murmured in my ear while I fought to hold back vomit. A blast of wintry rain smashed into my face, and he set me on my knees as my stomach expelled the gingerbread and chocolate. It splattered into the planter outside the kitchen door, tainting the ivy.

My stomach continued to heave after it was empty. I moaned in pain while Lukas held my head, the scent of

roast goose seeping through the kitchen walls torturing me further. “Help me . . . please . . . it stinks”

Lukas tugged me to my feet and laid a sturdy arm around me, guiding us away from the place where my entire sense of self shattered to pieces. When we reached the front door of the cottage, I asked him to hold me while the rain poured redemption onto my aching head. Its fresh chill soothed me in some strange way, gradually restoring my clarity.

I took several deep breaths, my fire warming my veins in the face of winter’s cold. Lukas sat upon the stone threshold and held me to his chest, his misty aura wrapping me in comfort and acceptance. He did not think less of me now that we both knew the truth about my heritage. I may be ineligible to become *Leitalra*, but he offered me his support without judgment.

“He must have made an agreement with the priest to push his blood over the threshold after Rita gave birth to me,” I whispered, blinking sopping eyes at the silver oak to the right of where we sat, its boughs heavy with moisture. “My father was eighty-three percent at birth, and there’s only one way that could change so quick.”

“One of the girls I knew in college awakened her magic that way,” Lukas said after a short pause. “She asked me to do it, actually. I agreed, but I’m like you. Not a big fan of anal. There’s too much shit up there.”

A strangled giggle broke from my throat, and I wiped at my eyes. “You’re just so obliging, even if a girl asks you

for something gross. I'm not going to forget that. But my real mother, Rita . . . I wonder if she's still bound to that awful priest? If he was using her to breed children, by now she can't still be fertile."

I summoned my fire into my eyes to show me the smoldering shield around the silver oak. The raindrops passed straight through it, but it pulsed with magic and life, promising fiery destruction to any Teuton who wished to harm the tree. The *Eihalbe* was my friend and confidant, even if my father was not the good man I thought he was. How could he leave my mother bound to a slaveholding priest?

"If your mother's still alive, she's probably locked away in that asylum on the Austrian border," Lukas said, his arms granting me the solace his words lacked. "There's no way any priest would release a woman who experienced that sort of bondage. Your father said it was an ancient tradition, but I've never heard of it before. Teuton priests probably keep it hidden from polite society."

"I wonder why?" I sneered, resolution welling within me. "I need to set her free, give her a chance at a life of her choosing."

"We'll find her and get her out together." I met Lukas' gaze, impressed by the determination creasing his face. He gathered me to his chest and rose to his feet, turning to enter the cottage. "First, I think you need some rest

after all of that. You're still in shock, and you need to dry off."

He pulled me inside and onto the mat, our clothes dripping water all over the threshold. The strength of his arms contrasted with the misty breath of his aura aroused a hunger inside me, one that might be inappropriate considering what we had just learned. But I had no wish to be tucked away and fed soup and pretzels. My fire flared into mortal flames that licked along my skin and clothing, drying me completely. I sensed Lukas' surprise when I directed my element to do the same for him, red veiling my vision as I looked from his eyes to his lips and back again.

"Lukas," I murmured, desire running along every nerve, "I don't want to think about the mess my life has become. Not yet. I want to remember what it's like to feel a man's body wrapped around mine. What it's like to bind my fire with elemental magic that reminds me of an early morning walk by the river."

Lukas' arms tightened around me, one of his hands sliding up to finger my bun. "Are you sure you want this?" he whispered, his husky tone revealing his own longing. "Now, when you're—"

"I need to know what it's like to make love with a Teuton man," I cut him off, a sizzling desperation churning in my blood. "To let my fire run free like it's not a shame, a disease. I need to bind my magic with yours. I need *you*."

With a guttural groan, Lukas bent his head down to kiss me, his fingers shifting to the hem of my sweater. A sense of rightness and completion enveloped me as we kissed, my eyes squeezed shut, my fingers blindly unbuttoning his flannel shirt. “I’ve always been yours,” Lukas uttered between kisses, pushing my sweater up to reveal my bra. “You’ve just refused to see it.”

“I see it now,” I promised him, freeing him from his shirt and unclasping my garnet pendant before yanking my sweater over my head. He peeled off his undershirt while my hands dropped to undo my jeans, his gaze tracing my torso with a look of approval. My breasts were small compared to Johanna’s, but Lukas did not seem to mind. The sight of his sculpted chest made me catch my breath, his strict rowing regimen clearly on display.

“Why did you stop?” Lukas had made his way out of his own jeans while I ogled his pecs and abs, his arm muscles flexing as he wadded his clothing into a tight ball. Glancing up at his face, I loosed a chuckle at his smirk.

“Your body’s kind of a distraction. A good distraction.” I stuck my tongue out at him and rolled my jeans down, stepping out of my boots at the same time. So far, I had kept my eyes away from the prominent tent in his boxers, wanting to bathe in suspense a little longer. My pussy was already damp, and Lukas had barely touched me yet. I might reach more than one climax at this rate.

“Mine’s a distraction? Have you looked in the mirror lately?” Lukas wet his lips and spun his index finger in a slow circle. He wanted to see all of me.

I turned my back to him, my heartbeat escalating into the pounding charge of a freight train. “Ahhh, that’s what I’ve been waiting to see.” His fingers sent a tingle along my skin as they traveled from the small of my back to my underwear, sliding beneath the cotton to cup my ass. “Beautiful.”

“I thought you didn’t like anal.” I could hardly concentrate on speaking, not with his breath upon my neck, his lips caressing my throbbing pulse.

“I like to admire an ass from the outside. I know full well what’s inside.” He chided me as if I ought to know better. I reached around to unhook my bra, since Lukas seemed uninterested in doing that himself.

“You are a strange man,” I chided him back, though his attentions had my entire body flushed with fire’s yearning. “Good thing you’ve matured in all the ways that matter. Those abs, though.” I twisted my neck to the left and caught his lips in a delicate kiss, gazing at him beneath hooded eyelids.

“Abs. Women are silly.” He rolled his eyes and turned me back around, his hard cock brushing itself against my clit. I moaned, my body quivering in his arms, my brain totally unaware of when he had lost his boxers. Now, only sensation mattered, desire transforming into elation as my fire rose to cover us both, merging with a cloud of

foggy mist in abject perfection. I dug my nails into his back when he entered me, panting his name.

At some point he carried me to the couch, where he brought me to a glorious climax beneath the colored glow of string lights on my Christmas tree. Fresh red flames occupied the fireplace, reflecting my euphoria while Lukas got to know my body, learning which touches prompted me to groan or cry out. When he finally spilled inside of me, growling my name as if it were an enchantment all its own, I knew deep down that I had found the right man after so many years of searching. With Lukas, I gained acceptance, respect, belonging.

We cooked chicken vegetable soup together in my kitchen afterward, having decided to forsake the rest of the Scholz family for a private holiday. Around evening, my father stopped by the cottage with Lukas' leather jacket and umbrella in tow, his eyes darkened with turmoil. He said that there were leftovers at the main house if we wanted some, glancing from me to Lukas as we worked together to set up my new stereo.

I rose to my feet and summoned my courage, figuring I had better find out whether my hopes of freeing my birth mother were viable or not. "My mother, Rita. Is she still bound to that disgusting priest?"

Moisture welled in my father's eyes and he looked away from me. "She died when you were just three years old."

Sorrow infused his voice, and Lukas reached out to touch my forearm. But I sensed no true regret in my father's spirit, no remorse for how he had misused a woman enslaved by a Teuton priest. I breathed out a sigh through my nose and buried my own grief. Of course my mother was dead, a mere pawn discarded when her womb no longer flourished.

“You left my mother there to die with her slaveholding master. Should have known. Typical cowardly move of a male. Merry Christmas, Papa.” I dismissed him with a wave of one hand, then crouched back beside Lukas, ready to tackle the next step in our stereo project.

My father departed the cottage without speaking, but I heard him sob aloud when he shut the door behind him. Lukas exhaled heavily and met my gaze. “He's probably justified it to himself all these years. You know it's not easy to find a compatible surrogate with our blood being so rare.”

I gasped as his statement hit me like a brick. “Shit. I'm going to have to talk to Bianca about this. I hope no priests have pressured her and Oliver to have kids this way.”

Chapter Fourteen:
NEW YEAR'S EVE



I went to see Bianca and Oliver on the day before New Year's Eve, sharing the full story of my heritage with them. Neither had heard of such an appalling tradition, but Oliver mentioned that one of the priests he knew at work told him there were dark ways to get children if he grew desperate enough.

“Most Teuton priests don’t admit to ‘dark’ stuff, even though almost all of the sorcery they practice is dark,” Oliver said as we sat around their kitchen table, splitting a pizza. “I figured he was hinting at asking a Cursed One for help. That’s a path we’re *not* going to take.”

I shuddered all over at the thought of requesting help from such an entity. Cursed Ones, or Black Priests, were Teuton males in service to Wuotan himself, exiled from the living in recompense for some terrible crime. Bianca cringed when her husband spoke the words. “Any Teuton priest who enslaves a woman ought to be cursed. Seems like something demons would encourage.”

“Agreed.” I bit a forkful of pizza, sharing a knowing look with my friend.

“Problem is, once a Teuton priest binds a woman’s heart, he becomes head of his own family, according to our people’s customs,” Oliver said. “That means only an unbound Teuton priest could be cursed.”

I glanced at Bianca’s husband, annoyed at the loopholes that excused our people’s most wretched sins. “Sounds like customs could use an upgrade.”

Oliver snickered. “You really want more Black Priests skulking around in the shadows? You know they have the gift of death, to kill with their anger.”

“Yeah, that could be bad,” Bianca chimed in. “I’d never dare to ask one for help having a baby, anyway. Lady Ilsa offered me a few more suggestions over the

phone for our next round of IVF. She's going to send up a prayer to my whirlwind, asking it to empower my body."

"Lady Ilsa?" I raised my eyebrows at Bianca, the name unfamiliar to me. The idea of offering prayers to an element intrigued me. I filed it away for later.

"The forest witch I told you about before. She knows lots of ancient spells our history books don't mention. Her element's air, actually, and she's given me tips on how to control my whirlwind better."

"I wonder if she knows anything about fire," I mused, chewing on a bite of mushroom pizza. Maybe I needed to meet this forest witch, myself.

"Her husband's fire, so she probably knows a thing or two." Bianca winked a blue-green eye at me and added, "They're both coming to the Taubenball because they like dancing outside in elemental glory. I can't wait to witness their mysticism. Elderly couples always create the prettiest displays."

"We still need to go dress shopping." I had nearly forgotten about the masquerade ball, set to take place next spring. I hoped Lukas would be free to attend as my date.

"Still annoyed I have to be in Berlin at the beginning of April," Oliver sighed, laying his fork across his empty plate. "At least one of you needs to bring a camera and get lots of pictures."

“I’ll bring my Nikon and try to sneak a few shots of people’s elements. But I’ll have to be really discreet so the priests don’t chew me out.” Bianca grinned.

“They shouldn’t be so weird about photo evidence of magic. Outsiders would just assume it’s special effects,” I noted, fully prepared to support my best friend’s undercover photo-taking.

Before I left their apartment, we agreed to meet up the following evening for the Teutonic New Year’s celebration. Set to take place at the traditional meeting place in the forest south of the city, it was the second largest Teutonic event of the year. I planned on cornering every gossipy female I could find to inform them I was no threat to their established order. I hoped to pull my elderly mentor aside as well, to inform her of the awful circumstances behind my birth. If she knew of such atrocities happening in Erlangen or the surrounding area, I would demand that she and Henning put a stop to it at once.

Lukas told me he had family obligations on New Year’s Eve, so we could not attend the celebration together. A let down, but one I could overcome. I could hang out with Bianca instead, and Dennis said he would be there after appearing at a college-related party. I looked forward to adding red flames to the collection of Teutonic fires in the main pit and mingling my magic with that of others.

I rode with Bianca and Oliver to the festival the following evening, ready to mingle among my people with a freedom I had never before experienced. While my father's revelations had broken apart my notions of family, they also liberated me from the need to marry in order to avoid bondage to a fated mate. Henning and I could continue our platonic friendship established during my visits with his great-grandmother, and I could give him suggestions on how to win his new Lady over romantically after his aged *Leitalra* entered eternity.

The dirt parking lot at the trailhead to the Teutonic meeting place was jam-packed with cars when we arrived, so Oliver had to search for a spot to parallel park along the street. "Our people never pass up an opportunity to party," I remarked, holding a jar of cold potato salad on my lap.

"You got that right. Looks like the crowd here might outnumber the one gathered to watch the fireworks downtown." Oliver found a spot for his Audi about a half kilometer from the trailhead and proceeded to back in.

"What time's Dennis showing up?" Bianca asked from the passenger seat.

"Not sure. Hopefully he won't get too drunk to drive safely. I think he's going to borrow our father's car." I eyed the tree line and undergrowth as it drew close to the window at my right side. My element detected magic buzzing in the air even at a fair distance from the glade.

The last major event I had attended here was the May festival back in 1994. Seemed like a lifetime ago.

“You sure you want to ride home with a sloshed sophomore?” Bianca asked as we piled out of the car. I carried my jar of salad, while she brought a bowl of rum balls. Oliver draped two blankets over one shoulder and retrieved a six pack of Apfelschorle from the back seat.

“I can drive if he’s sloshed when he gets here.” We struck out for the parking lot, walking alongside the cars lining the forest road.

“You sure you remember how? You’ve biked or ridden the bus ever since you came back here.” Bianca sounded doubtful.

“I’m not helpless. And my ex had a car. I might need to save up to get one myself, once my father finds a job.” Still no luck on that front.

We met a pair of Teutons Oliver knew from work at the trailhead, and fell into polite conversation on our way to the clearing. I sensed the distinctive tickle of an energy shield tracing my body when we reached the final curve, a protective barrier raised to keep outsiders from witnessing our elemental spells in honor of the New Year. Sounds of laughter, chatter, and live music broke upon my ears at the same moment, beckoning me toward our people’s merriment.

Bianca took the sparkling apple juice from her husband when we reached the clearing, requesting that he spread a blanket for us near the main fire pit while

she and I deposited our food on one of the tables set up along the southern edge of the glade. Lady Erlanga herself sat behind the one that held a variety of side dishes, her light radiating in a gentle glow from her skin and wavy hair. My fire flared to life, sharpening each of my senses and basking in the collective magic hovering in the atmosphere.

“It’s so good to see you here, Gabi,” my mentor greeted, reaching out to clasp my hands after I set my salad onto the table. Her light met my red fire in a burst of triumphant camaraderie, for our elements shared the same primary.

“I’m looking forward to working magic with everyone tonight. It’s been too long since I’ve been to a celebration like this.” I smiled at her and glanced toward where her Keyholder’s potent blue-fired spirit loitered with his priestly peers—a collection of black-robed figures.

“I know Henning will be thrilled to see you again.” Lady Erlanga offered a knowing smile. “He said you were a breath of fresh air at Frau Felder’s birthday party. Most of the guests there intimidated him, I think.”

“He wasn’t the only one intimidated,” I said, remembering how awkward I felt conversing with Lukas’ wealthy acquaintances. I gave her wrinkled hands a squeeze and let go, then lowered my voice, holding her gaze. “There’s something you need to know about me, something that changes what everyone’s expecting to

happen. I wasn't born in Erlangen. Elvira Scholz isn't my real mother."

My mentor's dark blue eyes widened and she rose to her feet with a groan, beckoning me to follow. We walked a short distance into the forest, away from the women near the food tables. It was probably better not to have eavesdroppers when I informed her of the atrocious circumstances behind my birth.

Lady Erlanga listened intently to my story, allowing me to tell it without interruption. After I finished, I sighed and thrust my hands into the pockets of my leather jacket, still not entirely sure what to think of my father and his wife. Would I have agreed to such a terrible act if my body proved infertile and my in-laws were desperate for an heir? Would I treat an adopted child with the disgust Elvira had always shown to me?

"I have heard of that heinous tradition, but I had believed it eradicated years ago," my mentor said at length, her forehead creased in pain. "In the late 1800s, my predecessor imprisoned the Old One of her council when she learned he had a slave hidden in his cellar. She stripped him of his title and decreed that if anyone, priest or not, was found perpetuating that crime, they would be imprisoned for life with their element suppressed. I made it clear when I took the helm of this city that I would uphold the previous *Leitalra's* edicts, and I have."

“Thank you so much for taking a stand, Lady Erlanga,” I responded, glad that some Teutons were bold enough to combat injustice. “Have you told Henning about your predecessor’s decree yet?”

“I have, but it would do him good to hear your story, if you wouldn’t mind sharing it with him.”

I saw the value in this, and while we waited for the young Keyholder to join us beneath the trees, I brought up something else that troubled me. “Apparently, not all Teuton priests view females as equals. I don’t know yet which city my real mother was from, or if she lived in a smaller town. But I think we need to figure out a way to make sure no priests are secretly hiding slaves, for breeding or any other reasons.”

“It’s never been easy to get priests to come to a consensus where darker traditions are concerned,” Lady Erlanga said, her light dimming a shade. “Binding Teuton females for the purpose of breeding is something Wuotan condones, part of the price our blood magic entails. The priests here are not taught of this practice, but not all of my colleagues have declared it illegal. Truthfully, that might be a task for my successor to undertake. My influence has faded along with my health since my late husband’s death. I might not be strong enough to lead the necessary charge.”

“I’ll help, whenever you decide what to do. Bianca and Oliver, too.” Henning appeared at my mentor’s side as I spoke, his black hooded cloak contrasting him against

his *Leitalra's* light. He laid a supportive arm around her waist and gave me his full attention while I related the circumstances of my birth. My fire sensed the horror in his aura as he listened, and he immediately asserted that we must seek a way to uproot Wuotan's evil from our land.

Both the Lady and her Keyholder agreed to let others know I had not been born in Erlangen, hoping to quiet the rumor mill. But I asked them to keep the circumstances of my birth under wraps, not wanting my father or his wife to face further heat from the community. As criminal as their past choices were, I would not exist otherwise. I also had no wish to see my father imprisoned or blackballed at all Teuton employers. He needed to regain his position as his family's provider in order to fulfill his sense of duty.

I added several splashes of red to the fire pit when I emerged from the forest, finding Bianca and Oliver seated on one of their blankets. Bianca was chatting with a lady from the chamber orchestra, while Oliver entertained a handful of young boys by tossing sparks into the night sky for them to catch. I touched Bianca's shoulder and informed her that I was off to fill my plate and sample the available liquors. An urge to let loose among the Teuton community simmered within me, heightened by the magic pulsing in the melody of fiddles and flutes.

I ate my fill of sausages cooked over the fire, along with a scoop of my potato salad, a slice of marble

cheesecake, and a handful of Bianca's rum balls. Added to the glass of Kellerbier I quickly downed, my thoughts found themselves muddled beneath a pleasant haze, the colored fires flickering in the pit awakening a primal wonder within. Bianca warned me to quit with the desserts after my sixth rum ball, cackling as she ate another herself and declared that neither of us would be fit to drive home. Oliver was the designated driver, contenting himself with a mug of steaming cider and one of his bottles of Apfelschorle.

Bianca and I danced in the shallows of the woodland stream with a group of ladies later on, each of us trusting our elements to buoy our feet in defiance against the frigid waters. I backed off after one dance, for the alcohol had begun to impair my fire, a standard result of drunkenness. Instead, I attached myself to a cluster of mothers, grandmothers, and children skipping around the fire pit in a traditional Franconian jig, one that did not call for elemental magic.

At some point during that dance, as I imagined myself truly at peace among a crowd of magic-wielders nearly three hundred strong, I caught sight of two new arrivals standing at the entrance to the clearing. A tall, broad-shouldered young man with a tapered buzz cut, his left elbow bent toward the maiden at his side. She wore her long dark hair in a fashionable braid, her tight jeans emphasizing her curved hips, the fingers of her right hand touching her companion's upper arm.

Lukas Felder.

With a young woman I had never seen in my life, her wide eyes vibrant with excitement as she gazed around at the gathering. She stood on her tiptoes to speak into Lukas' left ear, and I saw him laugh, his entire torso shaking with fun.

They moved off toward the food tables while my feet stumbled, unable to keep up with the dance any longer. Confusion swept over me as I watched them halt before the priest pouring rum over the sugar cone above the Feuerzangenbowle, the girl reaching her hand out to ignite yellow flames upon the alcohol. Lukas laughed again and placed a hand against the small of her back. Exactly as he had done to me on several occasions.

Bianca's comment from a phone conversation months ago arose in my fuzzy memories. *Lukas came to the restaurant to meet a girl for dinner. Somebody named Rosemarie. She's a student at the university.*

His current female partner looked young enough to be a student.

Lukas had said he had family obligations tonight. But here he was at the exact same event as me, with an attractive companion who claimed yellow fire and a sizeable butt. I had been his side piece all this time. All of his words of devotion were merely that. Words.

I was too buzzed to piece together the verbal tirade he deserved. Depression rolled over me in an ocean wave, overtaking my anger for the time being. I turned away from the joyful gathering and stumbled into the forest in

the general direction of the trail, too distraught to notice if anyone followed.

Chapter Fifteen:

**MOUSE DEFEATS
PANTHER**



Until that moment, I had never once regretted having sex with someone. I had my share of outsiders while I lived in Freiburg, learning how to excite a man along with refining my own preferences. Even my toxic ex taught me things I would not have known otherwise.

But now I staggered through a shadowed forest beneath the starry sky, my cheeks flushed in pure chagrin as jagged tears fell from my eyes. Just one week ago, I had practically thrown myself at Lukas in a desperate bid for acceptance, for the elemental liberation I had not yet seized. He showed me the wonder of binding my fire with refreshing water and held me in his arms like I actually meant something to him. It was all a sham. His true devotion was for Rosemarie, not me.

I sensed the energy shield releasing me to the outside world before I found the trail again, my feet wobbling their way through dead leaves and underbrush. Rejection, anger, depression, and self-hatred drifted through my drunken brain in a clouded haze, one that drove me blindly toward where the parking lot might be. I needed to get away, to find an anchor in this turbulent sea my life had become. A Teuton witch with fire dampened by alcohol, one who could never earn a viable partner. Unworthy. Motherless. A mistake.

I sank against a sturdy trunk before I found my way out of the forest, rough bark granting my shaking palms a sense of place. My stomach churned as my body began to reject the glut of liquor I had consumed that night. Maybe now was the time to let it all go. Maybe if I could actually think again, I could remember the reasons I was here, the reasons I must go on. My family—

A pitch black cloak enveloped me from head to toe, securing me in a tight vise as a throaty voice invoked a spell to eject my spirit from my body. My fire dormant

beneath alcohol's shroud, I had no power to fight the abrupt onslaught or remember why I should. Seconds later, I opened the crimson-hued eyes of my spirit, my ethereal form suspended in the atmosphere above the treetops. Dulled flames licked their way up my robe, doing what they could to protect my spirit while it drifted apart from its mortal home.

A figure comprised of pure darkness hovered before me, taking my head in his hands and pressing his lips to mine. A torrent of sensations raced along my spirit, igniting an uncontrollable need for elemental union. A Teuton man kissed me in spirit form, his darkness threading its way through my fire in true perfection. I had never experienced *this* before. Teutons never caressed each other in the realm of the spirit unless they meant to solidify a sincere romantic partnership.

This man of darkness wanted me. His lips breathed seductive obscurity into my spirit, inviting me to enter the home I had lost.

That rogue never truly cared about you, Gabi. But I do. The voice wove into my muddled thoughts, augmenting my yearning. I wrapped ghostly arms around the man's neck as he continued to kiss me, one of his hands slipping through my fiery robe to touch my fluttering heart. I know how desperately you long for a master to guide you, to purify your blood, to heal your fragile magic. I can give you all you seek, and you need never think of that misty wretch again.

He pulled back from my lips to stare deep into my eyes, his own pits of abyssal darkness. They seemed to swallow me whole as his fingers closed around the heart of my soul, his lips shaping the words of the spell that would bind me to him forever. The phrases pulsed with power in my helpless brain, granting me a lifeline in a sea of emptiness.

Eternal bond of love . . . one priest and his chosen one . . . unbreak—

His fingers fell away from my heart, and my mortal lungs gasped as I found myself back in my body. My eyes wheeled and I fell to my knees, sickness seizing my stomach. I retched, clumps of chocolate mingled with rancid sausage making a reappearance. Somewhere nearby, I heard the sounds of a scuffle, a voice I vaguely recognized raging at a whimpering male.

“How *dare* you try to rape my sister’s heart?! You fucking bastard priest, you know she wants nothing to do with you. You can’t make a heart-bond with a girl when she’s drunk! Just wait until the Keyholder and Lady find out what you tried to do. You can kiss your cozy life goodbye!”

Bile was all that was left in my stomach now. I crawled some distance away, my whole body shuddering. My fire remained a single ember in my spirit, and the chill of the winter night cut through my jeans and leather jacket. I needed to get to my feet and find my brother. My little

mouse had charged in as the rescue brigade, though my sloshed brain had not yet rationalized why.

Some Teuton priest had yanked my spirit from my body and made love to me in the realm above. A priest of darkness. Another faker, just like Lukas. No man actually wanted me.

Just as someone's fingers touch my back, I blacked out.

* * *

I awoke much later with a pounding headache and cringed away from the sunlight streaming through my bedroom window. I lay fully clothed on my side with the blanket around me, drool evident upon my pillow. Blinking, I groaned and shoved myself into a sitting position, catching sight of Dennis slouched in the desk chair, clad in his FC Nürnberg hoodie and a dirtied pair of jeans. The dark circles under his eyes implied he had not slept all night, his face shadowed beneath his hood.

“You’re awake, thank God,” he said, clearing his throat and locking his arms behind his back in a stretch. “I’ve been so worried about you, Gabi.”

I yawned and stretched a little myself, then rubbed my forehead. “I think I need coffee and some ibuprofen. Had too many of Bianca’s rum balls.”

Dennis grinned and got to his feet. “I bet they were worth it.”

“I’m not so sure.” I eased my way out from beneath the blanket and set my socked feet onto the floor, knowing I needed to change clothes and shower before trying to face this day. “You can make coffee if you want. I’ll be in the bathroom. I think there’s still some gingerbread cookies left over from Christmas.”

When I stood under the showerhead not long after, its scorching heat taking the edge off my headache, memories from the previous night rose from the depths. I saw Lukas’ face at a distance, laughing with his yellow-fired girlfriend Rosemarie, his hand supporting her back. I remembered stumbling through the forest in a vain attempt to find the trail back to the parking lot, reaching a thick tree with withered bark, and then

A dark figure had swathed me in his delicious oblivion, cast my spirit into the ether, and tried to tear my heart from my chest. I rubbed my right palm over my left breast, feeling my heart’s steady throbs beneath my skin as I tried to make sense of exactly *how* it had happened. Callen was undoubtedly the culprit. He had decided to remain sober enough to wield his element with precision, using priestly sorcery to separate my spirit from my body without my fire’s aid.

Lady Erlanga had taught Bianca and me how to use our elements to separate our spirits from our bodies long ago, while we trained with her in high school. That was a

perilous undertaking, not something to be done on a whim. Teuton law forbade people from infringing on others' privacy in spirit form, and some Teutons were incapable of making the crossing from physical to spiritual. It took me months of practice to get it right. I spent many hours crouched in the cottage's fireplace my junior year of high school, summoning flames upon my body in an effort to propel my spirit into the atmosphere.

Callen had used his darkness to send us both into the night sky, then tried to bind my heart indelibly under his sway through a spell meant to be performed out of deep love. I knew Callen did not love me. He wanted my body, for sure, but myself as a person?

I wondered if his sister Sandra—aspiring Lady of Erlangen—had put him up to this in an attempt to eliminate me from her perceived competition. Little did she know, that ship had already sailed. Dennis had said something during his rage at Callen, something about telling Henning and my mentor what that wretched priest tried to do to me. He called it attempted rape.

When I got out of the shower and wrapped myself in a towel, I thought back to how it felt when Callen's hand of darkness clutched my heart, his mental voice invoking a hex that would have eliminated my free will. My entire body shuddered, my mortal heart pulsing in defiance. I would rather be *Leitalra* than grant my heart to a Teuton priest with no city to protect. Heart-bonds created a power imbalance.

I threw on a baggy sweater and a pair of sweatpants, dropping four pain pills into the right hand pocket. After brushing my teeth and winding my wet brown hair into a tight bun atop my head, I made my way to the kitchen. Dennis sat at the round table nursing a mug of coffee, the last of the gingerbread cookies lying on a plate between his place and mine. I nodded at him and went to pour my own mug, then joined him at the table. Dennis still had his hood up over his hair and I noticed bruises on his knuckles.

“Hey. Thanks for saving me from that brute last night,” I said, pausing to blow on my coffee. “He was literally weaving the heart-bond upon me when you pulled his spirit back to the mortal realm.”

“I thought he was doing something like that.” Dennis’ black eyebrows formed a straight line, his lips bent downward. “My molten rock sensed darkness breaching the veil right before I reached the shield around the clearing. My instincts told me I needed to investigate.”

“Your instincts were on point.” I retrieved a cookie from the plate and bit off one of the star’s corners. “How did you pull his spirit away from me?”

Dennis chewed on his bottom lip for a second, his gray eyes meeting mine and then cutting quickly away. “I slashed at the darkness around his body with an obsidian dagger. First thing I managed to conjure up. It was violent, but that’s the only way I know of to force a Teuton spirit to return to their body.”

“If attacked, the element prepares for defense instantly.” Lady Erlanga had told Bianca and me about that during our lessons on the spiritual realm. “You did a good job. When you attacked Callen, it brought me back, too.”

“Then you drowned in a pool of vomit.” Dennis shot me a grin and took a sip from his mug. “I didn’t bring you home right away, actually. Once I saw that you’d passed out, I dragged Callen before the Keyholder and Lady.”

“You literally dragged him? In the middle of the New Year’s festival?” I was shocked. I stared at my younger brother, amazed that he had trounced a Teuton priest so much bulkier than him. Mouse had defeated panther.

“Made a scene.” Dennis did not look abashed. “Two of the council members aside from Herr Heising bled the truth from him, along with the Keyholder himself. They saw how he’d tried to rape your heart, as well as his motivations. The entire Heising family, Sandra included, was reprimanded publicly.”

I gaped at my brother, awed by his protective nature. “You really did an admirable thing, Dennis. Most Teutons would have either looked the other way or beat Callen to a pulp. You brought him to justice in front of hundreds of our people. I don’t know if I can ever repay you for that.”

“You don’t have to. You’re family, whether we have different mothers or not. I won’t let some bullying jerk

hurt my sister.”

His assertion made me think of Lukas. I looked down at my mug and fished the ibuprofen from my pocket, swallowing them along with a mouthful of coffee. Might as well tell Dennis what sent me into the wild in the first place. “Turns out Lukas’ interest in me was nothing but a lie. He’s dating a college student named Rosemarie. Saw them both at the festival, arm-in-arm.”

Dennis cursed, his left hand crumbling the cookie he held. “Want me to beat him to a pulp?” he asked, his expression eager.

I sighed. No matter how lucky Dennis had gotten last night against a trained Teuton priest, I suspected Lukas would overpower him on brawn alone. “Don’t bother. I’m going to break up with him over text. And once Papa gets a new job, I’m leaving. Think I’ll try my luck in München.”

“It’ll be lonely around here without you.”

My little mouse had reappeared, his wide gray eyes begging me not to leave. Aside from a renewed friendship with Bianca and a profounder relationship with Dennis, this city had brought me nothing but pain. My fire flourished among others of its kind, so I would try my luck at a different Teuton city next time. Maybe the Teutons of München did not toy around with blood prejudice.

“You could always come with me, once you’ve finished your degree. Go to med school in München while I keep

working my way up as an auditor.” I raised my eyebrows at my brother, offering an escape.

“I don’t know. I have some friends here,” Dennis hedged, looking toward the kitchen window and tracing his fingertips along the edges of another cookie. I got up to refill my mug, and my brother’s voice trailed me to the coffee pot. “Are you going to the Taubenball? You might find some decent Teuton guys there.”

I exhaled heavily as I emptied the rest of the coffee into my mug. “You’re as bad as Bianca. But yes, I’m going with her. And I guess I’ll be on the hunt after all. I’m more interested in the food, honestly.”

Dennis snickered and chomped on a piece of his cookie. “Me too. I’m taking the train there with some friends from college. We’ll be looking for you.”

“Might need you to keep Callen Heising off my back.” I rolled my eyes and sat back at the table, the earthy flavor of the coffee soothing my tensions. It was nice to sit here with my little brother, discussing our future prospects.

Dennis got to his feet a minute later, taking his mug to the sink. “I need to get back to the house. I’m dead on my feet. By the way, you didn’t happen to raise some sort of invisible fire shield around the silver oak, did you?”

The subject change caught me by surprise. I sat up straight and eyed Dennis’ back, his hood still concealing the majority of his head. “The fairy and I raised that shield together as protection against priests like Callen

who want to harm its tree. He's been raising talk among the priests that our family doesn't deserve to have a silver oak on our property since our bloodline is weak."

Dennis finished rinsing the mug and leaned back against the sink, a scowl sharpening his features. "Why does that not surprise me? Wish I'd known about the shield before I went to get a branch last night."

"Why did you need a branch?" The tree's boughs were bare for the winter; and while silver oak's bark also held mystical properties, its leaves were essential for a number of rituals. But Dennis was neither healer nor priest.

My younger brother shrugged and sauntered away toward the front door. "Doesn't matter. I didn't really need one. I'll see you later, Gabi."

In his absence, I cleaned the dishes and coffee pot, then checked the fridge to see whether I had enough ingredients to make a sandwich later. I would need to go to the grocery store once it reopened after the holiday. Today was the first day of January, a new beginning—2004. This year I would not allow some ridiculous man, Teuton or outsider, to parade my heart around on a stick.

The sight of the massive stereo standing beside the fireplace prompted me to cringe. Lukas spent hundreds of Euros in his attempt to persuade me he truly cared. I probably ought to return it.

While I sat reading a steamy billionaire romance an hour later, my headache mostly subsided, I sensed Elvira

Scholz' black fire approaching the cottage door. A knock sounded, presenting me with a new dilemma. She was alone.

Chapter Sixteen:
SMALL VICTORIES



Perplexed at the matron's sudden arrival, I rose to my feet and set my novel onto the side table. I glanced around the parlor as a whole, seeking anything my visitor might deem an affront. Sunlight created dapples of color upon the ceiling and walls thanks to the collection of crystals decking the windowsill, the Christmas tree's string lights casting further hues. Red flames glimmered from the fireplace, the stereo resting silent along with the TV. Nothing was out of place. I had even readjusted the floor mat after Dennis departed earlier.

Setting my hands on my hips, I chewed on my inner cheek and stepped to the front door. While I would prefer more time to decompress after last night's revelations, my father's wife would not tolerate dawdling. Not when her black fire addled my spirit, awaiting my acknowledgement.

I hope she's not in the mood to rip me a new one today, I thought as I reached to twist the doorknob. I've already lost almost everything dear to me.

Elvira Scholz stood upon the threshold, her crisp black slacks and suede jacket implying she considered this a formal meeting. Her graying dark hair parted sleekly in the center, her lips pursed in an unfeeling line, her irises absent of fire, she could have fit in at Werndl Accounting without difficulty. She looked over my bum outfit without commenting, her hands resting at her sides. "Gabriela. May I come in?"

She felt the need to ask for an invitation? "Of course," I answered, stepping aside and holding the door. "You can hang your coat on the wall if you want."

She inhaled noticeably when she walked in, likely sniffing the peppermint-scented candle lit upon the mantel. As I closed the door behind her, Elvira's gaze passed over the parlor's contents, lingering upon the stereo before darting away from the crimson fires. "You always did prefer colorful Christmas lights," she said, her eyebrows turning downward at my tree.

“And you always did prefer white lights or candles.” The rejoinder fell from my lips before I could stifle it. Magic bristled along my nerves, and I sidled back toward the couch.

“Is that why you insisted upon occupying this cottage? Because you wanted to splash it with color?”

My mouth went dry as I stood before the couch, waiting to sit once she was ready to do so herself. Elvira was in the process of hanging her jacket next to mine, revealing a plain violet sweater underneath. Had she really tried to joke with me just now? Or did she actually believe I based all of my choices on silly sentiments?

“Would you like something to eat or drink?” I asked when she moved away from the coat rack by the front door, her eyes zeroing in on her mother’s crystals lining the windowsill. A look of nostalgia passed across her face, but she controlled it quickly and marched toward the aged recliner beside the kitchen doorway, a seat I rarely used.

“No, you don’t have to trouble yourself. There are a few things I wanted to tell you, and then I have some housekeeping to do.” She situated herself upon the recliner and I sat down, following her lead. Fire scratched at my blood in a tense fashion, preparing to shield me from emotional damage.

Elvira studied me in silence for a long while, her hands clasped coolly in her lap. Nervousness edged its way up my spine, and finally I had to speak. “I moved

into Oma's cottage because you made it clear when I came back here that I don't belong. I'm a guest in your household, so I decided to create my own."

Wrinkles appeared upon her forehead, her gray eyes holding mine with a firmness that forever cowed me. "It can be difficult to belong when your family views you as a mistake," she said in an even tone, her words prompting me to draw back, though we sat on opposite sides of the parlor. "A maiden of fire when they sought for earth. The only surviving child, one whose blundering ministrations sickened the tree fairy."

My lips parted in shock when I realized she spoke of herself. Elvira was her family's only child, daughter of an earthen mother and a father of molten rock. Her strained relationship with my late grandmother began to make sense. She was a disappointment who chose a husband with blood below the magical threshold. She had projected her own insecurities upon me my entire life.

And I believed them, making them a part of who I imagined myself to be.

"Papa told me your parents pressured you to have children before he could invoke his earth magic," I remembered, comprehension igniting in my mind. "His blood was at eighty-three percent at the time, and yours was eighty-six. Did you and Papa decide to use a priest's slave to get it done because you feared I'd be under the threshold, otherwise?"

Elvira shook her head once, anger creasing her face. “I didn’t agree with what your father chose to do. My body isn’t strong enough to bear lots of children. You remember what happened when Dennis was born. The doctors had to perform a hysterectomy to save my life. I agreed that your father should ask a man to push him over the threshold, since my fire rendered me unable. But I had no idea he chose to fertilize another woman in the process. I didn’t know until he brought you home and begged me to sign your adoption certificate.”

I stared at my father’s wife in muted horror, envisioning how traumatizing that must have been for her. To imagine her husband had simply accepted anal sex twice to swiftly awaken his magic, and then find out he screwed a slave in the process? My father had cheated on her without thinking about how she would feel.

“But you adopted me anyway,” I whispered, flabbergasted at my family’s deviant history. “Why?”

“Because I love Lothar Scholz, even when he makes poor decisions. That’s something you learn when you’re in a committed relationship, how to compromise and respectfully disagree. He has never strayed since he conceived you, a devoted husband and gracious provider.”

She paused, her shoulders rising as she took a deep breath. Then she met my gaze and said, “I don’t regret adopting you, Gabi. I know I haven’t treated you with the respect you deserve, and I don’t expect you to forgive me.

But I do hope we can build something cordial out of this, now that the truth is out in the open.”

Something else clicked in my brain. “Papa never wanted me to know about my real mother. He wanted to hide his actions from Dennis and me forever. But you wanted me to know the truth all my life.”

Elvira raised her chin. “Yes. And I’ll confess that Lothar’s choice to conceive a Teuton child without my help upset me. No one should ever deride your magic or the strength of your blood, Gabriela. You are everything I could never be.”

For the first time in my life, I sensed pride in her essence, black fire reaching out to mine in a show of approval. Warmth pulsed into my spirit and blood, easing the tension in my muscles. Moisture welled in the corner of my eyes; but I blinked it back, silently ordering my fire to quash any potential tears. What could I say in return? Elvira Scholz had dropped her façade, regarding me with the admiration I had sought since childhood.

“Dennis told me what that priest tried to do to you last night.” Elvira’s words brought my attention back to the present, and my body stiffened all over again. Her gray eyes searched mine, sympathy reflected in their depths. “He also told me you plan to leave Erlangen as soon as your father finds a new job.”

I hoped he had not mentioned Lukas’ betrayal. Getting to my feet, I paced to the mantel and touched the flame upon the peppermint candle, its magic sizzling

along my fingertips. “I just can’t stay here any longer after everything that’s happened. I’m going to seek a place for myself among a different conclave of our people, one with no preconceived notions about my destiny.”

“I understand where you’re coming from,” Elvira said, rising from the chair and pointing her feet toward the front door. “As long as you stay in contact with Dennis this time, I wish you all the best as you chase your dreams.”

Turning away from the mantel, I watched her put her coat on, her gestures making it clear our conversation had reached its end. Although she had not wholly apologized for her mistreatment of me, at least she had explained her motivations. That was a step in the right direction. We could work on our relationship a little bit at a time. Maybe someday in the future, I would look forward to coming home for the holidays.

“Thank you for being honest with me. It really helps.” I approached her and stretched out my right hand, red fires still dancing along my fingers.

Elvira paused with one hand on the doorknob, turning halfway around to meet my gaze. She glanced down at my mystical flames, then breathed out a sigh. “Your mother Rita bore five children before her master’s cruelty took her life. You need never fear for your own safety in childbirth.”

Tears gathered in the corners of my eyes again. My adopted mother invoked her own set of black flames upon her fingers and grasped my hand firmly. Our magic mingled in a manner I rarely experienced, and when she lifted her eyes to mine, she smiled. “Rita’s master passed away just two years after she did. His crime was reported to the Keyholder of his city, and the council rescinded his authority. He died alone in prison, a fitting end to one such as him.”

Justice clasped my heart in pure satisfaction. Elvira released my hand and opened the door, but before she exited the parlor, I asked, “What is my birth city?”

“You were born on the outskirts of Amberg, a short drive east on A6 out of Nürnberg. The Keyholder there was quite pleased when Rita’s master was caught. He nurtures a strong sense of integrity.” She offered me a look that implied I ought to keep that well in mind, then raised a hand and departed, striding swiftly back to the main house.

My adopted mother’s confessions brought me clarity I had lacked before. Now I knew my true heritage. Born to a powerful red-fired woman in a small city, wielder of magic the silver oak fairy praised. Defender of those our culture scorned, self-made financial auditor, woman who chose and walked her own path. I texted Lukas shortly after Elvira left, confidence driving me forward. *I think it’s time we part ways. I wish you well in all your endeavors.*

His response came while I prepared myself a sandwich, no trace of distress evident. *I'd like to ask your reasons why, but I respect your privacy. Please know I'll always be here for you if you need me in any way.*

I was done being someone's side piece. We could return to our former status as boss and employee—professional only. Once I moved to München, I resolved to keep my work life and personal life strictly separate.

My father came to see me on Saturday, while I was in the process of taking my decorations down. He helped me pack away the tree's ornaments, the majority of which I found in one of my late grandmother's storage bins. We discussed how profoundly his lies had hurt me, when he had been a sure foundation in my life for so long. I had a low tolerance for people who chose to project deception, forcing others to bear its weight. His wife carried it for almost three decades, while I hefted deceptions from various sources—my adopted mother, my ex, and more recently, Lukas.

“They say to ask forgiveness, not permission, but that sort of thinking makes it impossible to trust anyone,” I told him as we wound up the string lights into tight coils. “Nobody's perfect, and the sooner we can admit it and just be real, the sooner we can focus on doing good.”

“I'm starting to think my wise daughter has eclipsed my own maturity,” my father remarked, his tone implying he knew not how to react.

“I’ve just faced a lot of shit from people. And I’m starting to realize I’m not to blame for anyone else’s problems. I can change my own mindset and transform my own sphere. If everyone concentrates on doing that, this world would be a better place.” I looked my artificial tree over from top to bottom. Time to box it up and store it in the shed until I left Erlangen for good.

My father reached out to pat me on my shoulder, pride evident in his voice when he thanked me for reminding him what was most important. He planned to branch out with his résumé starting next week, testing a few leads he had not yet pursued. I related Oliver’s earlier observation—that Erlangen’s largest employer might have openings for engineers later this year. My father gave a harrumph as he folded the tree’s branches, admitting he would have to look into it.

Mundane life at Werndl Accounting resumed without a glitch, although I began eating lunch at my desk instead of outside in the court. Lukas came by only when he had project issues to discuss, informing Johanna and me that he would be away in late January and much of February, promoting Werndl’s services on the cusp of tax season. With a dramatic groan, Johanna warned me that things were about to get super busy, but I waved it off. I was used to a hectic first quarter.

The second week back in the office, Johanna finally pulled me aside to ask what had happened between Lukas and me. Awareness emanated from her wide brown eyes when I quietly explained I needed to take a

break from men for a while. I had no wish to hear gossip floating around the office about how our boss had cheated on me, so I kept that part to myself.

“I get it. You have to do what’s right for you,” she murmured, touching my upper arm in a supportive fashion while we stood alone in the canteen, waiting for the coffee pot to finish its current brew. “Michael and Klaus are such darlings. I’m so glad our boss introduced me to them. We spent a lovely week in the mountains at Christmas. They don’t mind sharing.”

Johanna’s expression hinted she might not mind sharing, either, if I wanted to take one of her boy toys on a test run. I flashed a grin at her and lifted the coffee pot from its warmer, pouring myself a mug while pledging to keep that in mind if I got an urge to try something new. I hoped to be gone from Erlangen soon after the Taubenball took place on Friday, April 2nd. I had already sent my résumé off to a couple employers in München.

Each time I laid my reports on Lukas’ desk, I glanced over his tiny collection of pictures, certain that one day I would see Rosemarie’s smile beaming at me from behind glass. But the same three photos greeted me every day. Lukas and his two nephews. Lukas and his poised mother at his college graduation. Winston.

No Rosemarie.

Bianca and I rode the train to Nürnberg the first Saturday in March, on the hunt for our perfect dresses to sport at the Taubenball. While we sat together on the

train, Bianca informed me in a low voice that Lady Ilsa had gotten a message from the whirlwind, one that granted her a newfound hope.

“The whirlwind’s spirit said its daughters are most fertile in late summer,” Bianca whispered, her blue-green eyes shimmering with excitement. “So Oliver and I have decided to start our next round of IVF the last week of July. I think it’s really going to work this time!”

I pulled Bianca against me and leaned my head on her shoulder. “Still seems really witchy to ask an element questions and get a response. I’ve talked to my fire before, but it’s never talked back to me.”

Bianca shrieked with laughter. “That’s not the same thing, you goofball! Lady Ilsa has to do a complicated spell to summon an element’s spirit. They don’t always answer unless they’re in a generous mood. Humans are lesser beings, to them.”

“Sounds like elemental spirits have similarities to *Eihalbae*.” I shut my eyes to concentrate on the joy radiating from Bianca’s windy aura. My red fire reached out to share in it and offer prayers of its own. Maybe my best friend could seize her happily-ever-after, even if my own eluded me. That would make everything I had experienced this past half year worth it.

Chapter Seventeen:
ANTICIPATION



Bianca and I spent several hours at her apartment, primping ourselves for the Taubenball. I took that Friday off work and shared lunch with my father, who had started his new job with the city's largest employer the week prior. His happiness was contagious, his first check granting him the notions of success he had missed since October 2003. The Scholz family was in the

process of settling back into their usual routines—my father as the breadwinner, my adopted mother as matron of the house and tutor of schoolchildren, my brother the premed student and aspiring physician.

I had gotten two calls that week from accounting firms in München, each requesting an interview. A few weeks from now, I intended to hand in my notice at Werndl Accounting, ready to embark on my next journey of self-discovery. My time in Erlangen was coming to an end, but I would cherish these fleeting moments, especially this night's Teutonic masquerade. I would test the limits of my magic tonight, identifying others through their elemental vibes alone.

The dress I chose for myself was of blood-red satin in a medieval style. Red laces drew the bodice close like a corset, the plunging neckline drawing the eye to my grandmother's garnet pendant that hung above my breasts. Tight red sleeves flared dramatically at the ends, the full skirt brushing the floor even though I wore heels. Bianca curled my brown locks and bound them in a frilly red scrunchie, two felt roses thrust through the tie accentuating the look. The curls fell to just below my shoulder bones, hinting at my hair's true length.

I did Bianca's hair for her after she finished with mine, her short black curls relegating my work to sprays, sparkles, and carefully placed flower clips. She wore a sleeveless white dress sprinkled with silver, swashes cresting from the waist and around the hems, a clear

depiction of her windy element. White lace arm warmers climbed from her wrists to her elbows, her shoulders and upper arms bare. I predicted she would grow cold since her whirlwind claimed no intrinsic warmth. But Bianca assured me she had practiced summoning summer winds in recent weeks, maintaining a steady temperature in her and Oliver's apartment.

"He hasn't let me turn the heat off yet, but I'm determined to reach the point where we don't need to pay for that anymore," Bianca said, while I positioned one last clip in her hair. "He already runs all our electric himself, and he's sure once he gets some time off, he'll figure out how to connect to the internet using his energy alone."

"I'm starting to wish I had energy." I grinned at Bianca and stepped toward her vanity mirror, shifting my attention to makeup. Technically, I need not put any around my eyes since my mask would cover the upper part of my face. But ruby red lipstick was a priority.

Bianca seemed to share my thoughts on the subject, for she eased to my side and held her own mask in front of her face. Hers was silver with white feathers lining the upper portion. "Looks like all we need to worry about tonight is our lips." She formed a few air kisses before plunging a hand into her makeup bag.

"Your lips have nothing to worry about except the food. Mine?" I stopped speaking as I polished off my

layer of glistening red. “Might try for a taste of magic I’ve never known.”

My best friend squealed, entertained. “What sort of elements should I help you find? I know mist is out of the picture.” Bianca and Dennis were the only people I had told about Lukas’ betrayal.

I pondered for a minute, though I already knew what my fire preferred. “I’d like to try for a different manifestation of water. Ice or snow. Maybe just plain old water. My fire has this weird urge to mingle with its opposite.”

“I’ll keep my senses on guard. We’ll find you your one true love tonight, just like I found Oliver ten years ago. I’m sure of it.”

Hope my one true love doesn’t mind relocating to München, I thought while I waited for Bianca to finish with her silvery lip gloss. Maybe there’ll be a few single guys from that area at the ball tonight. No matter what, I need to stay away from Lukas if he happens to be there. Nicole, too. And Callen. I certainly hope that jerk stays home tonight.

Bianca drove us to the train station in the center of town, Oliver having left his Audi behind to take a company car to the conference in Berlin. Neither of us planned to get sloshed like we did at the New Year’s festival, mainly because we wanted to relish the spectacular offerings of food. My best friend gushed about that again on the way to the train station, rattling

off memories of lamb crown roast and blue cheese stuffed dates. Traditional Nürnberg entrées like roast pork knuckle and nine centimeter sausages were sure to be available as well. I looked forward to tasting some of the local beers.

When we climbed the platform to wait for the train, four teen girls in prom dresses bustled toward us, a cloud of cheap perfume proclaiming their youthful innocence. My fire sensed their elements right away, though they kept their magic concealed from the general public. The tallest one, obviously the leader of the clique, offered Bianca and me a brilliant smile. “Taubenball?”

“Yes! We’ve been waiting for this night for months!” Bianca crowed, her cheerleader persona on full display. “You all look positively enchanting! The guys will be swarming you, no doubt!”

“Really? You’re sure?” One of the other girls took a half step forward, patting fretfully at her highlighted hair. “We spent all afternoon getting ready!”

“Of course you did! Our young men deserve only the best. I met my husband at the Taubenball ten years ago.” Bianca’s grin widened, her eyes sparkling with fun.

All four teens shrieked, and two of them actually bounced up and down. They converged on Bianca in a flood, crying out a rash of cute queries. “You *did*?” “Your one true love?” “What’s his element?” “How soon did you marry?” “Did your instincts tell you he was the right one?” “Did he ask you to dance?”

I eased my way out of the onslaught, encouraged by their innocent chatter. With any luck, they need never face the heartbreak that dogged me. I sent a silent prayer to that effect heavenward, hoping our instincts would serve us well tonight.

“Did you meet your husband at the Taubenball, too?” The shyest girl among them turned her attention to me, nervousness apparent in her blue-gray eyes. Her aura vibrated with familiar heat, her fire strictly contained.

“I probably would have if I didn’t get bronchitis.” Two of the teens gasped and all four of them backed away from me as if I had the plague.

“She doesn’t have bronchitis *now*. That was ten years ago,” Bianca reminded her group of buoyant maidens. The train pulled up and opened its doors before she could comment further. We waited as they piled in, exchanging meaningful smiles. I let Bianca enter the train car first, knowing she would sit with the teens and offer sage advice during the short ride into Nürnberg.

I chose a seat in the empty row behind Bianca, grateful that the initial rush hour crowds had thinned. It was nearing six p.m., and the masquerade technically started at six-fifteen. According to Bianca, the main courses would not be served until seven-thirty, giving the guests time to socialize and dance. She and Oliver had met when an olive rolled off her plate while she filled it at the tables, an amusing twist of fate that granted her a lifelong partnership.

Maybe I should try to find myself a man named after a food.

More smartly-dressed people filed onto the train at each stop, the mystical ambiance growing ever stronger. I ticked off each element in my mind as Bianca continued chatting with the cluster of teen girls. Dark energy. Water. Warm wind or Föhn. Fire that seemed unwilling to choose a color, likely of the natural orange variety. Solid earth or stone. Air. Lightning. Ice.

I glanced toward the male who claimed ice, taking a quick inventory. Clad in a gray suit and light blue bowtie, he leaned against a pole near the train's doors. His hair was of a solid black, his attention fixed on his cell phone. Young enough, but probably not single.

You're being stupid, Gabi, I chided myself, gathering my skirt as I prepared to change trains at the city center. Food first, men second, if at all. The guys will have enough bubbling teens to choose from, anyway. None of them will bother with you.

Everyone attending the Taubenball exited the train and converged toward the line that headed east. The masquerade would take place at a castle on the outskirts of Nürnberg, its extensive grounds backing up to the Pegnitz River. A Teuton priest on the city council owned the property, which had been in his family for centuries. Two past Keyholders of Nürnberg had called the castle their home.

“There’s so much magic on this train, part of me thinks it might launch itself into the sky,” Bianca murmured in my ear after we found an empty pair of seats.

I chuckled, my red fire basking in the numinous atmosphere. “Guess we’re on our way to magic school, now. Pretty sure I might be hot for teacher.”

Bianca shook with giggles, while I opened my red velvet purse to check on its contents. My crimson mask ornamented with devilish flames sat at the top, ready to hide my face once we were finished riding public transport. Beneath that, I passed my fingers over my wallet, cell phone, keys, lipstick, hand mirror, tissue packet, small box of mints.

“Hey! I could use one of those right about now,” Bianca said, pointing at the mints. As usual, she was unprepared on that front. I handed her a mint and took one myself, its fresh burst granting me an extra jolt of enthusiasm.

The train station was a short walk from the castle grounds, equal to about two city blocks. Each train car belched out a glut of elegantly attired Teutons, the crowd striking out toward the castle. If any guests had trouble reading a map, they need only follow the throng. Bianca hooked her right arm through my left as we merged with the crowd, the collection of teens pulling quickly ahead.

“I hope Callen doesn’t try to nab one of them tonight,” I said, annoyance at that very real possibility sending

thicker fire through my blood. I fished my mask out of my purse and slipped it on, struggling to attach it behind my curls.

Bianca had secured her own mask already, her arm muscles tensing. “Guess we might need to keep our senses on guard for darkness along with mist. I feel like Mother Goose after our ride here. That bastard better not try to hurt my chicks!”

“All the priests in Erlangen know what Callen did. He might not be allowed to attend. But my fire’s going to take note of any mist or darkness, for sure.”

The castle soon rose before us, electric spotlights casting its front façade in a brilliant glow. I counted four second-floor balconies and a pair of half-timbered turrets capping each corner—a common adornment for Franconian castles. Two fountains splashed on either side of the cobblestone drive to the front entrance, a side path branching off toward a garage and parking area on the right. Most of the guests likely used public transportation, like Bianca and I had done. The parking lot was roped off and stuffed with vehicles.

I happened to notice a silver Mercedes situated amongst the cars that had earned a right to park on the property itself. Tearing my gaze away, I tried to focus on the joy radiating from Bianca’s spirit, not wanting to dampen her fun with my personal struggles. That was Lukas’ car, without question. He was here.

Keep your senses peeled for mist. Keep your senses peeled for mist.

Two robed Teuton priests manned the doors, ensuring all admitted guests wielded an element. The brass keys of Nürnberg hung from a ring at the waist of the middle-aged man who opened the left door for Bianca and me, his voice refined as he welcomed us to the celebration. I offered him a respectful nod, impressed that this city's *Leitaeri* chose to guard the door rather than strut like a prince.

Once inside, we handed our purses to an attendant. Then Bianca guided me through the vestibule and into an opulent ballroom, a bald man evoking Debussy's melodies from a white grand piano. There were multiple chambers like this one, she said, each embracing different styles of music. We could hang out here for a while, and if we found no interesting dance partners, we would move on.

Bianca had barely finished talking when a stern man appeared before us, his right hand stretched out to me. "Care to share this dance?"

Chapter Eighteen:

NÜRNBERG'S DAUGHTER



Rafael Kemmerich, the surly accountant whose judging eyes took note of my path to the restroom every day at the office. I would recognize his metal—and his voice—anywhere. His black mask matched his suit, his silver tie and hair the only visible hints at his true element. His expression

seemed expectant, from what I could see of it, his proffered hand awaiting mine.

I should deny him, probably, but curiosity drove me to accept. Since he had requested the dance using traditional Teutonic words, I responded in kind, falling easily into the olden dialect. “I would be delighted.”

Laying my hand in his, I sailed away from where Bianca stood by the wall, her glossed lips parted in surprise. Hopefully my coworker would not distract me for too long. The delicious tones of Debussy’s Arabesque filled the ballroom, each couple gliding along the paths their muses showed them. Rafael held my gaze while we danced, one hand steady upon my waist as the other grew pointed fingertips of pure metal, presenting my fire with a challenge.

I summoned flames upon my fingers, sending them forth to flicker against Rafael’s solid element. He cleared his throat, then admitted he wished to commend my recent work on the largest auditing project Werndl Accounting had ever undertaken. “You have proved yourself skilled and discerning, valuable traits in any accounting firm,” he said.

My work ethic impressed him, unlike my blood status. “I set high standards for myself,” I said after a moment’s pause. Why he felt inspired to discuss work while we mingled our elements in a dance was beyond me.

“I’ve noticed. Pity your supervisor has shifted his attentions to Nürnberg’s daughter.” Rafael narrowed his

eyes, looking irritated.

I was not ready for this conversation. My bodice abruptly felt constricting, but I forced myself to take a deep breath, moving my feet along the floor. “What do you mean, Nürnberg’s daughter?” That was a term I did not recognize.

“Lukas Felder has been passing in and out of these ballrooms with a yellow-fired maiden on his arm. She’s the Keyholder’s daughter. Rosemarie Ziehm.”

Now I was really struggling to breathe. I loosed my hand from Rafael’s grip and begged his forgiveness. Then I jogged in my heels to where Bianca stood before the doorway to the vestibule, balancing a small digital camera atop her silver purse as she took covert snapshots. “Need to get outside,” I wheezed, practically falling into her arms. “Found out . . . something awful.”

Tucking her camera away, she placed an arm around me and helped me into a hallway that spilled out onto a terrace that overlooked the side gardens. Her talents with her whirlwind came in handy as she forced my lungs to draw breath, overcoming the panic that gripped my spirit. Lukas and the Nürnberg Keyholder’s daughter. Of course.

Bianca sat down with me upon the stone banister, the night air refreshing me beneath her sway. Several other guests sat further along the terrace, and some gathered in the gardens, invoking magic under the moonlight. The Taubenball was supposed to be a celebration, not a place

to lament my losses. My fire had kept the tears out of my eyes. I needed to acknowledge reality and move on.

“Apparently Lukas is just like his mother,” I muttered to my friend, hoping none of the other Teutons lingering nearby could overhear. “He told me she likes powerful sexual partners, Teuton priests and Keyholders. He’s exactly the same, because he’s gone after Nürnberg’s daughter. Rosemarie is the child of this city’s Lady and Keyholder.”

Bianca’s eyes grew round beneath her mask, and she let out a soft whistle. “Makes sense, honestly. Like mother, like son. Might be harder to avoid him if he’s parading around with the Keyholder’s daughter.”

I rose to my feet and brushed off my dress, stuffing my hurt deep down into my toes. “He can parade around all he wants. We’re here to have fun. Let’s go dance together in the ballroom we just left. That might catch some males’ attention.”

“Who was that guy you danced with, anyway?” Bianca asked as we strolled back toward the ballroom. Sounds of a Chopin nocturne beckoned us forward, the pianist’s skills on grand display.

“Rafael. He’s one of my coworkers. The only Teuton in the office aside from Lukas and me. Had a bean up his nose until he found out I’m not eligible to become *Leitalra*. And apparently, he thinks Lukas is an ass for picking Rosemarie over me.”

“Hmm. Traits of a man who’s getting his priorities in order.” Bianca twined her right hand with my left and we began our dance, her whirlwind igniting my red flames in magnificence. “Is he here by himself? Single?”

I laughed at Bianca’s instinctive leap toward matchmaker. “All I know is he has a daughter in college. And I do *not* have ‘daddy’ issues. I like men my own age.”

We migrated into a different ballroom after completing our dance to a round of applause, a small coterie of Teuton males trailing in our wake. The next room we entered contained a cluster of young people swaying to a popular tune pulsing from the speakers tucked beside an empty fireplace, a DJ sporting a backwards ball cap sifting through a pack of records. A disco ball hung beside the chandelier in the center of the ceiling, modernity clashing with antiquity. Several hooded Teuton priests moved along the edges of the throng, keeping the peace.

Two of the males in our entourage begged for a dance when the DJ put on “A Thousand Miles” by Vanessa Carlton. Bianca and I split apart again to enjoy a few dances, my fire reinforcing my stamina as I melded it with a growing number of elements. Wind. Earth. Energy. Fire as black as my adopted mother’s.

This magical sharing was what made Teutonic gifts beautiful.

In the middle of a carefree dance to a song by Beyoncé, my fire flared a sharp warning. A Teuton of

mist had entered the ballroom, vibrant yellow fire poised at his side. Their elements intertwined effortlessly, as though they were meant for each other. That was my cue to scam.

I divested myself of my current dance partner and slipped into a hallway, my fire sending a silent call for Bianca to join me. Its heat sizzled in my blood, my hormones telling me I ought to confront Lukas and his youthful date and rip them apart. Who cared if Rosemarie was Nürnberg's daughter? I could probably take her in a fight. Red veiled my vision as I played it out in my head for a fleeting moment. Though my jealousy burned as bright as my element, priests would likely separate us if I attacked Rosemarie. They might even kick me out of the castle.

The path of maturity was my only option, though my emotions roiled.

Bianca joined me when Beyoncé's song ended, taking my hand and steering us both toward the terrace we found earlier. Her whirlwind reached out to comfort my element, easing it out of its bloodthirstiness. "I got an eyeful of Rosemarie's dress," she hissed in my ear. "Bright gold with sunrays spreading out from her right hip. Like she thinks her element is just as noble as her father's light."

I had not bothered to notice Nürnberg's Keyholder claimed light. Bianca's whirlwind must have been scanning other Teutons since we exited the train. "She

might be a nice person, for all we know. But I can't face her or him. Not without making a scene and getting us kicked out of the party."

"Food should be served soon, so that'll be a nice distraction. Why don't we explore the grounds while we're waiting? Might see some breathtaking elemental displays in the process."

We passed through the first garden of low holly hedges and into a second, occasional lanterns rising from the earth to offer light on moonless nights. The argentine glimmer of starlight combined with the first quarter moon doused the landscape in a mystic glow appropriate for a magical romp. Bianca turned the flash off on her camera and took several photos of the grounds, praising the scenery. We encountered three couples dancing and others making out upon benches, elements weaving the night air with refreshing wonder. My frustrations ebbed as my spirit basked in the collective joy of love and light.

We followed a paved pathway with bamboo reaching for the heavens on one side and blooming forsythias on the other. Bianca gave a sudden shriek, stuffing her camera back into her purse and bounding ahead to where a slim woman with a silver-white braid pushed a wheelchair occupied by a black hooded figure. "Lady Ilsa! You came!"

The older woman caught Bianca in a hug, her sky blue dress a crisp breeze on an Alpine hike. I summoned my fire back into my vision, seeing how beautifully their

elements greeted each other—whirlwind and air. “Of course I came. I said I would, didn’t I?” The woman pulled back and smiled at Bianca, her light blue mask matching her dress. “I even brought my master along for the ride.”

“As if I had a choice.” The priest in the wheelchair sounded amused as he offered a withered hand to my friend. “So good to see you again, Bianca.”

I halted a few steps back to watch their reunion, observing Lady Ilsa’s relationship with her priestly husband. She wagged her tongue at him in a playful manner while Bianca clasped his hand, and the elder made a chiding noise. “Don’t tempt me, airy witch. I want to finish admiring the flowers before we give these young people a show.”

“These young people can make their own shows, if they have the courage to do it. They don’t need us for that.” Lady Ilsa lifted her gaze to mine and beckoned me forward. “Come join us, my dear girl. You must be Bianca’s friend, Gabi. I sense the vital heat of your fire. I’m Lady Ilsa Vorbach, and this is my husband, Horst.”

I stepped forward to take her hand, stifling my element back into my spirit in the process. “It’s an honor to meet you, Lady Ilsa. Bianca has told me all about your . . . witchy ways.” I could not think of a proper term for her services.

The older woman burst out laughing, and so did her priestly husband. “See, these Teutons in the cities are

always so strict and formal. It's sweet." Horst shot me a grin, revealing several gaps in his teeth. He wore no mask, his face appearing much older than his wife's. But his irises gleamed with fire's natural flames.

"Sweet? More like ridiculous. It's no wonder they get all tangled up in rules and prejudices." Lady Ilsa put her hands on her hips and looked skyward. "We'd better get a move on if we want to park by the Pegnitz for our dance. Our colleagues here might think they need a fire extinguisher once we get going."

Lady Ilsa took command of her husband's wheelchair again, striking out for the river. My element sensed its presence just around the corner, water infusing the atmosphere with dampness that reminded me of Lukas. I followed behind the devoted couple while Bianca walked beside Horst, chattering about how she had begun to practice controlling the temperature in her apartment. The priest offered her a few pointers I had never considered, prompting me to ponder other ways to use my fire magic at home.

I continued to run my gaze over Lady Ilsa's slender form, her aura pulsing with air, the tip of her braid bouncing against her waist. She planned to wheel her husband's chair to the riverbank, where she declared they would share a dance. Was his fire potent enough to help him stand? Though Horst's cloak hid much of his body, he appeared frail with age. Could his witchy wife cast a spell to grant him youthful vigor? What sort of mystery was I about to witness?

When we reached the bank of the Pegnitz, I noticed a group of teens having a splashing contest some distance away. One of the girls sported claws of solid ice, each drop of water freezing before it could moisten her hair or dress. Another was in the process of conjuring a cord of energy, the river's waters prompting their creation to spark in frantic fashion. None of the teens paid any attention to us, but I called my fire back into my blood just in case.

Suddenly Bianca appeared in front of me, shoving me a few steps back from Horst and Lady Ilsa. "Give them space, and let your fire show you the realm of the spirit. This is going to be glorious."

Lady Ilsa had parked her husband's wheelchair in a paved alcove with steps leading into the river, a place doubtless used for swimming in summer months. She walked around to stand before her priest, taking one of his hands in both of hers. "Do you want me to take us both there?" she asked, holding his gaze.

A single scoff escaped Horst's withered lips. "Do I look dead to you? We'll go together, like we always do." He turned his hooded face toward where I stood with Bianca, the fire in his eyes glowing ever brighter. "If you girls wouldn't mind keeping watch over our bodies for a little while, we'd greatly appreciate it. Some novice Teuton might think my fire's going to destroy my chair; but if another priest happens by, you're off the hook." He winked.

“We’ll try not to take too long, but we make no promises,” Lady Ilsa added, acknowledging us with a sly smile. “My master is a fine man, and I plan to take full advantage of that while we’re out of these aging shells.”

Horst uttered something incredibly sultry, their commitment awakening my fire’s yearning. Then they both looked into each other’s eyes and their elements burst free to cover their bodies at the same time. Flames of natural orange engulfed Horst from head to toe, a thick shield of transparent air granting his wife a mystical glow under the moonlight. Because I had summoned my fire into my own eyes at Bianca’s behest, I witnessed their spirits leaping into the ether together.

My heart throbbed with amazement as I beheld Horst’s spirit, untouched by age or disability. His ethereal skin gave off a sun-like radiance, his flaming robes and hair shining like a beacon. He reached one hand forth to caress his wife’s face, Lady Ilsa’s robes an exact copy of the night sky—midnight blue sprinkled with a multitude of stars. Her white hair plunged to her waist in waves of pure air, her eyelids sliding shut at her master’s caress. Then they kissed, their spirits tangling in jubilant rapture.

My body swayed unconsciously when their spirits began to dance, dipping down to the Pegnitz to carry a swath of its waters along with them. Though neither the witch nor her priest were water elements, the river seemed thrilled to join their celebration, mist and steam swirling artfully around them. Horst broke away from his

wife to gather what appeared to be stars from the sky, tossing tiny fires down to brighten Lady Ilsa's elemental robes.

“Now that's something I've never seen before.”

A male voice pulled Bianca and me from our reverie. She squeaked, startled, while I tore my gaze away from the sky to acknowledge our companion. “Henning.”

The young Keyholder of Erlangen grinned at me, the hood of his robe pushed back to reveal his long brown hair tied in its usual ponytail. “Hey, Gabi. Bianca. I take it you know my Lady's good friend Ilsa?”

“I just met her tonight, but Bianca's known her for a while,” I said.

Henning looked from my face to the river, where Lady Ilsa and Horst were in the process of collecting another band of water to carry with them in their dance. “Did they ask you to guard Horst's wheelchair? Or are you just here for the show? There's food available in the castle now.”

My stomach chose that moment to remind me I had not eaten since lunch. “Maybe we should give them some privacy,” Bianca suggested. “I'm famished.”

“You'll make sure nobody bothers their bodies, right?” I directed the query at Henning, who looked toward the teens conjuring elements further upstream.

“Of course. I need to discuss something with Horst once they've finished.”

“Sounds good. Maybe we’ll see you again later on.” I struck out for the path between the bamboo and forsythias, Bianca quick to follow.

“It’s really too bad you weren’t born in Erlangen. I still think you and he would make a great couple. A *Leitalra* and *Leitaeri* I could look up to.” Bianca nudged my arm, her sandals making no sound upon the asphalt. My heels, on the other hand, announced my presence to the universe. More reason to ensure I maintained my dignity throughout this event.

“Erlanga’s soul will choose the *Leitalra* we all need, Henning included. Now let’s see if I’ll find my one true love at the buffet tables like you did.”

I had no luck on that front, but we did encounter Dennis at the drink station with a group of three friends. He introduced all of them, and my fire took note of their elements as readily as my brain forgot their names. All males who looked the same age as Henning and Dennis—in other words, too young for me. Wintry wind, smoke, and stone.

Bianca and I carried our plates and drinks to the terrace, situating ourselves against opposite pillars along the stone balustrade. I concentrated on my food for a while, relieved at the chance to sate my hunger. Along with a standard sandwich of Nürnberg sausage and mustard, I sampled the cheese-filled dates Bianca talked about earlier. Two lobster crostini and a small dish of

roasted almonds rounded out my meal, and I quenched my thirst with a flask of dark beer.

“So what’s next on the agenda?” Bianca asked, tugging the last bite of meat free from a lamb bone. “More food? More dancing? Should we find some shrubbery to hide in and breach the spirit realm like Lady Ilsa and her husband did?”

Memories of their gambols made me smile, renewed yearning warming me inside. “I hope someday I find a man like hers.”

“I hope Oliver and I become like them in our old age. Making love in spirit form, teasing each other, teaching our grandchildren how to shape new spells.” My best friend sighed, gazing out across the garden with a wistful look.

“You’ll get your wish. I’m sure of it. I’ll have to get serious about my hunt instead of hanging out with the teens. Maybe we should try the ballroom with that string quartet next. Might be more refined guys seeking partners there.”

“An established man looking for an established woman!” Bianca translated, her eyes practically glowing from behind her mask. She dabbed her lips with a napkin, then said, “We might need to touch up our lipstick first. Have to go ask one of the attendants where they stashed our purses.”

“More mints would probably be a good idea, too.” I drained the last of my beer and got to my feet, wiggling

my toes inside my shoes as I stretched.

We made our way through a number of dance partners as the night wore on. I made an effort to hold conversations with the men who held potential, but while some showed obvious interest, my fire had settled itself into a corner to observe in silence. It flickered to life anytime it detected Lukas' mist somewhere in the crowd, urging me to present myself as a valid alternative to his yellow-fired girlfriend. I did catch sight of her golden dress before I managed to extract myself from one of the ballrooms, her cheerful smile slicing at my heart. She glided through the castle like Nürnberg's princess, her striking consort always at her side.

I made my way to a restroom shortly after nine p.m., studying my face in the mirror while I washed my hands after finishing my business. The artistic flames lining my mask gave a fierce impression, the roses fitted above my curls granting a delicate contrast. Thus far, I had spoken with two single men about the same age as me, neither of whom stirred anything in my absurd heart. Instead, I stood here studying my reflection and thinking of Lukas, wondering how I could turn his attentions away from Nürnberg's daughter and back to me. I was hopeless.

On the way out of the restroom, a disturbance at the far end of the hallway caught my attention. Bianca screamed my name and staggered toward me, her face wet with tears. "Gabi . . . that bitch . . . that bitch is pregnant . . . *again!*"

Chapter Nineteen:
STARTLING TRUTH



Her cry, heavy with tragedy, spurred me into action. I rushed toward Bianca and gathered her in my arms, attempting to motor us away from those shooting us odd looks on their way to the vestibule. Many guests prepared to depart, for Nürnberg's Keyholder had visited each ballroom and dining area not long ago, announcing that the ball would formally conclude at ten p.m. Those

who lingered afterward might face the indignation of the castle's owner, who just happened to be a priest on the council, wielder of whirlwind like my distraught friend.

Ten p.m. was far too early for an event like this. Cinderella's ball had lasted until midnight. But who was I to judge the preferences of a Teuton magnate?

Bianca's chest quaked with sobs as I guided her into the restroom I had just left. It had three stalls and the main door had no lock. After making sure no one occupied any of the stalls, I dragged a trash can across the floor to block the door, giving us temporary privacy. Hopefully most of the guests would stop by one of the larger restrooms on the other side of the vestibule.

My friend began to tug at her mask, yanking it over her head and flinging it onto the sink, its fabric sopping wet. I came to her side and stroked her back as she bent over the sink, her essence seething with pain and desolation. "She's pregnant again," Bianca repeated, her eyes squeezed shut as they leaked salt water onto the sink. "She's pregnant *again* . . . and she says . . . I'm a worthless woman . . . because I can't . . . have kids."

Nicole must be the culprit. Anger reared up inside of me, agitating my fire, which endeavored to console Bianca's whirlwind. The air in the restroom stirred, an errant breeze ruffling her hair and mine. Red veiled my vision while I plotted to hunt Nicole down and make her beg for mercy. How dare she treat my friend so cruelly

when she had everything she wanted—a successful husband, two boys with strong Teuton blood, and now a new baby in the oven?

“She says . . . Oliver should have . . . taken anyone else,” Bianca went on, her breaths coming in short gasps, her eyelids opening a window to her tormented soul. “I’ve . . . rendered him . . . impotent. A failure.”

I growled out a sharp expletive. “Do you think you can compose yourself if I leave you in here?” I asked her, still gently rubbing her back. “That bitch has gone too far, and I’m going to drag her before Henning so he can tell her off.”

“It’s too late.” Bianca sniffed, her watery eyes meeting mine in the mirror. “She’s gone. She and her husband . . . were just leaving . . . she caught me in the vestibule. She’s already showing, Gabi. Her third Teuton child. Why can’t my body work like it’s supposed to?”

Fury sizzled in my blood as I folded her in my arms and laid my head against hers. The breeze in the restroom had begun to still, my best friend scrounging for pieces of her self-worth. I could not fathom what words could comfort her, so I simply stood beside her and held her close. She and Oliver would try again in late July, but now was not the time to remind her of that. Who knew whether her womb would finally kick into gear in her whirlwind’s fertile season?

The door to the hallway rattled against the trashcan. “Is someone in there?” A vaguely familiar voice drifted

into my ears and I straightened, releasing Bianca. “The line for the main restroom’s a kilometer long.”

“Lady . . . Lady Ilsa,” Bianca choked out. She staggered for the trashcan and tugged it back to its place beneath the sink. I pulled the door open as soon as the path was clear, and the elderly matron in her sky blue dress sailed into the room, compassion shining in her eyes as she embraced Bianca.

She cooed at my friend while her tears welled up again, and I related what Nicole had said. Lady Ilsa sighed, her gaze meeting mine beneath her light blue mask. “If that hussy hadn’t already gone, I’d give her a dressing down myself.” Her air reached out to my fire, acknowledging its vexation. “Why don’t you go blow off some steam, Gabi? I’ll get Bianca straightened out, and we’ll meet you in the vestibule. My master has already made it through the line for the men’s room.”

She gave a brief roll of her eyes, then nodded firmly at me, my signal to go. My anger had already found itself a new target—Nicole’s older brother, Lukas. The cheater. The arrogant bully who discarded good Teuton maidens like used napkins. He was doubtless hanging around the castle somewhere with his dear Rosemarie. My wrath at Bianca’s humiliation reinforced my confidence. That bastard was about to get an earful, whether his girlfriend stood beside him or not.

I whirled for the door and threw it open, calling my gratitude to Lady Ilsa on my way out. She could soothe

Bianca while I avenged her honor and mine. No other guests occupied this particular hallway, an offshoot of the one that led to the terrace. Taking a deep breath, I stretched my spirit forth, fire flaring in my eyes as my element sought Lukas' mist and Rosemarie's yellow fire.

I sensed five other mists and three yellow fires in the castle. None of the mists radiated familiarity, each in the company of different elements altogether. The sun-like quality of a fiery female—near light and water at the front doors—identified Rosemarie. She accompanied her father and mother, probably thanking each guest for coming. Why was Lukas not with her? Where had he gone?

He would not have left already, not without taking his date with him. Maybe Nürnberg's Keyholder and Lady did not consider him worthy to stand with their family yet. Served him right, if so. I would have to search for him on the grounds.

My heels stabbed against the stones of the terrace as I set out for the paved path to the river. My instincts told me I would find Lukas there, drawing vitality from his primary element. Fewer Teutons occupied the gardens at this hour; the ornate clock built into the terrace's overhang read nine twenty-five. I would have to make this quick, or risk getting booted once the clocks struck ten. I cast my senses far ahead, identifying the Pegnitz' potent presence, along with Teutonic elements here and there. Two fiery males on their way back to the castle. A

snowy female whose spirit quivered with heartbreak, seeking comfort from the river.

One robust male of mist lounged on a smooth stone at the water's edge, his refreshing element hovering around him in silent serenity.

Time to disrupt that jerk's peace and quiet.

I pivoted to the right when I reached the spot where Lady Ilsa had parked Horst's wheelchair earlier. Marching onto a dirt trail through a batch of junipers, my fire boiled with heat, its target in sight. Lukas sat not far away with his back to me, his face turned to the river. His sleek gray suit seemed to shimmer under the starlight, his mask forgotten at his side, fog swirling softly around his body.

When my heels struck his stone perch, he jerked to attention, swinging his torso around. I halted two steps away from him and tightened my fists, crimson flames sweeping along my fingers. Lukas lifted his head, and his mist-infused eyes met mine, his jaw dropping in what resembled shock. I unleashed.

"How *dare* you just *sit* here playing in the water when your fucking sister just tore my best friend's heart to shreds?" I shouted, not caring how far my voice carried. "She spouts shit about babies, babies, babies because she thinks she's better than people who can't have any. I've had enough of her and of *you*, messing with my heart when what you really want is Nürnberg's daughter!"

Lukas' eyes widened and he pushed himself to his feet. His cloud of mist sank into the Pegnitz, his deep red tie hardly suitable for someone with a watery element. "Gabi," he said, lifting a palm as if to restrain my fury.

"What'd you leave your precious girlfriend for, huh?" I bellowed, allowing my fire free rein throughout my body, transforming my curls into licking flames. "Do her parents not accept you yet? Bet they know you break hearts left and right, sticking your piece into any willing pussy. You have no concept of loyalty or commitment, and if Rosemarie had any sense she'd dump you right now!"

Lukas held both hands up in surrender, realization breaking across his face. "Gabi, wait a second. I can—"

"Do what? Lie again?" I interrupted, my element reinforcing my stamina, fully prepared to clash against Lukas' mist. "Say you're not exactly like your mother, looking for a more powerful witch to screw? That's why you're still single, isn't it? Because you can't keep your dick in your pants whenever there's a Keyholder's daughter strutting around? You probably have more kids sprinkled here and there than your bitchy sister could ever pop out!"

"Please, stop," Lukas begged, sweat dampening his forehead. "I know you're angry right now, but I promise, it's not what it looks like. There's a lot—"

"Of course it's 'not what it looks like,'" I spat back at him, using air quotes. "My ex used to tell me that all the

time, trying to keep me—”

“Rosemarie’s my *sister!*” Lukas finally hollered, reaching up to loosen his tie, his chest heaving. Though he refused to match my anger with his own, my tirade had shaken him.

“Nicole’s your sister.” My thoughts wheeled in confusion.

Lukas placed a hand to his forehead and shut his eyes, trying to control his breathing, his left hand crushing the center of his tie. “Nicole is my half-sister by my mother. Rosemarie is my half-sister by my *father.*”

A gasp breezed through my lips as the knot began to unravel. “Your father . . . he’s the Keyholder of Nürnberg?”

“Yes. I’m his illegitimate firstborn.” Lukas winced, his eyes opening to stare desperately into mine. Their irises were a pure hazel, his mist confined within. “It’s not common knowledge, so I’d appreciate it if you didn’t spread it around. My father cheated on his previous *Leitalra* with my mother. He’s the man she loves most, but they can never be together.”

I felt as though the ground would reach up and swallow me. Of all the excuses Lukas could have given, I had never expected this one—the only valid one. Astrid Felder arose in my mind’s eye, her grim poise and snowy eyes hiding her pain from the world around her. She loved Nürnberg’s Keyholder, but he would never be free.

He renounced his autonomy the moment he accepted the keys.

“Dear God, please spare Henning from that.” The prayer whispered its way toward the heavens, Lukas’ behavior making perfect sense now.

“May he be spared,” Lukas echoed, heartache evident in his voice. When I met his gaze, he let go of his tie and gestured toward the stone’s edge, where he had rested earlier. For the first time, I noticed daffodils blooming along the stone. “I have a lot more to tell you, more things I shouldn’t have kept hidden. I’ll tell you everything right now, if you’ll sit down with me.”

I released a shaky breath and noted the moon’s position. “The priest who owns this castle wants us out by ten. Do you have a watch on you?”

Lukas pushed his left cuff back just far enough to reveal one that looked way above my pay grade. “It’s nearing nine forty-five. But I know Herr von Rische. He won’t banish us from the property as long as we don’t make a ruckus.”

“I’ve already made a ruckus,” I groaned as I stepped forward to sit before the water, my fire’s fury diminishing. I tucked my legs beneath me, making sure the lengthy skirt of my dress remained on the stone. Embarrassed, I wrapped my arms around myself, unable to look at Lukas. I was such an idiot. He had practically *told* me Rosemarie was his sister when he said he had

“family obligations” on New Year’s Eve. But here I was thinking he had dumped me for a younger witch.

“It’ll be fine. Just hold back your judgment until I’ve explained everything. Please.” Lukas positioned himself beside me, dropping his long legs among the daffodils. He left a handbreadth of space between us.

“I can do that. But something has to be done about Nicole. She can’t keep bullying young Teuton females with empty wombs.”

“I’ll talk to her again and mention it to our mother. If she can’t bring Nicole in line, I’ll request an audience with Erlangen’s Keyholder. Henning, as you call him.”

I detected a trace of amused jealousy in his tone but decided not to address it. “Okay,” I replied simply, gazing at the currents rippling along the surface of the river’s dark waters. I saw the landscape in nighttime’s colors now.

“Okay. First of all, I know how it must have looked to you, to see me with my sister tonight and at the New Year’s Eve festival. Rosemarie and I have been fake dating in public for a couple years now, because she’s interested in someone our community will probably reject. Since it’s not common knowledge that I’m the son of Herr Werner Ziehm—Nürnberg’s Keyholder—our ruse has worked fairly well. Too well, it would seem, since you were totally convinced.” Lukas grimaced, staring down at the daffodils before him.

He had asked me not to judge until he explained everything, but questions churned in my mind already. What sort of man had stolen Rosemarie's heart? Our people were not the most tolerant, but nor were they the most bigoted. Maybe she had fallen for an outsider, like my previous relationship with Kyle. While such partnerships were not forbidden in the modern world, they were still discouraged, since any child born to such a couple would be unable to invoke magic.

"Is Rosemarie in love with an outsider?" I asked.

Lukas shifted his gaze from the daffodils to me, his expression guarded. I looked away, unwilling to give him quarter quite yet. "No. She fell for an exchange student she met in high school, one of the Teutons from Las Vegas. The Teuton communities in Germany and Austria hold some negative opinions of that group."

I blinked at the waters of the Pegnitz, perplexed. "I didn't even know any of our people lived in the U.S., let alone in Las Vegas."

"The Teutons there have some sort of shady history, so our priests try to keep us in the dark about their existence. I've met Rosemarie's boyfriend, though, and he seems like a nice guy. No weird or dark vibes hovering over him. He's not very good at speaking German, but most Americans aren't bilingual."

"I think I'd like to get to know Rosemarie now. She's piqued my curiosity about Las Vegas Teutons." My earlier fury at Lukas was dissolving. I traced a finger

through the river's currents, inviting the water to cool my spirit further. My age-old attraction to the man beside me began to unearth itself from its deep cave, the presence of his mist a welcome companion.

"I can introduce you, but don't ask her about it right away. I'm not sure if she's told anyone but me about her boyfriend. She's not going to like it if you ply her with questions." My fire sensed worry exuding from Lukas' spirit. He might be regretting his candor.

"I won't be nosy about it," I assured him. "But thank you for telling me. That explains a lot."

Lukas sighed, his shoulders slumped in defeat. "I don't know why I didn't realize you broke up with me because you saw me with Rosemarie on New Year's Eve. I witnessed your brother bringing Callen before the Keyholder and Lady, so I know what he tried to do to you that night. I should have called, texted, something. But I was already beat from accompanying my mother to a gala earlier that day, and I had to drive Rosemarie back to her dorm. I crashed as soon as I got home, and I woke up to your text."

Shame struck me as I recalled that blunt text I had sent him while I nursed my hangover. What a terrible way to learn of a breakup. My hurt and rage drove me to dump him without considering his reaction. If I had found the gall to call instead, these last three months would have passed much differently.

“I asked my mother for advice after I read your text,” Lukas went on while I wallowed in remorse, steam rising where my fingers stirred the river’s waters. “Well, after I got over feeling utterly broken. She said you probably needed time alone to sort out what you’d learned about your family, and what that brute had done to you. Callen’s not my friend anymore at all. I’ve deleted him from all of my contacts and barred him from Felder property. I’ve tried my best to treat you with the respect our working relationship demands, but I’m struggling, Gabi. I’ve been chaining my love for you with reinforced steel, but I don’t know how long I can keep it up.”

To my astonishment, his voice hitched as though he forced back tears. “You *love* me?” I whispered, turning my face toward him at last. He stared at me with pleading eyes, his typically sure jaw trembling.

“So much. And I’ll wait as long as you need. Or if you’ve found someone else, I’ll lock those chains and throw away the key.”

Shivering, I drew my hand out of the water and admitted the truth. “My heart’s belonged to you since the day we met. My attempts to distract myself with other men, Teuton or outsider, have never worked. I just wish I could be the woman you need. That my weak blood would be enough for you.”

“Gabi, my blood is eighty-five percent Teutonic just like yours.” I blinked at Lukas from behind my mask, startled afresh. His face crumpled in pain as he went on,

his fingers toying with the fog-hued mask he had discarded before I interrupted his solitude.

“Before, I said I’d bullied you in high school to turn attention away from my mother’s reputation. That was only part of it. You’re only the fourth person in this world who knows my Teuton blood is at the threshold. You, me, my father, and my mother. My mother hadn’t seized her snow yet when she conceived me. She was only seventy-eight percent at the time. Born in Nürnberg, but ineligible to become *Leitalra*.”

Lukas fell silent, and I rubbed at my temple. The similarities between our backgrounds overshadowed our differences by far. Teenaged Lukas had singled me out for my blood status because it was a reflection of something that shamed him. Had Erlangen’s Keyholder not taught him what my mentor had taught me?

“All Teutons are equal in elemental power.” The phrase I had repeated to myself over and over when my fears consumed me, insisting that one day my fire magic would vanish forever. The biggest lie the youth in our community told.

Before Lukas could respond to my declaration, a resounding *clap* rent the ether, the stone beneath us shuddering along with the earth. Lukas leaped to his feet, his mist erupting in a shield around us, his hands rigid. “What *was* that?” I asked in a low voice, rising to my feet myself. My fire smoldered restively within my blood, certain of danger.

“Someone’s conjuring dark magic here on this property,” Lukas said, his sturdy fingers weaving through mine.

Chapter Twenty:

BOUND



For several seconds, I stood frozen upon the stone at Lukas' side, my fingers easily linking with his. Fire sharpened my vision as I looked toward where the harsh clap seemed to originate—some distance upstream from our position. “Should we go back to the castle? Let your father know somebody’s messing around out here?”

In the Teutonic sphere, dark magic usually meant demons, Wuotan or one of his minions. Though I considered myself a follower of the light, my faith in God unshaken, I did not feel confident enough to confront some Teuton who worked devilish spells. My religion had taught me to hold demons at a distance, advice the *Eihalbe* in my backyard reinforced. Mortal humans were prone to gullibility, and in this instance one misstep may open hell's gates.

"We probably should," Lukas said, narrowing his eyes in the same direction I looked. "My mist senses seething heat breaching the veil. Even though I haven't studied for the priesthood, everything I've read tells me somebody just summoned Wuotan himself to the mortal plane."

"Heaven help us. We'd better move." I started onto the trail that led toward the paved path through the bamboo and forsythias, tugging Lukas along behind me. We currently headed *toward* the danger, but I had no wish to strike out into the junipers in hopes of finding another way to the castle. That section of the grounds harbored a maze of thick hedgerows.

By the time we reached the alcove where Lady Ilsa and Horst had parked for their dance, Lukas had positioned himself between me and the danger, his element enfolding us both in a vaporous shield. We quickened our steps and turned for the castle, our joined spirits drawing vitality from each other. A heavy gloom hung in the atmosphere, morbid hopelessness seeking purchase

upon our souls. But with Lukas at my side, our misunderstandings resolved, its machinations fell short.

Suddenly, a pair of young males burst from a side path into the bamboo, eyes round in terror. They pushed past us and sprinted for the castle, their shoes slapping harshly against the pavement. One paused just long enough to shout back at us, “Run! That fool just called Wuotan up from his molten rock!”

A squeak pealed from my lips as I stumbled to a halt, nearly twisting my left ankle in the process. My fire revealed the verity I longed not to see. The fleeing Teutons belonged to the group Dennis introduced to me at the drink station. Stone and wintry wind. *That fool just called Wuotan up from his molten rock.*

Lukas ground to a halt beside me, his stricken gaze meeting mine. I began to pant, shock tracing its way throughout my entire body. “Lukas . . . I think my little brother just summoned Wuotan. He’s molten rock. And those two guys were hanging out with him earlier.”

“He’s a college student, right? Is he studying for the priesthood?” His hand tightened around mine, his aura surging with dread.

“Not that I know of. He shouldn’t even know how to summon a demon!” I extracted my fingers from Lukas’ grip and flexed them, invoking my red fire to the fore, the landscape taking on a crimson hue. “I have to make sure he’s okay. He has no idea what he’s doing. He could get hurt!”

I charged down the side path, my magic granting my heels perfect traction. Lukas was right beside me, his tone incredulous as he asked, “Why would Dennis need to summon a demon?”

“He doesn’t!” I panted, my mind trying to work out his rationale that very moment. “Papa has a great job now, and last I knew, Dennis was doing better at school. He doesn’t have any reason to bargain with Wuotan!”

Lukas’ hand brushed my arm as we motored around a corner, the heaviness in the air increasing substantially. “Slow down, Gabi,” he whispered with a touch of desperation. “We have to see what’s really going on before we jump right in, especially dressed like this. We’re not exactly wearing armor.”

He had a fair point. I slowed my steps, my lungs gasping madly for oxygen. “If Wuotan tries . . . to hurt my brother . . . I’m going to fight him. I don’t care . . . that he’s a demon . . . and I can’t win. Dennis . . . doesn’t deserve—”

“Hush.” Lukas laid a muscular arm over my back, lowering me into a crouch. We had reached another copse of junipers along the Pegnitz, a garish glow pulsing through their needled branches. The spicy fragrance of smoldering juniper reached my nose as lava consumed what lay on the ground where it burned.

A second later, I heard my brother speaking the Teutonic dialect. “So you’ll do it? You’ll use your influence to convince our families we aren’t corrupt?”

I eased forward to peer between the branches of a shorter juniper, Lukas' arm secure against my back. Hunkered side by side with the partner my fire had desired for over a decade, I ran my gaze over the scene before me. Dennis stood with his back to me, clad in a formal black suit, his confident posture implying he retained control of the situation. A Teuton with wavy brown hair stood steps away from my brother, his hands visibly trembling. The smoky male Dennis introduced to me at the drink station.

Out of nowhere, his name arose in my memories. Till. Same as the lead singer from Rammstein.

Those two were a mere backdrop to the igneous mass standing nearly three meters tall, molten rock launching acrid smoke toward the night sky. It blocked the river from my sight, eyes of flaming green glaring down at my brother and his friend. The monstrosity had no mouth—and no actual face, for that matter—my brother's powerful element containing its essence in fiery earth.

Lukas' voice whispered a prayer to God just centimeters from my right ear, his mist and my fire unifying in abject horror. I knew Teuton priests summoned demons to earth from time to time through their blood magic, using their elements to keep the damned beings at bay. Never had I imagined such a venture looking like *this*. Wuotan—once worshipped as a false god of wisdom and war—was entirely encased in lava, rooted to the earth below while my little brother bargained.

What exactly do you intend to give for my help? The voice burst into my mind without warning, prompting both Lukas and me to jerk in surprise. My brain felt tainted by the voice's sinister touch, deep and throaty as though it rose from a pitch black trench.

“We have asked for your influence, nothing more. The cost for that should not be terribly high.” Dennis sounded far too self-assured under the circumstances. What offering did he envision could assuage a demon's greed? Our ancestors had staged blood sacrifices to Wuotan in centuries past. Dennis must have something less atrocious in mind, surely.

A dark chuckle entered my brain, tearing away at what little courage I still claimed. *I fear you have no conception of how your summoning inconvenienced me this night. You dragged me to this wretched planet while I was on the cusp of expending myself into one of my most subservient males. He tends to avoid me for many moon cycles before groveling on his hands and knees and begging for release. He attained his desires this night, but I did not. Because of you.*

I struggled to keep my breathing soft and steady as my brain processed what the demon had said. Teuton history asserted Wuotan preferred to mate with female devils and other such creatures. Except tonight. The night my little mouse chose to bind him into a seething pillar of molten rock.

Shit.

Before Dennis fabricated a reply, the smoldering monstrosity's green-fired eyes shifted to stare directly into mine, the juniper's branches unable to hide me. *I require the body, blood, and spirit of that Teuton witch prowling in the shadows. A fresh opportunity to peel away a mortal's faith is sufficient payment for my trouble.*

"No deal!" Lukas strode into the clearing before I could stop him. Dennis and his companion jolted, their necks twisting around as their eyes acknowledged Lukas. Till's irises were of a blue that reflected what I saw whenever I looked in the mirror, his smoke magic confined within his spirit. Afraid to manifest his element in the presence of an entity from hell's depths?

"Nothing these two could have asked from you is worth the cost of a Teuton's life," Lukas spat at the demon, Teutonica flowing like water from his lips. "You have no authority to claim that woman or any of us without our consent."

Not one of my priests, but a male with an educated mind. Wuotan's green eyes shifted to a silver so bright it was almost white, fires flickering more violently upon the lava that bound him. *I fear your assertion falls short, misty mortal, for you forget this child tore me away from my sexual conquest. A debt he must pay, even if I withhold my influence from those who judge his path.*

"I wasn't trying to—"

“Quiet.” Lukas made a slicing motion at Dennis, who fell silent. “You would demand a female as payment for his indiscretion, and not one of us?”

Lukas’ tone implied he thought Wuotan preferred males. But he had to know better; he had doubtless read the same ritual tomes I had. In his personal realm of fire, Wuotan harbored twelve immortal sirens—females who each wielded power over one type of Teutonic element. Many artists had portrayed the sirens in paintings throughout history, a vain attempt to seize the unattainable. No mortal could copulate with a demon’s kin and live.

Wuotan laughed again, his amusement stabbing at my element’s vigor. *Silly mortal, you should know that females offer more opportunities for pleasure. The one you guard so jealously holds her faith in the Almighty close to her heart, and it has been several decades since I last sought to stifle that sort of delusion.*

For some reason, the demon’s decision to ridicule my faith spurred me into action. I emerged from the junipers, drawing myself up straight as I raised my red-fired eyes to meet Wuotan’s. “My faith is no delusion,” I informed the demon in strong Teutonica, setting my fists upon my hips and halting beside Lukas.

“*Gabi?!*” Dennis choked out my name in a distressed voice. Apparently he had been too focused on the molten demon in front of him to notice which female Wuotan threatened to claim.

“Any attempt by you or your kin to tear my soul away from the light would result in my death, which translates to failure,” I said, determination fueling the crimson flames shimmering along my hands and hair. “I would never renounce my faith, because I know exactly what you are. A liar on a one-way path to defeat.”

Lukas grasped my hand again, our elements weaving together as we stood mere steps away from a devilish mass of molten rock. Dennis had begun to weep from his place to our right, his companion Till having wrapped an arm around his shoulders. “Gabi, please, you need to get out of here. This is my fault, my mistake. You don’t need to be punished for my sins.”

Wuotan, meanwhile, started laughing once more, the heat of his fire raising sweat upon my skin. That was new. My fire usually protected me from sweating, even in the hottest summer months. *I fear if your precious sister attempted to flee now, she would find herself trapped beneath my sway. As would the rest of you feeble mortals. I require one of you to accompany me to my domain this night, as payment for disturbing my affairs. If my mortal prey manages to please me, I might deign to grant this child’s request.* A hand dripping with lava extracted itself from the demon’s shapeless mass, its index finger pointing at Dennis.

As usual, you offer an extremely imbalanced bargain. A different mental voice entered the conversation, a beacon of brilliant fire appearing above the river, beyond the gathering of mortals and demon.

My eyes widened, and I gasped when I recognized Horst Vorbach in spirit form, his ethereal hands wielding a swishing whip of sizzling flame.

Wuotan's blazing eyes marched around the upper portion of his seething frame to focus upon Horst, an event that would have been funny under any other circumstance. Since his current body had no head, only the demon's eyes could shift position to take note of new arrivals. A menacing growl rang inside my brain, injecting ice into my blood. *You! I thought you had renounced your interference among the Teutons of the cities.*

Yes, me. And I thought you knew better than to demand a Christian's life in exchange for some paltry demonic favor. Horst bared his teeth at Wuotan, his hair as radiant as the rays of the sun, his fire whip snaking around his spirit as though searching for an evil entity to attack. Courage flared within me as I beheld the magnificence of his fire. We had a Teuton priest speaking for us now. We would find some way to evade this demon's threats.

You do not seriously imagine yourself powerful enough to banish me, do you? I know the frailty of your aged body. You cannot even stand without help.

Horst shrugged off Wuotan's mockery as if it were an errant insect. *I am merely the messenger. Two Keyholders and the priest whose property you now taint are on their way here this moment. And if I waste*

too much time away from my aged body, my wife may decide to make an appearance herself.

To my surprise, Wuotan's igneous form shrank back, as if the demon feared meeting Lady Ilsa. Judging by the expression on Horst's ghostly face, I suspected Wuotan spoke to him directly now, closing the rest of us out of the conversation. He did not want the rest of us to realize he feared an airy forest witch. I had a strong desire to ask Lady Ilsa to teach me her ways.

Lukas pulled on my hand while the demon and Horst's spirit stared each other down, reaching his right hand out to where my brother stood with Till. The four of us took a cautious step back, then another. If Horst continued to distract the demon, maybe we could escape the bounds of his captivity hex and flee to the castle.

Before we managed to ease our way between the junipers, Lukas' back slammed into a solid wall of elemental power. A short gasp breezed through his lips and he sank to the ground, his misty eyes widening. "Dennis, help me!" I cried out, bending my knees and slinging Lukas' left arm across my shoulders. I could not lift him on my own. He gave a weakened groan, his fingers twitching and then securing themselves around my upper arm.

My brother and his friend helped me pull Lukas to his feet, and the devil of molten rock turned his eerie eyes back toward us. *Before you go*, he began in a tone thick with warning, *I would advise you four mortals to listen*

well. My servant and I have reached an agreement regarding your fates.

I serve the living God, not you, foul creature. Horst's spirit drifted to the bank of the Pegnitz, his fire whip flaring with heat, his visage irritated.

Wuotan ignored him. *You have one week to determine which of you shall join me in my domain. If you cannot come to an agreement by this hour seven nights hence, the fire witch is mine to claim.* The bells of a clock somewhere in one of the castle's turrets began to chime. It was ten p.m.

Dennis made a grumbling noise, his left shoulder supporting Lukas' armpit. "So be it," he growled.

So be it. The demon vanished from the earth with a sharp clap of magic, smoke rising from the cindered grass left behind. My fire assured me the shield trapping us in the clearing had gone along with its maker.

Lukas straightened to his full height and let go of my arm, turning away from me to grimace at my brother. "You shouldn't have sealed the bargain."

I rounded on Dennis a second later. "Did you say 'so be it' because you plan on offering *yourself* to Wuotan instead of me? You can't *do* that!"

Lukas took my hand, his mist reaching out to still my imminent tirade as three robed priests emerged from the junipers, elements glowing in their eyes.

Chapter Twenty-one:
UNITED FATES



By ten-thirty, Lukas managed to herd me away from the riverbank and back into the castle. Inside, he marched down several empty hallways toward a side door that led to the parking lot, his strong fingers tugging me along whether I wished to go or not. The priests were in the midst of an argument about what to do with Dennis, for my little brother had committed a crime. Only Teuton

priests were permitted to summon demons, and Dennis had not earned his robe.

I stood beside him for as long as they allowed, repeatedly pointing out that his mistake paled in comparison with the bargain that bound us. Lukas, Dennis, Till, and I must decide which of us would sacrifice life on earth for demonic servitude. Horst confirmed the truth, though I already knew it deep inside. While a mortal human could travel from earth to the devilish domain unscathed, no one could return alive from that place.

One of us was bound to die.

Nürnberg's Keyholder—Lukas' father—and the owner of the castle seemed far more interested in the spell Dennis had recited to summon Wuotan, arguing that my brother must be taken into custody and questioned. Eventually Henning overruled their demands, stating that as a child of Erlangen, Dennis was under his jurisdiction. He would take my brother and his friend to the house of one of the priests on Erlangen's council, where the two would face judgment tomorrow.

Dennis protested such a plan, insisting that he was at sole fault for what had happened, that Till was a mere witness, same as Lukas and me. Henning met my gaze about that time and requested that Lukas take me home and watch over me until we discerned a way to dismantle Wuotan's bondage. Despite his offer of a delay, the demon expected to seize *me*, not any of the three men.

Now I sat in the passenger seat of Lukas' silver Mercedes as he drove away from the castle, en route to A3. At this time of night, we would likely be back in Alterlangen within fifteen minutes. I was not prepared to face the night alone. My entire body trembled with belated shock, my fingers anxiously stroking my red velvet purse. One of the attendants had pressed it into my hands before opening the side door for us, his head bowed in what my fiery spirit discerned as pity. Apparently, everyone left at the castle knew that Lukas and I no longer controlled our destinies.

I should have shared my concerns with Lukas, asked for his help in untangling our impossible situation. But my voice box seemed to have turned to stone, my eyes blinking blindly at the buildings and streetlights passing by. I felt a buzz inside my purse and my fingers jolted to attention, digging for my cell phone. Flipping it open, I found a new text from Bianca. *Riding home with Lady Ilsa, Horst, and their grandson. I'll call you tomorrow. Be safe.*

I had totally forgotten to check on Bianca before leaving the castle with my doomed boyfriend. Was Lukas my boyfriend now? When we sat together before the Pegnitz, he confessed his love for me. That conversation felt like it happened ages ago. Did I love him in return? If so, was I condemned to lose the one man who accepted me for who I was in less than a week's time?

Which of us must renounce our freedom to spare everyone else?

“The Taubenball was a complete disaster,” I stated in a monotone, drained of all sentiments. Later, terror would come home to roost. But for now, I felt hollow inside, rudderless in a sea of confusion.

“For the four of us, that seems to be true,” Lukas said, morbid amusement evident in his tone as he guided his car onto the Autobahn. He floored it right away and merged into the left lane. I had forgotten his tendency to drive like a madman. We would be at my cottage in less than ten minutes. Aloneness loomed.

“Right when I was about to take a major step forward in my career,” Lukas went on, “a demon throws a claim on my soul. And yours.”

I closed my phone and slipped it into the bottom of my purse, retrieving my pack of mints. “A major step forward, huh? You taking Herr Werndl’s place?” It was weird to talk about job-related stuff in light of the bargain that bound us both.

Lukas answered that on Thursday, he had accepted a position as a controller at his mother’s employer, a job in finance that would raise his salary by a strong margin. “That means if we get out of this demonic debacle, you’ll have to see me outside of work, if you want to see me at all.”

Slipping a mint into my mouth, I glanced at Lukas’ profile, his jaw as tense as his fingers gripping the steering wheel. He kept his eyes on the highway before him, not on me, as though he feared I still wanted

nothing to do with him. Wuotan's threat had obviously traumatized him, too.

"You want a mint?" I questioned, grasping at faint threads of normalcy, keeping him in suspense for a little longer. His eyes darted toward my face, then downward at the plastic container I held. With a sigh, he reached his right hand in my direction, palm up.

I shook one mint onto his palm, a feeble grin playing across my lips. "Not sure why you think I *wouldn't* want to see you, after you bared your heart to me an hour ago," I said, tucking the mints away inside my purse. "I'm just as smitten as you are, not that it does us any good now that a demon lord wants our souls."

The tension in his shoulders noticeably eased, and he tossed the mint into his mouth. "You might not feel that way once I tell you who's taking my place at Werndl."

Somehow, I already knew. "It's Rafael, isn't it?"

The mint bulged in Lukas' right cheek. "It is. I can try to get you an auditing position with me, if you want."

"Rafael and I danced at the ball, actually. And he complimented my work ethic. Should have known he had an ulterior motive. Softening me up."

Lukas' eyebrows slanted, his Mercedes barreling through the interchange for A3 onto A73 south of Erlangen. He might have slowed five kilometers at most. Once on A73, he remained in the right lane and leveled

me with a loaded look. “Rafael danced with you. Really. You know he’s single, right?”

I burst out laughing, delighted by my companion’s protective instinct. “Totally *not* interested in finding out what it’s like to get plundered by a metal penis. That would hurt.”

Now Lukas was laughing, too. “Oh, Gabi. I’m going to need a cold shower after spending fifteen minutes in the car with you.”

“It’s been nine minutes.” I glanced from the digital clock on the radio to Lukas’ waist. His suit coat hid evidence of his claim from me. For now. “I could spare you from that cold shower, if you want. To be honest, the thought of sleeping alone at the cottage freaks me out. Demons aren’t all that trustworthy. I might wake up getting yanked through a fiery portal.”

A rabid smirk spread across Lukas’ face. “Just what I wanted to hear. We’ll make sure to steer clear of my sister’s family, if they happen to be home.” He braked hard as he exited the highway, downshifting in preparation to enter the city.

Memories of Bianca sobbing over Nicole’s spitefulness resurfaced, irritation supplanting my dread at the idea of waking up in hell. Or whatever realm Wuotan called his home. “How often is her family at your place?” In the short month we had actually dated, I had seen no trace of Nicole or Jan at the Felder property. Their young sons had been welcome sunbeams, though.

“Nicole has her own suite in the main house, same as me. Jan bought a house on the other side of Erlangen a couple years ago. Most of the time it’s just my nephews who stay overnight. Occasionally, Nicole will install herself for a few nights, especially if she and Jan are fighting.”

“Hmm. If we’re going to make this work—whatever it is we have—I might request you ‘install yourself’ at my cottage. Until we can get our own place. I don’t like the thought of running into that bitch when she’s mad at her husband.” I made a face, and Lukas turned right onto a side street along the Europakanal.

“Fair enough. We’ve got the same stereo in both places, assuming you didn’t get rid of yours.” Lukas bit his lower lip, appearing uneasy.

“I thought about donating it to charity,” I admitted, “but it turns out I’m too selfish to dump something that raises my spirits. Thanks to you, my CD collection is growing.” For the first weeks after I broke off our relationship, I had avoided that stereo like the plague. But by the end of January, I had caved after experiencing an awful nightmare involving my ex.

The garage door opened for us as Lukas drove his car slowly toward it, lights switching on at the car’s approach. I relaxed some more, my element relishing the adoration it sensed in Lukas’ mist. We could drink each other’s love and rest, then overcome Wuotan’s wiles as a team.

“I never really thanked you for buying me that stereo,” I noted, getting out of the car to stretch as soon as he shut off the engine. Lukas stretched as well from the other side of the car, his muscular arms reaching for the rafters. He favored me with a shy smile as I said, “Music always gives me a boost, especially if I’m feeling down in the dumps. You’ve really paid attention to know that was the best present to give me.”

His smile broadened. “I do try. And I do believe we have some things to do, am I right?” Before I had time to react, he launched himself over his car’s hood and caught me in his arms, pressing me against his chest as he sprinted into the house. The steady sound of his heartbeat impelled me to close my eyes and cuddle myself against him, grateful for these fleeting moments of security.

Lukas carried me all the way to his suite on the second floor, his physical strength on clear display. Memories of the only time we had bound our bodies and elements in erotic bliss brought warmth to my core that had nothing to do with my fire. This time would be more meaningful, more permanent. Wuotan’s greed could not separate me from my chosen mate.

“I probably ought to take a shower before we get started,” Lukas said when we entered his bedroom. He set me down upon his king-sized bed, my butt sinking into a cozy expanse of cerulean. Lazily, my eyes tracked the movements of my misty companion as he divested himself of his gray suit jacket, draping it over the back of

the rolling chair perched before his desk. “That demon’s heat made me sweat, and I need to wash off his taint.”

He had a good point, but fatigue tugged at the edges of my consciousness. I just wanted to lie back on his bed and let him have his way with me. “My fire burnt off his residue after the other priests showed up. And I had a shower this afternoon at Bianca’s. I won’t be able to keep myself upright if I join you in there.”

Lukas was on his way to the bathroom, his scarlet tie deposited onto his desk. “Fair enough,” he said, leaving the door wide open in invitation. I yawned, sprawling onto my back for another stretch. His bedroom ceiling was painted with a galaxy theme. I wondered whether the stars glowed in the dark.

After I heard him step into the shower, I pushed myself onto the floor and kicked off my heels. As much as I longed to allow my exhaustion the upper hand, I ought to at least get undressed while I waited for Lukas to join me. I set my purse onto the floor and made my way out of my formal gown, casting my gaze over the bedroom as a whole. This was my first look at Lukas’ personal tastes, for each of my previous visits to this house had involved entertaining his nephews. I had never been to his suite before, let alone his bedroom.

The room evinced a vibe comparable to Lukas’ watery element. The ceiling was of a deep midnight blue sprinkled with clusters of stars and nebulae, the walls a lighter hue, reminiscent of the summer sky. Azure

curtains matching the blankets of his bed cloaked the doors to his private balcony, a smaller window over his desk offering a glimpse of the night sky. Interestingly enough, each piece of furniture—from the headboard of his bed, to his wardrobe and bureau, to his desk and bookshelves—exhibited a cherry finish. Splashes of red appeared here and there—roses in a marble vase atop his desk, the framed photo of sunrise over the ocean, the russet rug upon which his bed stood, the dark red weights standing along the wall beside the curtains marking his balcony.

The round, crimson throw pillow poised in front of the larger pillows lining the headboard of his bed.

“Is red your favorite color?” I hollered toward the bathroom as I stood in my bra and panties, seeking a place to hang my dress. Maybe his wardrobe had some free hooks. I scooped my shoes off the floor and headed toward it.

“What gave it away?” Lukas called from inside the shower. He seemed to be keeping the resultant steam confined within the bathroom. Useful trick.

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe the way my element draws you toward it like a moth to a flame?” I hung my gown on a hook upon the wardrobe’s right door, setting my heels on the floor beside it. I cut my eyes around the room again, looking for a mirror. I probably ought to let my hair down. The curls ensured it would be a mop tomorrow morning.

“Is Bianca Langguth your best friend?” Lukas queried over the sounds of the shower. I stood in front of the mirror over his bureau, working a comb through my hair as I extracted each pin.

“Yes? Shouldn’t you already know that? I hung out with her all throughout high school.” I winced as the comb snagged a tight tangle, annoyed that I let Bianca curl my hair. Every time I got it styled, I remembered why straight was best.

“Is *that* why she threw herself at me that evening at Zum Weißen Hirsch?” Lukas turned the water off, the shower doors giving a brief squelch as they opened. “She was trying to distract me from noticing you, wasn’t she?”

I rolled my eyes at the memory and gave up on my hair. It would have to stay frizzy until I used the shower myself in the morning. “At that point the only Lukas I knew was the bully Lukas. So yes, she was protecting me. And finding out all about Winston in the process. Where is he, anyway?”

“He spends the nights in his crate downstairs. My mother took care of him tonight, but in the morning he’ll be begging for attention. He’s probably caught your scent already. That’ll make his day.”

I grinned at the prospect of greeting Lukas’ lovable pug in the morning. The fallout from the Taubenball was not all bad; I may have met my one true love there after all. I unhooked my bra and shimmied my underwear down to the floor, then spun for Lukas’ bed. Climbing

onto the azure blanket, I flopped my head upon the round pillow and shut my eyes, my body bared and waiting. I gave one armpit a quick sniff, making sure my deodorant was doing its job. It was.

Weariness draped me in its shroud several moments before a soft whistle intruded upon the stillness. “Gabriela Scholz, you are a sight for sore eyes.”

Cracking one eyelid open, I took in the sculpted form of the man who chose me. He had not bothered to put on clothing of any sort, the defined muscles of his arms, legs, and chest apparent as he stalked deliberately toward the bed. His damp black hair retained a hint of untidiness, as if he had slicked a comb through it once or maybe twice. His hazel eyes, flecked with an attractive blue, roamed over my body from head to toe.

“Have you looked in the mirror lately?” I threw his earlier line back at him, opening both eyes to admire everything about him. Lukas climbed onto his bed and crawled to where I awaited him, his hands and knees holding his body aloft as he watched my breasts rise and fall with my breath.

“Exactly how much foreplay do you need?” he asked me in a husky tone as his cock brushed my folds, prompting me to gasp. He pampered my lips with a tender kiss before admitting, “I’m not sure how long I can hold out.”

“No foreplay. Just take me,” I responded, my voice plaintive with need. I wrapped my arms around his neck

and said, "I'm too tired to do anything but lay here and bask in your affection."

"All I ask is that you invoke your fire to meet my mist," he murmured in my ear, his mouth trailing soft kisses down my neck. I exhaled in satisfaction when he entered me, my fire rising to twine our spirits together in a union of love. Yes, I did love this man, this Teuton who respected me as an equal. He had not tried to hide me away from my little mouse's attempt at infernal bargaining. No. He had stood beside me to confront Wuotan himself, my formidable partner.

Afterward, as I lay fully sated in his arms, I decided to bring up the elephant in the room before allowing sleep to take me. "I'm not sure I trust the priests to work out some way to save us," I said, gazing up at the ceiling. Lukas had dimmed the lights, the stars casting a numinous glow high above.

Lukas sighed, his arms drawing me closer to his chest. "I know what you mean. My personal experiences with Teuton priests have been generally positive, but I'm not sure they'll reach an agreement within a week. Especially once the local council gets involved. Hopefully my father will bow out, since Dennis is under the kid's jurisdiction."

"The kid's name is Henning," I reminded him, letting loose an expansive yawn. "To be honest, I think Lady Ilsa and Horst could take care of it themselves. Did you

notice how Wuotan recoiled when Horst said his wife might get involved?”

“I did notice. I don’t know either of them, but I might need to change that.” Lukas traced his fingers down my back, his mist soothing my fire into a trance.

“Bianca’s friends with Lady Ilsa. I just met them tonight. I’m worried what the priests might do with my brother. And his friend, Till. I think Dennis did the summoning on Till’s behalf. I don’t want either of them sent to prison when we’ve got demonic bondage to worry about.” I chewed on the inside of my cheek and shut my eyes against the moisture that threatened to well. Dennis and his friend were confined in a council member’s house right now. How could I shield them from the consequences of my little mouse’s audacity?

Lukas remained silent for a while, his gentle touches luring me toward slumber. Just as I hovered on the verge of drifting off, he voiced a solution so terrible it may prove our only recourse. “If we can’t figure out a way to settle your brother’s debt by next Friday night, I do know how to summon our demon lord. I’ve read the spell. It’s honestly not that difficult.”

I stirred, opening my eyes to gaze vacantly at the glimmering stars upon the ceiling. What was Lukas saying?

“Your brother seems just as protective as you,” he went on, his tone of voice inferring disaster. “He’s going to do all he can to convince the demon to claim *him*, not

you or his friend. But if I summon the demon myself, well . . . we could demand he take us both. Free Dennis and his friend . . . and meet our fate together.”

“There has to be a better solution than that,” I mumbled, though my weary brain recognized the value in Lukas’ proposal. I yawned aloud and closed my eyes again. “But thank you, Lukas. Thank you for saying we’ll face this together. That’s what I’ve always wanted. To meet all challenges together with you.”

Chapter Twenty-two:
DENNIS' SECRET



Lukas went to hunt up some clothing for me the next morning, while I took a long shower. The hot water spoke softly to my fire, restoring its vitality along with my determination. Today, we would figure out how to appease Wuotan's greed and spare our lives in the process. The demon *had* to accept payments other than blood and souls. Maybe we could create some sort of offering with

our elemental magic. My red fire, Lukas' mist, Dennis' molten rock, and Till's smoke.

My partner called out to me before I finished washing my hair, stating that he had laid several of his mother's dresses on his bed. The matron and I were of similar build, though her shoe size was smaller. Until we embarked on a side trip to my cottage, I must parade around in six-centimeter heels. I would have to wear the same knee-high tights from last night, so hopefully Lukas had brought dresses with longer skirts.

I thanked him for his help as I worked conditioner into my hair—something else he had snagged from his mother's collection. His voice sounding much closer, he noted he had found me a hairbrush and a fresh toothbrush; and unless I needed anything else, he would meet me in the kitchen for breakfast. “My mother's making omelets and pancakes, her specialty. She doesn't cook all that often.”

That was no surprise, considering her affluent status. “I'd better hurry up, then. Kind of hungry after our binding last night.”

Lukas' throaty laugh trailed behind him as he left me to my shower. “You're not the only one. I'll make sure my mother cooks *big* omelets.”

A gale of giggles shook my entire body as I turned the water off and opened the glass doors to retrieve a towel. My stomach growled at the idea of big omelets, while other yearnings painted vivid colors in my mind. We

needed to craft plans on how to counter Wuotan before assuaging such instincts, though.

The savory scent of simmering sausage led me to the kitchen, where Lukas set mugs of steaming coffee before three place settings on the marble table beside the double doors to the dining room. Sporting casual jeans and a long-sleeved FC Nürnberg shirt, the thicker hair on his crown slicked back with gel, he looked like a Teutonic dream. My fiery spirit reached out to his mist of its own accord, his essence a refreshing taste of morning dew.

He looked me over when he finished adding a spoonful of sugar to his coffee. I had chosen a black dress with a plunging neckline and a layered skirt that brushed my ankles, my garnet necklace in place, my damp hair wound into its usual bun. “You look like you could wield darkness itself in that outfit,” Lukas said, his hazel eyes shining with appreciation.

Heat surged into my cheeks at his compliment, and I scrunched my nose as I approached the table. “Dark energy or black fire? Sure. Darkness? No. Callen has ruined that element for me. Didn’t sense him at the Taubenball, though.”

“The council forbade Callen from attending.” Frau Felder drifted toward the table to collect the plates, clad in a cream blouse with wide sleeves and a tea-length gray skirt. The blue topaz earrings Lukas and I picked out for her birthday dangled from her ears, her hair pulled back

in a striking silver clip. “From what my son has told me, that priest’s maneuvers are the least of our concerns.”

Lukas had filled his mother in on our unfortunate situation while I prepared myself for the day. I offered some of my own observations when we sat down to eat, the pancakes and omelet really hitting the spot. Sausage, cheddar cheese, green peppers, and mushrooms rounded out the omelet, and I dropped a few bits of sausage to the floor for Winston. The pug had scurried into the kitchen shortly after I arrived, his scrunched face hopeful as he watched his human family eat.

“We’re going to have to find out what exactly Dennis was trying to get from Wuotan,” I said, after relating the exact words of his plea. *You’ll use your influence to convince our families we aren’t corrupt.* “His parents don’t think he’s corrupt, so I’m pretty sure he invoked the demon on Till’s behalf.”

I glanced from Lukas’ face to his mother’s, her sympathetic mien catching me off guard. “Has it occurred to you that your brother might be gay?” she asked in a gentle tone. “That maybe he’s afraid to come out to his parents? He and Till might be more than just ‘friends.’”

I froze with my fork in my mouth, my eyes widening as the curtain ripped itself in half. It made perfect sense. Dennis was gay. In all the time we had spent together since my return to Erlangen, he had never once mentioned an interest in any females, Teuton or

outsider. I had just assumed he wanted to finish his degree and move on to med school before bothering with romance.

Lukas reached under the table to stroke my knee, his touch shaking me out of my daze. I swallowed my bite of pancakes and syrup, then turned my gaze toward him. “Dennis might not know our father raised his blood status through sex with a man. Some of the people in our church still believe being gay is a sin. That’s why my father’s kept the truth quiet. My brother might think our parents will disown him if he comes out.”

“They wouldn’t do that, would they?” Lukas wrinkled his eyebrows and took a sip of coffee.

“I . . . don’t think so.” I frowned as I thought about it, taking up my knife to cut more of my omelet. “They love Dennis very much. He’s the only child they were able to have together. Who he loves shouldn’t change that.”

“Till’s family may not be so accepting,” Frau Felder said, looking unhappy. “Especially if they believe all Teutons should mate to bear children.”

“If Dennis and Till are gay, they could still donate sperm,” I pointed out. “They don’t have to have their own kids. They could help Teuton females who want children but haven’t found a male partner.”

After breakfast, Lukas and I took Winston for a walk through the forest on his family’s property. We tossed plans back and forth along the way, letting the pug pause to investigate each intriguing scent. We needed to stop

by my cottage first, so I could change into casual clothes. Then we would strike out for wherever the council members had stashed Dennis and Till.

I had an urge to infiltrate their lair and break my brother and his friend out. Lukas and I could certainly accomplish it if we set our spirits free. It had been years since I last entered the spiritual realm of my own volition, but I knew my fire was up to the task. Even if we could not get Dennis and Till out right away, we could observe the lay of the land.

Lukas identified the flaw in my plan immediately. There was no possible way to sneak into any location guarded by six Teuton priests—the Keyholder and council members. They would be on the lookout for spirits and might even have an energy shield in place to repel any spies. Our best bet would be to make a few calls, find out which priest on the council held my brother and Till. Then we could park outside in Lukas' car with our elements monitoring the activities within.

“They’ll doubtless drain some blood from your brother’s neck to discern his intentions,” Lukas said on our way back to his house. “If he was telling the truth last night, his blood should clear Till of guilt.”

“And then every priest on the council will know Dennis is gay. If that’s the reason behind all of this.” I groaned, certain my little mouse would not want his preferences revealed in such a wretched manner. “This is so messed up. What the priests *should* be doing is

figuring out how to get Wuotan off our backs. But no, they're all horrified that an untrained Teuton managed to summon a demon. It's not like there aren't books out there that spell out the exact invocation."

"Do *you* know how to summon a demon?" Lukas raised an eyebrow at me and tugged Winston away from a patch of crimson tulips. I set my feet onto the stone patio, grateful for solid ground to support my heels.

"No. I've never read any priestly tomes. Just *Der Weg* and a few fairytales." *Der Weg Teutonisch*, or *The Teutonic Way*, was the quintessential Teuton history book, a volume first written in the eleventh century and expanded as time passed. While that encyclopedia gave detailed descriptions of elemental sorcery, the spells Teuton priests perfected were not included.

"My father has given me some tomes over the years. I think at one point we agreed to peruse them before the poolside fireplace at my mother's penthouse."

"I very much look forward to doing that with you," I said, planting a quick kiss upon Lukas' left cheek.

It took longer than I had expected to learn where the council members were holding Dennis and Till. I called Lady Erlanga from my cell phone but got her voice mail, which prompted me to wonder whether she was attending the young men's trial. Would she drink my brother's blood or let the priests take care of that? Her maternal nature might benefit Dennis' cause.

Lukas made several phone calls without uncovering the information we sought, his expression growing more and more irritated. At last, he growled that he would call his father and drag the truth from him, muttering several curses as he scrolled through the numbers on his cell phone. Their relationship was strained, a bridge I hoped to help Lukas repair with time. Assuming we did not walk side by side into Wuotan's domain next Friday night.

As it turned out, Dennis and Till were being held at a townhouse belonging to the eldest member of the city council. By the time Lukas and I arrived—having taken a brief detour to my cottage so I could change into flared blue jeans and a V-necked maroon blouse—it was nearing eleven a.m. Lukas drove past the townhouse at a slow crawl first, so we could take stock of the situation. The house was three stories tall with an aged brick façade, two windows facing the street on each level.

My fiery spirit detected a jumble of Teutonic elements inside, pinpointing Dennis' molten rock right away. It seemed oddly drained. A second later, I realized I knew the earthen spirit occupying the townhouse.

Lothar Scholz. Our father.

Great. The priests on Erlangen's council had bled my little mouse and then shared his inmost secrets with our father. While I appreciated the council's wish to keep our father in the know regarding Dennis' fate, I was certain

my brother would have wanted the truth to come out in any other way.

“You need to find a place to park,” I said to Lukas, betrayal wrapping itself around my heart. “My father’s in there with them. So maybe they’re not planning on sending Dennis to prison, but” My voice trailed off, and I winced.

It took another five minutes for Lukas to find a spot for his Mercedes two blocks away from the townhouse. As we walked hand-in-hand to uncover Dennis’ fate, I noticed my father’s Toyota parked along the curb on the first cross street. Anxiety sank its claws into my bones, my heart rate escalating despite my attempt to appear calm. Would the priests let us into the townhouse, so I could be moral support for my brother and his friend? If not, just how long would they keep the two young men shut inside?

I prayed silently for God to be merciful, whether He considered Dennis’ acts to be sinful or not. Dennis might need to check the foundations of his faith. If he did not fear divine judgment for his romantic preferences, he would not have asked a demon for aid. But love was a trait of the path of light. It was a beautiful emotion devils counted as weakness.

Love was no weakness. My confidence, alongside my elemental vitality, had increased exponentially since Lukas had bathed me in his affection. Both of us were stronger as a team than we could ever be alone. My

intuition assured me it would be the same for Dennis and Till, if Frau Felder's conclusion was correct.

"We can wait outside if they won't let us in," Lukas whispered in my ear as we approached the wrought iron fence separating the townhouse's front yard from those of its peers. "But we'll have to keep sharp tabs on the status of your brother's element. It felt weak to me when we passed by earlier, so they've already bled him."

"I certainly hope they don't take too much of his blood." I flexed the fingers of my left hand, invoking my red fire to hover on the edge, ready to leap into the physical world if necessary. This particular townhome was on a very public street, but with Dennis in danger, I was prepared to go flaming witch on his captors.

To my surprise, the front door of the townhouse opened just as we reached the gate, Lukas' fingers deftly unlatching it. I gave a soft cry as my father stepped out first, Dennis and Till trailing behind him. Several robed figures remained in the shadows of the doorway, the blue glow of fiery eyes visible beneath the hood of the priest at the center. Henning, the Keyholder of Erlangen, and also my friend. I hoped he had protected my brother as far as he was able.

Once my body relinquished its shock, I charged through the gate as Lukas pushed it open, enfolding my little brother in a tight hug. He was still wearing his dress shirt and pants from the night before, the upturned collar partly concealing the slight bruise on his neck. My

fire shared its magic with him, trying to restore his frail molten rock. One of his arms reached around my back to give it a soft pat.

“Dennis, I’ve been so worried! Are you okay?” I asked, pressing my face into his chest. The silkiness of his maroon dress shirt soothed me a bit, but I could tell he had been sweating. His deodorant worked hard to hide that fact.

“Gabi. I’ve been better,” he murmured, pulling away to meet my gaze, worry evident in his wide gray eyes. He lowered his voice considerably to ask, “Wuotan hasn’t tried to steal you away, has he? The priests mentioned he might not keep his end of the bargain.”

I looked from Dennis to his friend, Till, who hung back a couple steps, his hands thrust into the pockets of his navy blue suit jacket. My father seemed to be in a conversation with Lukas closer to the sidewalk. Both of the young men looked fearful, Till’s ocean-blue eyes locking with mine before trailing away. This time I noticed his nose sported a sprinkle of freckles.

“Nothing foul has happened yet,” I told my brother under my breath, taking his arm to guide him away from the hooded onlookers in the townhouse. “Lukas and I are trying to figure out how to evade the demon’s demands.”

“The priests on the council are working on that, too,” Dennis noted, falling into step beside me. I longed to ask him whether Frau Felder’s assumption had any weight, whether his sexuality had been broadcast to the entire

council, the Lady, and our father. But that conversation required a better venue than this.

When we passed through the gate, my father nodded at me, his expression determined. “Lukas brought me up to speed on your relationship,” he said to me as my misty partner latched the gate behind us. We struck out for our parked cars, and my father continued, my brother’s suit jacket draped over his left arm.

“I’ve invited you and your boyfriend to join us for lunch at Zum Weißen Hirsch. Dennis is in desperate need of food after the priests bled the truth from him—” my father cleared his throat “—and of course his smoky partner is welcome, too.”

My father reached out to slap Till on the back, whose cheeks flushed scarlet. A slight gasp breezed through my lungs as my brain processed what my father had said. “Then you’re okay that Dennis has a boyfriend? You’re not angry?”

“Wait. How did you find out?” Dennis cut in, shooting me a confused look. The red upon Till’s cheeks deepened a shade, his gaze riveted on the sidewalk.

My father chuckled. “Why would I be angry? My prayer for both of you has been that you’d find success and happiness in life. You’ve found success, Gabi, and it looks like happiness has entered the picture for you at long last. Dennis’ path to success will take longer than yours, but he’s seized happiness with a noble young man. It’d be an honor to welcome you both into the Scholz

family, Till and Lukas, if your respective partners decide to unify your destinies.” My father favored me with a meaningful grin, then offered Till the same.

A heavy weight lifted off my shoulders, joy infusing my spirit with delicious lightness. My fire sensed relief pulsing from my little brother’s aura, and I found myself mirroring my father’s grin. Then Till mumbled a phrase that polluted the beauty of this moment. “I wish my parents felt the same way.”

Dennis laid an arm around Till’s waist, his gesture hesitant, as if they were both used to suppressing their true feelings for each other. “We’ll figure it out,” my brother promised his boyfriend.

“Looks like we have to part ways for now,” Lukas said, for we had reached the cross street where my father’s Toyota was parked. He grinned at my father and slipped his fingers through mine. “See you at Zum Weißen Hirsch in a couple minutes.”

“A couple minutes? What are you, a race car driver?” my father called after us as we continued down the street.

“You don’t want to know!” I yelled back, humor pushing our predicament out of my mind for the time being. Now it was time for a wild ride with Lukas. Then I would have to decide whether I wanted to actually eat anything at the restaurant. My stomach was still full from Frau Felder’s hearty breakfast.

We took one of the larger tables inside at Zum Weißen Hirsch, where we spent over an hour debating the important subject—how we could escape Wuotan’s awful demand. Dennis argued that the demon should not require a soul in payment for attempting to sway Till’s parents into accepting their son’s status. Although he had not studied for the priesthood officially, Dennis had learned some things from one of his high school friends who recently earned his robe. Wuotan always demanded one life for another, such as when a Teuton asked for the demon’s help during a blood-transfer or to protect a woman and baby during childbirth.

The other priests on the council were of the same opinion, and would likely summon Wuotan later as a group to bargain on our behalf. Horst had granted us a delay, but what we needed was a complete reprieve. I mentioned my earlier muses, that maybe Lukas, Dennis, Till, and I could work together to fashion some sort of elemental creation for the demon to display in his domain. Lukas flattened his lips at my suggestion, and Dennis sighed and gently informed me that Wuotan’s tastes in art were far dissimilar to mine.

“We could offer him a wild animal, like a buck or a boar,” Lukas proposed after we sat silently pondering and sipping our drinks for about a minute. “It’s been a few years since I last went hunting, but I practice with my rifle every few weeks.”

“We’d have to sacrifice it, though,” Dennis said with a frown. “That would be complicated.”

“Please, no. I don’t want any animals to die on our account,” I begged.

“Better an animal than one of us, right?” Dennis rejoined, raising one black eyebrow at me. I wrapped my fingers around my glass of beer, not convinced.

“I think we should talk to the *Eihalbe* about it,” my father said, running a hand along the back of his neck. “The fairy might have insight to offer, especially since you helped shield it from the controversy earlier, Gabi.”

That actually seemed like a solid plan, though I saw Dennis cringe a little. Before I could add my thoughts on the subject, my cell phone buzzed within my purse. Digging it out, I saw Lady Erlanga’s number on the screen. When I brought the phone to my ear and spoke my name, my mentor’s response sounded harried. “Gabi, I need you and Lukas to come to my house. Immediately.”

Chapter Twenty-three:

A COSTLY SACRIFICE



“What advice do you think Lady Erlanga has to share with us?” Lukas asked after we parted ways with the other three. He guided his car south toward the Lady’s house, his stiff posture indicating his uncertainty.

“Maybe she’s figured out a solution the priests didn’t think of,” I guessed, running my gaze over the familiar buildings of Alterlangen as we headed toward the

Regnitz River. “She might even have some fresh cookies to nibble on.”

Lukas made a scoffing sound through his nose. “I can’t get over how casual you are with the most powerful Teutons in this city. The Keyholder? ‘Oh, that’s my friend, Henning.’ Now the Lady. ‘Awesome, she’ll probably have cookies.’”

“Didn’t you study with the old Keyholder when you were a kid?” I shot Lukas a questioning look. His formality around Erlangen’s Keyholder and Lady always struck me as peculiar for such an imposing man.

“No, I mainly studied with my father. But you know, I think that’s one major advantage in our relationship. I have contacts among the corporate executives, and you have contacts among the Teutonic leadership. Together, we’ll take this world by storm!”

I laughed, though I understood his meaning. “Honestly, I’d rather just live a peaceful life with you. Raise a child or two. Play with Winston every day. Create a positive sphere in our own environment and let it expand from there. Aside from the slaveholding Teuton priests. Totally ready to lock them up for life.”

“I can get behind that.” Lukas turned his car onto Lady Erlanga’s street. “Will there be room in her driveway, or do I need to look for parking?”

“Should be room, unless she has company. She’s only got one car.”

“Still wondering why she asked for us specifically, and not Dennis or Till.” Lukas’ forehead creased as he parked his Mercedes behind the Lady’s Volkswagen. A dark green BMW sedan sat in the space beside the Volkswagen.

I turned my attention to the Teuton spirits within her house, identifying the Lady’s light and Henning’s blue fire instantly. My element also sensed the presence of natural fire and wispy air, a hint of familiarity digging into my memories. When Lukas pulled the parking break and turned off the engine, I straightened in my seat. “I think Lady Ilsa and Horst are here, too!”

Excitement buoyed me as I leaped out of the car and sprinted to the front door. Lukas followed at a more reserved pace, as though he remained wary of the intentions of those inside the house. Lady Ilsa opened the door for us, her silver-white braid pinned to the back of her head, a thumb-sized locket of beaten gold hanging on a chain around her neck. She wore relaxed clothing today—baggy jeans and a sweatshirt depicting a brand of chocolate I did not recognize. Her blue-gray eyes held mine as she gave a solemn nod.

“Well, you certainly got yourself into a pickle, didn’t you, Gabi?” she said, stepping aside so Lukas and I could enter the parlor.

My first instinct was to shove all the blame onto Dennis, but I stopped that in its tracks. Instead, I shrugged and replied, “I couldn’t let a demon hurt my

little brother. Someone had to step in.” I took a deep breath, the forest-scented incense smoldering at the front windowsill offering a welcome sense of peace.

“A noble soul. My favorite kind.” Horst spoke from his wheelchair, which was positioned between the TV and the bookcase. He wore a red plaid shirt and well-worn overalls, giving the impression of a retired farmer rather than a Teuton priest. His sapphire irises seemed to sparkle at me, no trace of flame evident within them for the moment. His thin gray hair and withered skin indicated he was closer in age to Lady Erlanga than his own wife. I judged him to be in his eighties, while Lady Ilsa might be sixty-five at most.

“Don’t let her fool you. She leaves town at the first sign of trouble.” Lukas smirked at me and walked forward, holding a hand out to Horst. “Lukas Felder.”

I made a face at his back while he finished greeting Horst, and muttered, “Jerk,” under my breath. Lady Ilsa chuckled and waved me to the teal couch against the front window.

“The *Leitalra* and her priest are finishing up a batch of cookies right now,” Lady Ilsa told me as I moved toward my usual place—the couch cushion closest to the door and across from my mentor’s overstuffed chair. “Chocolate chip, I believe. The Keyholder’s likely preparing tea, too, but we’ve got beers if that’s more your style.”

Lady Ilsa gestured at the coffee table, which held a collection of Paulaner cans along with a pile of napkins. The delicious scent of baking eased outward from the doorway to the dining room and kitchen, mingling seamlessly with the incense. “Where’s everyone sitting?” I asked Lady Ilsa just as she glided into the dining room.

She spun back to face me, her spryness granting me a fresh goal. *Stay in shape so you can move like her in your sixties.* “I took the couch cushion nearest to my master, but the other two are open. The *Leitaeri* will sit at his Lady’s feet.” She glanced toward the green ottoman beside the armchair, then disappeared.

Lukas, meanwhile, had gotten beers for himself and Horst, two cans cracking open as they exchanged opinions on business. Horst had been a family lawyer in an Austrian village for many years, his wife handling the financial facets. I sat upon the couch’s center cushion, suspecting Lady Ilsa would rather sit beside me than Lukas. Then again, she might enjoy discussing finances with him. I picked up a can of Paulaner for myself, not particularly in the mood for tea.

Once the elders finished their snack preparations, the parlor’s aura would grow much more solemn. Two aged Teuton witches—one Erlangen’s Lady, two Teuton priests of equal caliber though far different in age, and two Teutons bound by a demon’s infernal bargain. Bianca had said Lady Ilsa knew ancient spells even priests dared not weave. If these elders planned to

extract Lukas and me from the bargain while leaving Dennis and Till at risk, I would rebel.

Lady Ilsa reentered the parlor while I ruminated on potential solutions, her left arm supporting Lady Erlanga, a bowl of cookies balanced against her right hip. My mentor wore a flowered house dress and fuzzy slippers, her wavy white hair pulled back in a low ponytail, her gait slow and cautious. I smothered a gasp at her frailty. She had seemed fine at the New Year's festival, which happened only three months ago. Now she looked like a slight breeze could blow her over.

Pain seized my heart as my thoughts turned to Henning. Was his beloved *Leitalra*—also his great-grandmother—walking the path to eternity at long last? Was he prepared to shift his priorities toward whichever young female Erlanga's soul chose to take his current matriarch's place? I could not imagine the heartbreak that sweet young man must soon bear. I offered a silent prayer for heaven to bless whichever maiden found her destiny bound to Erlangen.

I set my beer onto the coffee table and helped Lady Ilsa situate my mentor upon her plush chair. Light flared in Lady Erlanga's irises as she met my gaze and offered a smile. "Ah, Gabi. Fate has certainly done a number on you and your dear partner, hasn't it?" Her eyes drifted toward where Lukas hovered nearby, concern evident upon his countenance. He had set his own can upon the coffee table, too, his hands extended to grant assistance.

“You can say that again, Lady Erlanga,” I answered, watching her wrinkled fingers arrange the skirt of her dress. “Do you need anything else?”

“I’ll be fine once my great-grandson joins us. He’s been sharing power with me for many months. We’ll get you and Lukas straightened out, don’t you worry.” She and Lady Ilsa clasped hands, and my fire detected a current of air rushing into my mentor’s spirit.

“You two might as well sit and enjoy the cookies,” Lady Ilsa advised, thrusting the bowl into my hands. “The young *Leitaeri* is almost finished with the tea. Think I’ll have some of that, myself. Beer has never been my first choice.”

“She’s fibbing,” Horst said in a stage whisper, shooting his wife a playful smirk. He held her gaze starkly and took a swig from his can.

“You know I prefer champagne,” Lady Ilsa corrected, shaking her head at her priestly husband. Their banter made me smile, a brief reprieve from whatever news Lukas and I were about to receive. My mentor’s weakness stirred my anxiety, my intuition predicting tragedy.

I hoped against hope Lukas had no intentions of mentioning the agreement we had reached last night in bed. We would never be permitted to offer ourselves to Wuotan unless we kept our plans safely hidden.

Henning entered the parlor holding a tray with the tea kettle, cups, spoons, and standard additives, right after

Lukas and I sat down upon the couch. I took the center cushion again and set the bowl of cookies on the corner of the table before us, slipping my left hand through Lukas' right. The mist in his spirit stretched forth to comfort the fire in mine, and we exchanged a meaningful look before averting our attention to the young Keyholder. We would meet our fate as one, no matter how terrible the specifics might be.

Henning greeted us politely, then set his tray upon the coffee table. I studied his aura as he prepared a cup of tea for his beloved *Leitalra*, the hood of his priestly robe pushed back to reveal his standard ponytail. His blue fire seemed deadened, its natural brilliance dimmed by pain and dread. He did not meet my gaze while he added two spoonfuls of sugar to his great-grandmother's tea, spilling a portion on the saucer underneath the cup. Uttering a quiet curse, he took up a napkin to repair his mistake, a nervous quiver in his fingers.

Lady Ilsa stepped in to help Henning, murmuring a few gentle phrases. He grabbed a can of Paulaner and a handful of cookies before retreating to the ottoman, his eyes fixed upon his *Leitalra*. She favored him with a grateful smile, and I sensed his fire magic expanding to merge with her spirit.

Horst's wife brought Lady Erlanga her teacup and saucer along with a small stack of cookies, the strained silence in the room growing more and more ominous. Horst requested some cookies as Lady Ilsa headed back to her place on the couch, the Alpine lilt of his dialect

breaking some of the tension. Husband and wife shared a loaded glance when she deposited four cookies onto the napkin in his lap. The airy witch sighed, returning to her seat to prepare her own cup of tea.

“If the atmosphere in this room gets any darker, my light might explode into a miniature sun,” Lady Erlanga remarked. She eyed me over the rim of her teacup as she took a sip, then shifted her gaze to Lukas. “There’s really no point in beating around the bush, so I’ll start with the hardest news first. My kidneys are failing. My doctors don’t expect me to live much longer without requiring dialysis.”

Lukas stiffened at my left side and drank from his can; aside from that, no one else in the parlor reacted to my mentor’s admission. Lady Ilsa, Horst, and Henning already knew. Henning had doubtless known for months. I bit the inside of my cheek, my brain trying to piece together the new puzzle set before me.

“Has your *Leitaeri* been sharing magic with you to delay the effects?” I did not think that was possible. While Teutonic blood magic granted our people the ability to heal wounds quickly, I knew several Teutons with chronic health issues. My late grandmother had struggled with high blood pressure for decades before her death, and Bianca’s father had Type 1 diabetes. My gaze strayed toward Horst, settled calmly in his wheelchair. His fire magic was powerful; his display when he had confronted Wuotan proved it.

But it could not grant him the strength to rise up and walk.

“Henning has been very supportive, despite the incomplete nature of our bond,” Lady Erlanga responded, giving her great-grandson a devoted look. “Kidney failure has been a gradual process, at least for me. I’ve known for years that I would eventually face dialysis or death, since at my age, a transplant is unsafe. I’ve also known that I have no wish to submit to that grueling treatment. My late husband understood my feelings in this matter, and when he left the earth, he knew I would follow shortly.”

I chewed on a cookie, its savory warmth taking the edge off my turbulent emotions. Would I react the same way, if my kidneys failed in old age? Would I refuse treatment and allow death to take me? The idea of an infusion port made me shudder; maybe her choice was not so peculiar.

“We must each follow the path we believe is right, and make peace with the consequences,” Horst said, after an extended pause. Lukas was also working on a cookie, apparently as dumbstruck as I felt.

“Well said,” Lady Ilsa interjected, lifting her teacup to her lips. I noticed she did not blow on her tea, her air magic adjusting its temperature to her preferences. Bianca also knew that trick, though she had struggled to perfect it due to her wind’s intrinsic wildness.

“Unlike my dear husband,” my mentor went on, her eyebrows lowering in fortitude, “I have no intention of passing away quietly in my bed, drained to a shell. While that seems to be the goal many strive for in today’s world, I’ve always longed to make a significant impact with my departure, one that should benefit my city’s Teuton community for years, even decades.”

Now Lady Erlanga really had my attention. Lukas and I gawked at her, the partial cookies in our hands forgotten. She looked from one of us to the other and said, “Long before either of you were a thought in your parents’ minds, my previous *Leitaeri* performed a duty for that wretch who wishes to siphon your faith away. In the process, the demon became indebted to me, the matriarch of Erlangen. For many years, I’ve intended to go before Wuotan in my last days to require payment of his debt. When I do, I’ll rescind his hold upon you both, as well as your brother and his friend.” She nodded at me, looking satisfied.

I had no words. What my aged mentor claimed seemed too good to be true. How could any mortal human hold sway against a demon’s wiles? All at once, I remembered what she had told me when I first visited her back in October. *I still have a few things to accomplish before I leave this world for good. Some debts I haven’t settled yet with supernatural entities.*

Her statement had aroused my curiosity at the time, but other issues quickly eclipsed its position in my memories. This must be what she meant. Her husband

had done Wuotan a favor, and now the demon must pay the debt to her. Lukas' fingers twitched where they gripped my hand and he brought his cookie to his mouth, his black eyebrows drawn together. I sensed he was not convinced.

“The *Leitalra* of a Teuton city wields an authority the rest of us in this parlor can never comprehend,” Lady Ilsa noted in response to the silence. She jostled my right arm with her elbow, prompting me to meet her gaze. Her blue-gray eyes filled with arcane wisdom, she explained, “All of the departed souls of this city will come at her call, imbuing her with a power no demon can match. Few Teuton Ladies ever tap into that vast flow of strength, but Frieda's instincts will guide her.”

“And she has the Almighty God on her side, along with a legion of elemental spirits,” Horst added, while I sat stupefied that Lady Ilsa had called my mentor by her first name. In my entire life, I had heard it only once, when she first introduced herself to me in my childhood.

The slim matron at my side offered me a smile and pointed at my half-eaten cookie. “No point in leaving that unfinished. We must honor my dear friend's final batch of cookies.”

“What?” I looked down at the cookie myself, then cut my gaze back to Lady Erlanga, who had begun to chuckle.

“Luckily, I taught Henning how to bake. And he has access to all of my recipes, a Keyholder the Teutons of

this city will greatly respect.” Henning’s cheeks flamed, his gaze riveted on the hem of his *Leitalra*’s dress.

“Final batch of cookies,” Lukas repeated, bringing the subject back around. Thank goodness he was keeping up with these startling revelations. My mind still lingered several steps behind.

“The *Leitalra* intends to depart this earth for the demonic dimension just twenty-five minutes from now,” Horst said, looking at his watch. Then he raised his gaze to meet mine and lowered his voice. “As I mentioned last night when my colleagues arrived to defend you four, no one comes back alive from that place.”

“Twenty-five minutes?” My voice quavered, horror seizing me in its vise. Lukas and I stared at each other, my fingers reflexively tightening upon his hand. The Lady of Erlangen planned to give her life for ours.

“I trust there’s more you . . . intend to accomplish . . . aside from saving my life, Gabi’s life, and the lives of the two young men?” Lukas spoke the question I could not, his voice heavy with anguish.

“I have a few other expectations Wuotan must meet,” Lady Erlanga replied, her right hand fingering the last piece of a cookie she had eaten while the rest of us talked amongst ourselves. “But truly, Herr Lukas Felder, I do believe that sparing the lives of four vibrant young Teutons is a worthy enough cause. Maybe even the greatest of all.”

Lukas exhaled a shaky breath, slumping against the back of the couch as the *Leitalra's* generosity showed itself. She studied him for a moment, a glimmer of light magic enhancing her dark blue irises. "I've heard good things about your mother from a trusted friend of mine. Herr Liebig worked with her for many years before his retirement. He calls her an ambitious yet charitable businesswoman, one who cares about the wellbeing of others. I trust that you'll follow in her steps as you build your own family, Herr Felder."

"I will, for sure." The promise tumbled from Lukas' lips. He cleared his throat, obviously still distressed by the Lady's plans to liberate us.

During the subsequent pause in conversation, Henning rose from the ottoman without letting go of his great-grandmother's left hand. "You'll need to put on your spelled robe and shoes before the demon opens the portal, Omi."

The matriarch sighed and uncrossed her ankles, allowing her Keyholder to help her rise from her chair. Lukas rushed to her aid, supporting Lady Erlanga's back as she groaned on her way to her feet. "Pity I didn't have time to finish those," she said, looking at the three cookies left on her tray. "Maybe I'll take them through the portal with me. See how long my baking can withstand Wuotan's fires."

Bemused, I slouched against the back of the couch myself, not knowing how to feel about my mentor's

decision. What had her late husband done for Wuotan years ago that put the demon in her debt? *Her* debt, not his debt. I suspected Lady Ilsa and her priestly master did not know the particulars, and would not share them if they did. Chewing absently on another cookie, I watched Lukas and Henning guide the Lady down the hallway, their chatter softening until I could no longer distinguish the words.

“Frieda really cares for you, Gabi,” Lady Ilsa murmured to me while I gazed blankly toward the bookshelf, the natural flames adorning a pair of jarred candles easing my element into a reverie, a temporary bandage to block my sorrow. “She called you and Lukas here specifically to assure you there’s nothing lesser about either one of you. Not your magic, not your blood status, and certainly not your commitment to each other.”

“But how can we ever repay her for doing this?” I asked, feeling unworthy. “I mean, I know she said she’s been planning on making Wuotan pay his debt in her last days, but . . . how long can she *survive* in the demonic realm? Can her light protect her from the flames? Will she be tortured to death?”

I broke off as a knot of tears formed in my throat. Sobs attacked me abruptly, and I buried my face in my hands. Lady Ilsa tucked me against her breast, her arms granting a grandmother’s comfort. The deep-seated doubts that had hampered me my entire life began to dissolve, my fire sharing in my elders’ love and grief. I

was a Teuton fire witch of eighty-five percent, a self-made businesswoman, a loyal friend, and an advocate poised to move our people forward. Maybe Lady Erlanga planned to dismantle that inane blood prejudice hanging over this city. Maybe its persistence resulted from Wuotan's deceptions.

When I managed to compose myself, I slipped out of Lady Ilsa's embrace and used a tissue to wipe away my tears, blowing my nose once for good measure. I edged to the other side of the couch to toss the tissue into a small trash can, then leaned forward to grab my beer. My element flared to life in my blood, veiling the parlor in fiery scarlet as I drained the contents of my can. If Wuotan was about to crack open a portal to the damned dimension, I needed my fire handy in case the demon tried to do more than summon Lady Erlanga away.

"Your fire's color is incredibly striking," Horst commented when I placed my empty beer can onto the coffee table, my peripheral vision catching sight of the yellow-orange flames enhancing his own irises. "You could certainly become an extraordinary witch, if you put your mind to it."

Horst's compliment stoked my newfound determination to be the partner Lukas needed and to shine a light in our community. Fate may not have led me back to Erlangen so I could become the city's *Leitalra*, but it had indeed brought me to a place where I found the belonging I craved. On Monday morning, I would cancel my scheduled interviews at the two

accounting firms in München. My home was in this Franconian city along the Regnitz River, with Lukas Felder, my little mouse, and my lifelong best friend. I would live a purposeful life in honor of my mentor's noble sacrifice.

Eventually, Lady Erlanga made her way back into the parlor, now clad in a pitch black hooded robe that trailed the floor. Its design was similar to the attire her Keyholder wore, and it was a jarring experience to see her in black. I got to my feet and Lukas joined me, leaving the Lady with her devoted great-grandson standing in the open space between the hallway and her chair. Henning clung to his *Leitalra's* right arm, his magic rushing into her essence in a tidal wave.

"You have to let me go, my dear boy," Lady Erlanga said to him, her sage eyes passing over his pleading face. "I'll allow eternity to take me as soon as I've finished what I must do. Within days, Erlanga's soul will be reborn in the heart of a young maiden, a Lady who will be your perfect match."

"I pray that you're right, my gracious *Leitalra*. I'll send you as much magic as I can, once you've crossed over . . . and I'll pray for divine mercy, that you may reunite with Opa very soon."

Leitaeri and *Leitalra* shared a brief kiss, and then Henning stepped back, his right hand moving automatically to the city's keys hanging from his belt. His

fingers closed around them, as if seeking comfort from their potent sorcery.

An ear-splitting *crack* rent the air apart between where Lady Erlanga stood and her front door, a portal ringed in black flames forming in the ether. My mentor narrowed her eyes at the gateway, then held her left palm out. “Ilsa, hand me those cookies. Horst, always shower your special witch with your heart’s deepest love.”

The *Leitalra’s* eyes ran over Horst as she spoke, and when Lady Ilsa offered her that last pile of cookies, she averted her gaze to Lukas and me. “Never stray from the path of light. You two embody the sensitivity our people need.”

My mentor turned for the portal, and I vowed, “Lukas and I will live our best lives in your honor. Thank you so much for freeing us.” I clasped his right hand in my left again, our elements forming an iridescent sphere around our hands.

Lady Erlanga offered all of us one last smile, then passed through the portal, which vanished an instant later, taking the city’s Teuton matriarch away.

Chapter Twenty-four:
COMMITMENT



The following Monday, while I sat in my cubicle at Werndl Accounting just before lunch, trying to extract my brain from its mystical confusions and focus on mundane auditing, the phone on my desk rang. When I looked at the caller ID, I jerked to attention. The call came from Lady Erlanga's house.

I knew what news I would get before I lifted the receiver. Taking a deep breath, I ordered my emotions to remain at bay and answered the phone.

“Hi Gabi,” Henning’s unusually deep voice reached out to touch my spirit, his tone betraying intense mourning. “The *Leitalra* has completed her mission. You, Dennis, Till, and Herr Felder are free from Wuotan’s bondage.”

“Thank you for telling me,” I said, after pausing for a moment to send a silent prayer heavenward, asking divine grace to guide my mentor to her husband’s side. “Please let me know if you need help getting her affairs settled. I can make some to-go meals to stock up your freezer.”

Henning sighed over the phone. “That would be helpful, actually. I really appreciate that. Thankfully, my Omi got all the legal stuff in order long ago. Her oldest son will be inheriting this house, so I’ll be staying with my parents until I save up for my own place. I’m doing my internship now, and I’ve already started tucking away a few Euros every week.”

“That’s a good habit to build,” I encouraged him, curiosity creeping forward to eclipse my sorrow. I longed to ask whether Henning had sensed any pull toward his new *Leitalra* yet, whether she turned out to be Sandra Heising or the woman whose name I did not know. Or whether it was someone else entirely.

But instead, I reassured the Keyholder again and pledged to bring him a big stack of home-cooked meals tomorrow evening. I would request to leave work early so I could start cooking, numerous one-pot options running through my mind. Henning told me he would be staying at the late Lady's house until the end of this week, sorting through her things alongside the rest of her family as they arrived. Her funeral would take place at the Huguenot church on Saturday afternoon, right in the middle of the Easter holidays.

Lukas and I ate lunch together in the court, sitting upon the stone bench beneath the chestnut tree, its leaves manifesting the radiant hues of spring. After I passed on Henning's message, Lukas agreed that I should leave work at three p.m. so I could start several pots of noodles and stew. I had already texted Bianca and she intended to join me, collecting all of the necessary ingredients from the local grocery store first.

I had spent the weekend bouncing between Lukas' suite and my cottage, not sure which of the two would become our primary residence. My adopted mother planned a family dinner on Easter Sunday meant to include all of us—Lukas and Till, alongside Dennis and myself. I occasionally mused on giving up the cottage so Dennis and Till could use it as their first home. While I would not enjoy meeting Nicole at the Felder property from time to time, maybe the two of us could smooth things over once she realized her brother and I were committed to our relationship.

“You know, I have to admit I won’t feel entirely safe from a rogue demon portal until ten p.m. on Friday,” Lukas said after a few moments of silent eating. “Does that make me a coward?”

Taking a bite of my turkey and cheese sandwich, I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye. His leather jacket, black dress pants, and smartly-slicked hair gave off the impression of confidence, not cowardice, though I sensed his element’s insecurity. I allowed my fire to grant him a breath of light, my doubts haunting different environs altogether.

“I don’t think you’re a coward. You didn’t grow up under Lady Erlanga’s guidance, like I did. It makes sense that you’d have some doubts. I trust that she kept her word, but I’ll probably sleep a little more soundly after Friday night.”

“You sound like you have something else on your mind.”

Perceptive, as usual. I ran my gaze over the hedgerow before us, then turned to meet Lukas’ questioning eyes. “I’m feeling really sorry for Henning. He loved his great-grandmother so much, and I think he’s nervous about who his next Lady will be. It’s not like there’s a lot of decent maidens in the pool, if Erlanga’s soul chooses a woman who has lived outside of Teuton lands. The first time I met Henning, he said he hasn’t felt attraction to anyone yet.”

“Hmm. I hope he doesn’t have a secret crush on Dennis.” Lukas appeared thoughtful as he took a sip from his bottle of sparkling water.

That idea had not occurred to me, but I quickly pushed it out of the range of possibilities. “Couldn’t be. If Henning were gay, he wouldn’t have taken the keys. Keyholders are expected to marry and raise a family with their Ladies. No gay man would agree to deny his true self forever.”

“In this day and age, you may be right. Fifty years ago?”

“Henning’s twenty,” I stated, not following Lukas’ train of thought.

Lukas shrugged and pulled an apple out of his lunch bag. “Just thinking out loud. I don’t know who Erlangen’s next Lady will be, but tradition says the soul of a Teuton city never chooses wrong. Maybe she’ll be someone none of us have met before. Someone with insight that could really make a difference.”

“I hope you’re right,” I said, not entirely convinced. For now, I needed to support Henning as he grieved and offer a listening ear.

The Scholz family dinner on Easter Sunday was far more pleasant than the gift exchange last Christmas. My adopted mother had become an entirely new person after she told me the truth about my parentage, her black-fired aura radiating contentment rather than disdain. She and Dennis cooked a bountiful dinner that included

lamb with gravy, potato dumplings, cucumber dill salad, and an Easter cake filled with sour cherries.

I got to know Till a bit more while we sat around the table. He had grown up in a village along the Czech border, his parents devout in their religion to a point that gave me cultish vibes. They had forbidden him to ever use his magic, training him to shackle his smoke and punishing him whenever it manifested itself. Magic was of the devil, and his father prayed every evening that God would cure the taint of his family's blood. Till's mother had tried to set him up with girls his entire life, even though he recognized his attraction to boys at a young age. He hoped to stay in Erlangen permanently and never return home.

“Well, if Lukas thinks he can put up with me sharing his house, you two are welcome to have the cottage,” I said, looking from Till to my brother. “There's a really amazing stereo in the parlor that's almost brand new. And the silver oak tree that shades the western roof gives off healing energy that can help you center yourself, if you ever feel like your magic is going haywire.”

Dennis rose from his place at the table and came to my side, binding me in a strong embrace. “Thank you so much, Gabi. We could really use a place to stay during summer break. I'll have to try to make peace with the *Eihalbe* first, though.”

“I should be able to help you with that. I think the reason the fairy has never spoken to you is because it

knows you've dabbled in dark magic. If you renounce that stuff, you'll discover there's lots of beautiful sorcery out there, too."

I moved in with Lukas the following weekend, and the Monday after that, he started his new job at his mother's employer. My attentions shifted ahead to the first Saturday in May, when the Teuton community of Erlangen would hold a dance at the meeting place in the forest. The largest mystical event of the year, our people would come together to eat, share stories, and lace streamers around the Maypole. My twenty-ninth birthday was the Sunday afterward, May 2nd. I knew Lukas was planning a special celebration, but he had been tight-lipped about it so far.

Anticipation could be a sweet event, a privilege I had experienced only rarely in my life before Lukas.

We rode to the May dances in Frau Felder's sky blue Rolls. The corporate executive herself sat at the wheel, her driving habits much more refined than those of her son. Rosemarie Ziehm occupied the passenger seat, her rapport with Lukas' mother on full display as the two discussed recent Hollywood movies. Rosemarie studied film at the local university and hoped to work in cinematography once she finished her degree. From what I had seen of her thus far, she seemed to be a lovely person, youthful optimism evident in her yellow fire's aura.

Lukas and I sat together in the back seat, our fingers locked while our own elements spun a delicious weaving of red fire and mist in the air between us. All four of us wore traditional Alpine attire—Dirndls for the women and Lederhosen for Lukas. The sight of my boyfriend in the garb of a Bavarian farmer prompted me to stifle giggles. Only rarely did our people wear clothing like this; I had not worn a Dirndl since I left Erlangen after high school. The fingers of my right hand toyed with the pink ribbon at my waist, as I envisioned building a family with Lukas in some obscure village—the fantasy his career barred from him.

“My stomach is growling like Winston when he sees a squirrel,” Lukas said as his mother parked in the dirt lot before the trailhead. We had come early this time to ensure we could get a spot in the main lot. When we released the magic uniting our spirits so we could exit the car, Lukas caught my gaze for a second and clarified, “I’ve been thinking about your potato salad ever since I smelled it cooking last night. You know how to torture a strapping young male, fire fairy.”

I snorted with amusement, thinking back to our first bike ride along the canal, when I accidentally revealed my attraction to him. “This fire fairy loves to bring strapping young males to their knees, one way or another,” I tossed at him as his mother popped the trunk, letting us collect the food we would contribute to the festival.

Lukas snatched my large jar of potato salad before I could get it, holding it to his chest as if it were a baby. He crooned some ridiculous song to the jar, which got Rosemarie laughing along with me. “Your brother’s a goofball,” I told her as I retrieved two folded blankets.

Rosemarie rolled her eyes, her dark hair done up in pigtails, her scrunchies matching the radiant yellow ribbons decorating her Dirndl. “He’s always been that way. I haven’t finished giving him grief about showing you a bully façade when you were both in high school. Surprised he had any friends at all.”

She stuck her tongue out at him and collected a covered bowl of soft pretzels and another of sugar cookies frosted with Erlangen’s colors of white and red. Lukas mirrored her expression and handed his mother her dish of mushroom tarts. “So says the maiden who didn’t grow up among Teutons insistent upon judging others by their blood status,” he teased, shutting the trunk before striking out for the trailhead.

“The Teutons in this city are so weird,” Rosemarie groused, falling into step at my side.

“Tell me about it. We’ve got our work cut out for us, and so does Henning,” I said, my shoes crunching on the leaves and grass lining the trail.

“Has the poor boy found his new *Leitalra* yet?” Frau Felder asked in a soft voice as the forest’s shadows surrounded us. “He seemed like such a sweet boy when I

met him at my birthday party. Not sure why his fated mate is playing hard-to-get.”

“Not every female is as confident as you, Mutti,” Lukas pointed out from the head of our group. “She’ll come forward when she’s ready.”

We passed through the energy shield that hid the gathering from outsiders, the magical quality of the atmosphere increasing tenfold. My spirits rose the closer we came to the clearing as I remembered years long past, when I danced around the Maypole with my father, mingling fire and earth along our streamers. Today I would dance with mist for sure, along with Bianca’s whirlwind and Rosemarie’s yellow fire. Together, we might dupe people into believing we both claimed natural fire—red and yellow made orange.

I headed for the fire pit beside the trickling brook first, staking out territory for my new family by arranging our blankets amidst the collection of folding chairs. Henning sat alone upon a rock at the water’s edge, his eyes tracking the blue flames licking skyward among the other Teutonic fires in the pit. He acknowledged me with a nod, disquiet darkening his spirit.

I finished spreading our primary blanket, situating the second beside my purse at the end nearest the stream. Glancing over the clearing, I estimated around fifty Teutons had already arrived—a number that would surpass several hundred by evening. If I wished to learn

what stirred the young Keyholder's anxiety, I would have to act fast.

"You know who your Lady is." Taking a shot in the dark, I stepped to his side, my gaze dropping from his pensive face to the key ring attached to his belt.

Henning raised his head, blue flames enhancing his irises as they met mine. Darkness continued to cling to him, heightened by the color of his austere robe. His nostrils exhaled a breath of smoke, and he murmured, "Yes. She's currently resisting the bond."

Pain struck my spirit in response to his anguish. "Resisting the bond . . . or resisting *you*?"

Henning's eyes widened, his head withdrawing deeper into his hood. "I'm . . . not sure. Hadn't thought about it that way. It may be a bit of both."

Before I could explore the matter further, the Keyholder rose to his feet and made for the center of the clearing, where a group of young males gathered to set the Maypole in place. I sighed a little as I watching him go, hoping his new *Leitalra* would soon accept him for who he was. Thank goodness the Lady of Amberg—my birthplace—was a mother in her thirties. Lukas would claim me officially before I faced any compulsion from Amberg. I felt sure of that.

The festival progressed in glorious fashion, magic undulating in waves as my people danced around the Maypole to welcome spring's renewal. I mingled my red fire with many elements that afternoon, my spirit certain

it had found its place at long last. One of the most magnificent moments came when my adopted mother invited me to dance with her, our fires weaving into a rich maroon around the Maypole. Lukas and his mother united their snow and mist in that same dance, power surging outward to bless each person in the clearing.

Lukas caught me in his arms and drew me away from the crowd after that dance concluded, my fiery spirit relaxing in the presence of his mist. “I’m starting to think I’ll never get a chance to dance with my beloved one, at the rate you’re going,” he crooned at me, leaning forward to brush my lips with his. “Bianca, Rosemarie, Dennis, Till, your father, your adopted mother. Six dances in a row, yet your fire pulses with undying stamina.”

I kissed him again, my entire body and spirit relishing his adoration. “Still have enough gumption to dance with you, my love,” I assured him.

The next cycle had already begun. Lukas glanced briefly at the gamboling Teutons, then fixed his gaze upon me. “You know, I’m supposed to wait until tomorrow to do this, because I want to give you your best year yet. But I love you so much, I just can’t hold out any longer.”

My eyes widened in surprise as Lukas knelt before me, releasing my waist so he could dig something out of a pocket of his leather trousers. My hands rose to cover my mouth when the man of my dreams presented me with a

stylish diamond ringed with tiny rubies, the gems set in a platinum band.

“You’re the only witch who can tame my misty soul. Gabriela Luana Scholz, will you marry me?”

Warmth spread outward from my heart as my element smoldered through my blood, joy banishing any lingering uncertainties. Lukas had spoken his plea in Teutonica, so I answered in kind. “Of course I will. I love you more than life itself, my partner, my equal . . . my Lukas.”

I held out my right hand, waiting for him to slide the ring into place. Then I leaped upon him before he could rise to his feet, flinging my arms around him and kissing him with a ferocity that could have ignited the forest. He picked me up and spun me in a circle, my tresses dancing in the breeze as I relished every sensation humming along my body. Dimly, I heard Bianca give a delighted shriek, our family and friends’ applause surrounding us.

When we pulled back to look into each other’s eyes, I knew for sure I was where I should be. With Lukas Raymond Felder, my committed partner, ready to create a wonderful life of our own.

EPILOGUE



After a memorable honeymoon in Mallorca, each day filled with fresh adventures of both the touristy and sexual varieties, Lukas and I returned to Erlangen on a Wednesday at the outset of October. Winston greeted us with bubbling affection, and Frau Felder—whom I now referred to as “Mutti”—informed us the pug had missed us dearly. Only our nephews’ games could distract him from his loneliness, the maroon couch in our private parlor his preferred place to sulk.

“Sounds like I’d better take you outside for some games right now,” Lukas gushed at his pug, reaching for the leash that hung beside the front door. Winston woofed and bounced around, his curled tail practically buzzing.

I smiled at my mother-in-law and ordered Lukas not to take too long, for his misty essence awakened my fire’s primal yearning. I could hardly wait to give our bed a

proper christening, as Herr and Frau Felder. The dagger my father had given me last Christmas knew the taste of our commingled blood, our magic united in Teutonic matrimony.

One of the housekeepers helped me carry our luggage up to Lukas'—now *our*—private suite. I thanked him for his aid and then shut the door to the hallway, releasing a contented sigh as I looked around. Now I was Frau Gabi Felder, a fire witch who claimed a misty mate. During our honeymoon, Lukas and I had agreed I would stop taking my pills, so we could learn whether fate wanted us to expand our family. If it was meant to be, I would become a stay-at-home mother once we had our first child, Lukas' salary being more than enough to sustain us.

I had nearly finished putting our clothes away when my husband burst into the bedroom, his hair windswept, his muscles flexing as he moved to take off his polo shirt. “Your fire’s calling to me, but I find you fully dressed with a suitcase open on our bed,” he chided in a sultry tone.

Lifting the mostly-empty suitcase off of my side of the bed, I dumped it onto the floor and yanked down the zipper of my jeans. “I’ve failed you. I’m so embarrassed,” I responded, turning my back to him so he could gawk at my ass as I slid my jeans down to the floor. “Are you going to punish me?”

“Is that what my fire fairy is hoping for?” Lukas’ strong hands gripped my cheeks and squeezed, right as I tugged my blouse over my head. I gasped, heat rising in my blood when his fingers ran along the top of my panties, probing their way beneath the cotton to tease my skin.

I twisted my neck around just enough to trap his lips with mine, keeping my eyes open so I could look deep into his. Flames already flickered at the edges of my vision, my husband’s mist swathing his irises in blue as we kissed. He released my mouth before I was ready, his hands rolling my underwear down to the floor. How had he managed to completely undress this fast? The sight of his muscular back and shoulders drove me wild, warmth building in my core.

He began kissing his way up the backs of my thighs, one and then the other, and a groan escaped my lips before I could smother it. “Lukas, if you don’t—”

My cell phone’s ringtone blared out the first few notes of a pop song, killing the mood, at least for me. I practically jumped, then cut my gaze toward the side table, where the phone hummed along happily. Lukas’ hands held my legs in place. “Don’t answer it,” he growled.

Lifting myself onto my tiptoes, I managed to read the name on the screen. “I have to answer it. It’s Bianca.”

Lukas growled again but released my legs so I could snatch up the phone. I flipped it open and said, “Gabi

Felder, who just so happens to be in the middle of something with her husband right now.”

A shrieking giggle tickled my ear. “Oh gosh, Gabi, I’m so sorry! Do you want me to call you back?” She giggled again.

I narrowed my eyes and sat down on the bed. “We just got home from our honeymoon *today*, and I know that you know that. Therefore, you must have some really urgent news, or you wouldn’t be distracting me from my extremely hot and horny husband.”

Bianca laughed louder this time, more apologies stringing into my ear, while Lukas sat on his heels upon the floor, his dick pointing at me like a rifle. Despite his obvious need, he was following our conversation. And before Bianca composed herself enough to admit the truth, he said it for her. “She’s pregnant.”

I gasped and leaped to my feet, the certainty in Lukas’ eyes vanquishing all doubts. “You’re pregnant, aren’t you? Aren’t you?!” I cried out.

“I am! I am! It actually worked, just like Lady Ilsa said! Gabi, I’m so excited I can’t stop crying. I can’t wait to meet our baby!” Bianca’s voice grew thick with tears and I soothed her, promising to visit this weekend so we could start making a list of what she and Oliver would need once their child was born.

Joy stoked my element into a radiant blaze as I ended the call, silencing the phone this time before turning my attention back to Lukas. His anticipation had not yet

waned, his magnificent body summoning me to claim him as he set his hands on his hips. “Seems like we need to get to work if we want our kids to be best buddies,” he mused, his gaze shifting from my face to my pussy.

“Come and get it,” I invited, diving backwards onto the bed with a naughty grin. And the two of us bound our bodies and elements in glorious perfection, our hearts beating as one while we celebrated a new wellspring of Teutonic life.

* * *

Thank you for reading *Gift of Fire*. I hope you enjoyed experiencing Gabi’s whirlwind love story with Lukas.

The *Elemental Bloodlines* series will continue as Henning seeks to gain his new Lady’s trust. (*Gift of Stone*: <https://books2read.com/ebgiftofstone>).

If you’d like to read a bonus short story detailing how Ilsa fell in love with Horst, check out *Gift of Air*, currently available in the *Lunar Rising* anthology:

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Gift of Air will be available as a free download for my newsletter subscribers in February, 2023. Sign up and

get another short, magical romance while you wait!

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ALSO BY C.L. CARHART

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TRANSLATIONS

Alterlangen – Old Erlangen

Apfelschorle – sparkling apple juice

Der Weg Teutonisch – The Teutonic Way

Dirndl – traditional Alpine folk dress with a tight bodice, flared skirt, and apron

Döner Kebap – Turkish specialty, seasoned meat cooked over a rotisserie, often served in a wrap

Eihalbe/ae – singular/plural, silver oak fairy

Feuerzangenbowle – German alcoholic beverage served during the winter holiday season, in which a rum-soaked sugar cone is lit on fire and left to drip into spiced wine

Föhn – warm Alpine breeze

Franconia – German region including the northern section of Bavaria

Frau – Miss/Mrs.

Herr – Mr.

Kellerbier – cellar beer

Lederhosen – leather shorts or breeches worn as traditional folk attire

Leitaeri – Keyholder of a Teuton city

Leitalra – Lady of a Teuton city

Linzer cookies – layered sugar cookies with raspberry jam in the middle, usually baked for the winter holidays

Mutti – mom

Omi/Oma – grandma

Opa – grandpa

Roulade – bacon, onions, mustard, and pickles wrapped in rolled beef

Sauerbraten – roast beef marinated in wine, vegetables, and spices

Tante – aunt

Taubenball – Dove Ball

Teutonica – ancient Teutonic dialect

Wuotan – demon lord of the Teuton people

Zoubaraera Teutona – Teuton witch

Zum Weißen Hirsch – at the Sign of the White Stag

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

(for names and commonly used words)

Eihalbe – EYE-hahl-buh (eye is pronounced like eyeball)

Elvira – El-VEER-uh

Erlangen – AIR-lahng-en

Frau – Frow (ow is pronounced like cow)

Gabi – GAH-bee

Herr – Hair

Jan – Yahn

Johanna – Yo-HAH-nah

Leitaeri – Leye-TARE-ee (eye is pronounced like eyeball)

Leitalra – Leye-TAHL-rah (eye is pronounced like
eyeball)

Tanja – TAHN-yah

Taubenball – TOW-ben-ball (ow is pronounced like cow)

Teutonica – Too-TAHN-ih-kuh

Werndl – VERN-dool

Wuotan – VOH-tahn

Zoubaraera Teutona – TSOW-bahr-air-uh Too-TONE-uh
(ow is pronounced like cow)

Zum Weißen Hirsch – Tsoom VICE-en Hersch

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

C.L. Carhart has been writing since the age of 4, dabbling in everything from children's books, to fantasy, to historical fiction. Eventually, her lifelong interest in European history inspired her to create a mystical other-world based on the Teutonic people groups. Her Teutonic fantasy realm is chock full of heart-pounding adventure, dark magic, and swoon-worthy romance.

A book addict, stray cat rescuer, and unashamed metalhead, you can find her plotting out fresh stories deep in the night with a can of diet soda and a fun-sized panther infringing on her progress.