

Verena Bachmann: Vol.1: The Witch Queen – Magic Unleashed

Bd. 1: The Witch Queen – Entfesselte Magie

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ENGLISH SAMPLE TRANSLATION

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CHAPTER 1**RED AS BLOOD**

If it were up to me, I would spend my Saturday evening as follows:

First I would take a long relaxing bubble bath and then curl up on my sofa with a big cup of hot chocolate and a book.

Unfortunately, as we all know, life was not a concert of wishes and mine definitely did not go according to my wishes.

So, as usual, I stood behind the bar of my aunt's bar on a Saturday night, bored, watching the stripper work up a sweat on the bright red foreheads of a bunch of office jocks in their forties.

While the groom-to-be looked as if he wouldn't last a second longer without heart pills, I watched with growing unease as the stripper settled on his lap and moved her hips rhythmically back and forth. At least I had the number of the ambulance service on speed dial.

To the jeers of his friends, the dancer rose and left a stupidly grinning Leopold sitting there with a visible bump on his crotch.

Oh, how nice. His bride-to-be could look forward to the wedding night.

With a deep sigh, I propped myself up on the counter and hung my head. I wanted to go home.

The loud music, the hooting and that unpleasant mixture of alcohol and men's sweat got on my nerves. The only thing that made it worse was that Leopold was one of those men who went from being quite nice, somewhat shy insurance employees to pushy guys who couldn't keep their hands to themselves once they had drunk alcohol. As if that gave them a free pass for groping.

In any case, it didn't work for me and Leopold had already noticed this several times. However, his memory basically diminished with the increasing number of drinks. This evening was no exception. Because the watchful, almost anxious

look that he usually wore in my presence was now missing as he staggered towards the bar and thus towards me.

"Hey, pumpkin, give me another double. And pour yourself one while you're at it. You know, when there's a fire on the roof, you have to keep the cellar damp."

His gaze wandered meaningfully from my face downwards, lingering far too long on my breasts.

Did "something blue" actually count at the wedding if it was the groom-to-be's eye?

"Thank you. I'll have to pass," I replied, forcing myself to maintain a neutral tone. Which was anything but easy for me.

In support of my feeble inner calm, I closed my eyes and let my neck crack a few times while I pulled another bottle of Korn from under the counter.

"Oh, don't always be such a killjoy, Enju. No one will ever court you when you behave like that." Considering my clientele, a circumstance that would not give me sleepless nights. Besides ... courting? The nicest pick-up line I had ever heard here was: "You look a bit wrinkled. Do you want me to iron you over?"

Even on good days, it got on my nerves to be picked on by the guys here in such a cheap way. Followed by oh-so-well-intentioned advice so that I wouldn't waste my life being single. Because everyone knew that a woman without a man by her side had clearly missed her goal in life. After all, there was no better meaning to life for the female sex than to have children and faithfully care for her husband. As I said, it already stretched my patience on good days. Today was not one of the good days. That's why I felt a twitch in my cheek even before Leopold reached out his hand.

"And with such a delicious thing as you, it would be such a waste, little mouse..." breathed Leopold with a transfigured grin as his hand crept towards mine. Once he reached his destination, he began to caress my forearm, which gave me goosebumps because of the disgust that rose inside me.

"With a broken hand, it's very awkward to get into the suit jacket. So you'd better keep your fingers to yourself," I threatened and withdrew my hand in the same movement as I pushed his drink towards him with the other.

Leopold's mouth twisted defiantly at the rude gesture. At the same time, he pushed his chin back so far that he didn't just have a double chin, but rather a triple one.

"Always so dismissive. You know, frigidity doesn't go down well with men either, little mouse."

Calm, stay calm. He was actually quite a nice guy when he was sober. I had also seen his fiancée before and had to say that the two of them had found each other late, but they fitted together extremely well. They deserved a beautiful wedding, with Leopold's face still recognisable as such.

I exhaled heavily again and reminded myself that violence was not a solution. I ignored the little voice in my head that added "but a good alternative".

But obviously encouraged by the fact that I hadn't slapped him yet, Leopold grabbed the shot glass, spilling half of it on the bar and emptying the rest in one go before continuing to talk.

"Honestly, vixen. How long have I seen you here now? Three years? And neither with your nineteen nor now with ... twenty-two ..."

Did he now seriously have to calculate?

"... I've ever seen a man here who wanted to start something with you. You're not one of those ... who prefer women, are you?"

He looked at me as if he had just found out that I was torturing little puppies in my cellar.

It was always droll to hear homophobic statements from someone who jerked off during lesbian porn about twice a week.

How did I know? Leopold had already tried it here in the toilet, drunk as a skunk.

When I thought about it, I had really been very tolerant of his drunken self for

the last three years. That would end now, and I also had the perfect wedding present for him and his bride-to-be.

He could not react so quickly as I grabbed his forearm and dug my fingernails into the soft flesh. Leopold let out a cry of pain, but I nipped it in the bud.

His eyes widened in shock, revealing to me that he clearly felt it. I felt myself penetrating his innermost being, burrowing into his mind to take possession of his spirit.

Yes, that's right, Leopold. That was not normal. That was not an ability that a normal person had.

Surprise! I was no ordinary person!

"Firstly, I don't like being called a vixen or a mouse or anything else. Secondly: Yes, what is happening right now is anything but normal. I am not normal. Which I don't usually show in public. At least not here. But in your case, I'll make an exception. Because I'm such a lovely sweetheart ... I don't like sweetheart either, by the way." I forced Leopold to lean forward so that I could speak even more quietly and so that he, with his heavy figure, could shield the gazes of the others who might have become bored with the stripper.

His eyes betrayed that he would like nothing better than to put a whole ocean between us, but I prevented his escape reflex. Just like the uncontrolled urination. After all, I didn't want to have to clean up a mess later just because he was scared to death.

My eyes bored into his little black beady eyes and I felt the trembling of his massive body. Like jelly.

I knew what he saw. Which, apart from the fact that I was holding his brain like a vice right now, scared him so much. My normally caramel-coloured eyes had turned ice-blue and a purple thin ring twisted incessantly around my black pupils.

What made him panic even more was the feeling I triggered in him. My hand around his brain, with the power to crush it to pulp and make him live out the rest of his existence as a drooling little pile of misery.

Fortunately for him, I wasn't planning to do that at all, but it didn't hurt to let him know that I could do that at any time.

"You will listen to me very well now!"

A nod. He was quite attentive despite his previous alcohol consumption. But good. I didn't really give him any other choice, or rather I had let him sober up in record speed.

"I know you're actually a pretty nice guy. That, by the way, is the only reason I haven't banned you in the last three years. That, and because I knew you were a bit lonely. But you're not anymore. You have a nice woman now who wants to spend the rest of her life with you. Something good can really come out of this. But my dear, you have a real drinking problem."

I waited and increased the pressure on his mind to let my words sink deep into his consciousness.

"Hence my wedding gift to you and your wife:

From this day on, you will not touch a drop of alcohol. You no longer need it. You have no more desire for it. You will never spend your evenings here in this bar again. From now on, you are determined to solve your problems by other means than alcohol."

He nodded slowly, but I didn't need confirmation.

It was not well-intentioned advice that I gave him. I was manipulating him.

Forced my will on Leopold and would send him out here with my thoughts, believing they were his own.

"And to make sure it stays that way in the future, you should regularly attend the meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous. It's best to do some soul-searching and think about seeking further help to work through any unresolved problems," I added

after a moment's thought, because this change in character that he brought about through drinking had to have some origin.

"And before I forget ... As far as my life is concerned, that's none of your fucking business! As soon as you leave this bar tonight, I and everything to do with me will be erased from your memory. You won't even remember my name. Let alone what just happened here."

Again a nod. With that, I withdrew my hand and disconnected.

Leopold remained sitting for a while with a blurred look in his eyes. I knew he had to process the aftermath of my mind control. A weak mind like Leopold's was easy to manipulate. But the after-effects were then twice as bad for those affected, precisely because they were so weak.

I could literally see how his brain was taking on new directions. Once it had consolidated, Leopold rose and disappeared from the bar, never to be seen again. His alcoholic friends did not even notice his departure.

I, however, continued to look at the door for a while. And I asked myself why I hadn't done this good deed three years ago.

Good deed, of course, referring to me. I was not Jesus, after all.

At half past two, the last guest had finally disappeared and I could call it a day. While I was moving the last bar stools to the counter, the heavy entrance door swung open again.

"We are closed," I announced without looking up.

I really had to get into the habit of locking up as soon as I had kicked the last drunk out the door.

"Sweetie, I've been out for a good twelve hours straight now. If you deny me my well-deserved good-night drink, I'm afraid I'll have to rob the nearest liquor shop. Then you'll have to visit me in prison every day as punishment to ease your guilty conscience."

I still didn't look at the door, but I couldn't suppress the grin that crept onto my face. "You really think I could feel guilty if I had to choose between your salvation

and my bed? Then you grossly underestimate how much my bed and I love each other, James."

"Then I appeal to your good heart."

With that, the six-foot-tall giant stepped closer, pulled one of the stools back from the counter and lowered his massive body onto it. With a movement that told me James was obviously in pain, he raised his arm and slammed a dark grey canvas bag down on the counter.

"I don't know what it is, but it's bleeding all over my counter," I commented as I circled it.

"Sorry. I'll clean it up later," James replied, sounding so tired that I doubted it.

While I put the bourbon whiskey swill he loved in front of him, his broad shoulders sank steadily down. He looked as if the only thing holding him in place were his folded arms, which he had propped up on the counter.

"Tough assignment?", I asked, hoping fervently that James wouldn't still fall off my stool.

I was anything but weak, but I wouldn't be able to move James a millimetre. At least not in the normal way.

He was not only very tall, but also extremely broadly built. The massive figure, more precisely defined, the 2.16-metre tall and 179-kilogram figure - I had asked him about it once - consisted solely of muscles.

"Yes. Very hard. But it was necessary unfortunately," he replied, rubbing his tired face.

"Do you want to talk about it, big guy?"

He replied with a shake of his head.

"Pack matters."

Ah, I get it. It meant something like: Mind your own business! The pack was very strict about such things and its members abided by the rules. James, as one of the higher-ranking members, anyway.

The Pack, or rather called the Beasts, was a group of magical creatures that, in simple terms, could be described as shape-shifters. The Beast that resonated in their soul could belong to the species of known mammals, such as wolves, but could also be something quite mystical. Like a hydra, a minotaur, griffins or even a dragon. Transformed, their form then took on a kind of intermediate form between human and animal. Fearsome, strong and created solely for battle. What essence resonated in James' soul, I did not know. I had never asked him about it.

At first glance, he just looked like a slowly aging rocker with his long, strawberry-blond hair, which he always tied back in a ponytail. His three-day beard, the bushy brows above his light blue eyes and the dark leather clothes rounded off the whole thing.

"Can you at least tell me what's in the bag then?"

"Don't you want to know."

Woah. James must be really tired. He didn't seem so, but normally he was quite a chatterbox. Monosyllabic answers were rather unusual.

"Frankly, yes. Because the blood is just starting to burn little holes into the wood."

"Oh damn!"

With a movement almost too fast for the human eye, his hand shot out and snatched the bag upwards.

The fact that James was still so fast despite the obviously sore muscles looked really scary to me.

The blood from his pouch was dripping onto the floor by now, leaving little holes there too. No real improvement.

Frowning, I returned James' apologetic look.

"A Medusa ... or rather the head. Those damned snakes live on and produce poison after you cut off the head," he finally admitted.

"Interesting. Like hair and nails that continue to grow after death?"

"Something like that."

James lowered his arm and let the bag slide to the floor beside his bar stool.

"And you carry the head around with you because ...? Your wife got bored with flowers as a souvenir?"

James' blue eyes narrowed and a smile twitched around the corners of his mouth.

"Order of the pack," he replied in a final tone.

"So no more murders ..."

James had a refill and took a sip before his eyes looked at me attentively and clearly more awake again.

"You are sometimes cleverer than is good for you, Enju."

I smiled at him in amusement.

"I'm not just clever. I am genius!"

So I was right. And it was not difficult for me to put two and two together in this case. The newspapers had reported five murders of young men in the last few weeks. Each one more horribly mutilated than the last. The words mangled and parts found their way into the respective articles more than once, but there was nothing more to report. For the murders puzzled the police. There were no clues to a perpetrator and the police could not recover any useful DNA traces either. Only sand and small pieces of rock could be found among the scattered body parts and pools of blood.

But for people like me, who knew there was more between heaven and earth, they were very clear clues. I had already suspected a Medusa after the second murder. A very angry one of her kind. For it had obviously not been enough for her to petrify her victims. She had also smashed the stone bodies. Which ultimately explained the scattered body parts. For with the destruction of the statue, the curse expired and stone turned back into soft flesh. And, as reported, left quite a mess.

"I'm just surprised that you intervened so late," I continued, pouring James another drink.

Normally, the pack did not allow murders of this kind. Any danger that could lead to the discovery of the magical society had to be nipped in the bud.

James emptied his glass again in one go.

"They did violence to her. Three of those men ..." James replied, his eyes looking wearily and lacklustrely into space.

I understood. Even if murders were generally not tolerated, it was different in the case of vigilante justice. It was tolerated to a certain extent and was common practice among the Beasts.

"Three. But there were five victims," I clarified.

"Right. She has taken a liking to murder. That's why I had to take care of her," James replied and his gaze darkened.

Without comment, I poured him another glass. James had never told me exactly what his job in the pack was, but by now I could figure it out.

I guess it fell to him to ... clean up certain things. Not a job I envied him for. He certainly had to get his hands dirty a lot.

"How old was she?", I asked.

Although I didn't think it was possible, James' expression darkened even more.

"Fifteen," he answered reluctantly.

"Shit ..." was the only comment I could think of.

James nodded and rubbed his face again before taking another sip.

"And what will happen now?"

"The order for elimination was given by the Alpha. So now her parents still have the opportunity to challenge him to take revenge."

"Will they do that then?"

"Rather unlikely. They had the opportunity to take care of it themselves, to bring their daughter to her senses before we had to take the last resort. But they didn't. Didn't get through to her. She couldn't even return to her human form in the end."

And when she went after her younger siblings, transformed and only out to kill ...

Well, her father knew how I would act when he called me ... what the Alpha's decision would be. I guess he just didn't want to have to do it himself."

Wow. I had already heard that the Beast could completely displace the human side under certain circumstances. But that this would be so bad that the only option left was to liquidate the person? And that parents sometimes had to make this decision for their children?

I had a few more questions on the tip of my tongue, but I knew James wouldn't answer them because they would ultimately relate to the pack. And regarding this point he was more secretive than an oyster. He had already revealed a surprising amount.

"Another?", I asked when James had finally emptied his glass.

He held his massive paw over the glass and shook his head.

"No, thank you," he replied and rose heavily.

"Leave it ...", I said as James made an effort to pull his wallet out of his pocket. "... it's on the house today."

"I owe you one, kid."

With that, James leaned forward and grabbed his bag.

A glance over the counter revealed more burn holes on the floor. Great. James didn't miss them either.

"Send me the bill ..." he began readily, but I waved it off.

"The few holes don't stand out here."

Following my words, his gaze roamed the gloomy bar.

"I've been wondering for a long time why you're here ..."

James' gaze went back to my face and he broke off in mid-sentence. We both knew I wouldn't talk about that any more than he would about pack matters.

"And what else are you going to do now?", I asked to change the subject.

"To the castle and let them know the job is done ..." The sack swung slightly back and forth as James unconsciously turned his wrist. "... And after that, I'll go home,

give my wife a kiss and sit by my daughter's bed for a few more minutes. Listen to her steady breaths and stroke her hair. Knowing that she is well and happy."

"Sounds like a good plan," I replied, smiling slightly. As I said, I estimated James' position in the pack as an enforcer of sorts. And just from the fact that he had survived so far, I concluded that he was certainly good at his job too. But I didn't believe that every job left him cold. He was also a husband and a father, and in these respects I had already experienced him as extremely loving and self-sacrificing. James nodded goodbye and was at the door shortly afterwards. But after opening it, he paused.

"One more question, Enju: have you ... noticed anything ... unusual lately?"

"Define unusual," I replied.

Unusual, after all, applied to almost everything when moving in our circles. James avoided my gaze and seemed to be thinking hard. Several seconds of silence passed before he turned away with a shake of his head.

"Not that important. Just forget about it. Take care of yourself, Enju."

With that he had already pushed his massive figure through the door and disappeared.

After James' departure, I had lost no more time, but locked up immediately and headed straight home.

I wanted nothing more than to finally fall into my bed. But the sudden throbbing in my temples and the painful tightening of my stomach told me that it would not be so easy to get home today.

For me, these symptoms were harbingers that heralded a rift in the magic, as I had felt on and off over the last few weeks.

My home, like that of almost all members of the magically gifted society in one form or another, was in Lapis Lazuli. The city that existed everywhere and yet nowhere. Although I belonged to one of the groups that had magic by blood, after all these years I was still unable to discern what ancient magic moved in Lapis Lazuli and kept the city alive. I only knew that it was ancient and powerful,

because it allowed this huge city to move almost unrestricted between places all over the world.

Which, by the way, was to be taken literally. Lapis Lazuli had no fixed location. It was a city that existed outside the ordinary world and yet was in some way adjacent to all other places in this world.

It was therefore no problem to stroll through Paris in the morning, spend the afternoon in London, then take a detour to Munich and end the night in Las Vegas. All you had to do was use the right portal in Lapis Lazuli. Which made it a perfect place to live for all magical creatures. Lapis Lazuli arguably formed the largest of the magical cities because the city adapted to its inhabitants. When space became scarce, the city enlarged itself and created new areas. As far as I know, there were two or three other cities besides Lapis Lazuli that also moved freely in the world.

Nevertheless, not every magical being lived in Lapis Lazuli or one of the other magical cities. Some also preferred to live and work in the normal world.

Which was good, so that the different magical peoples could get out of each other's way. Because with so many different beings, friction and open hostility could not be avoided. It would probably be even worse if there was no way to get out of the city and into the ordinary world. Not to mention the possible extinction of magical beings if they could not reproduce with ordinary people. Or the lack of work and money. Or, to put it on a smaller scale, how annoying it would be not to be able to order anything on the internet because you couldn't leave a delivery address.

No, Lapis Lazuli was really almost perfect. That's why I was surprised that the magic of the city had been rumbling so strangely lately. As if it temporarily cramped up and then torn apart.

I couldn't remember anything like this happening before in recent years. If I didn't know any better, I would almost say the city has been suffering from a severe stomach ache for a few weeks.

These also seemed to kick in again when I tried to cross the entry point to Lapis Lazuli behind the bar. At the very moment I stepped through, the passage shifted. So I realised with a groan that it had not taken me to the crossroads opposite my flat as usual, but a good fifteen kilometres away from it. To the club district of the necromancers. Wonderful!

So now I had to walk. Firstly, I didn't have any money for a taxi, and secondly, even if I did, I wouldn't be able to afford one in this neighbourhood. Because if anything amounted to a motto among necromancers, it was this: If you have to ask the price, you can't afford it anyway.

There was no other people in Lapis Lazuli who were so rich. The Beasts were close, but still could not compete with the necromancers. For apart from the disgusting fact that their main focus in magic was necromancy, they had an incredibly good hand when it came to lucrative real estate. The necromancers owned the most exclusive and hippest clubs in the city, the casino, the luxury hotels and the entire red light district. And these were only their known investments. They certainly had their fingers in many more areas.

I buried my hands deeper in the pockets of my leather jacket and pulled it tighter around me. It was now half past three in the morning and noticeably chill, so I wished I was wearing more than a pair of waist-high jeans that ended in knee-high black lace-up boots and a simple top under my jacket.

I quickened my steps and involuntarily marvelled at how well the necromancers had mastered keeping their neighbourhood clean. Literally clean. There was neither chewing gum nor cigarette butts on the pavement. Not a bit of litter anywhere. Quite different from the run-down neighbourhood in the other world that I went to every evening to work. Here everything was so spotless that the thin red trickle that crossed my path lit up like a neon sign in the dim light of the street lamp.

Red as blood, it flashed through my mind as I looked at the thin red path that stretched across the pavement and ended with steady silent trickles on the street. I looked in the opposite direction, searching for the source of the trickle. It was not particularly difficult to spot the source. From my position, a paved driveway led to a single wide flight of steps lined with red velvet that led to a glass double door. The entire driveway was permeated with the blood-red liquid like a network of veins.

Since I strongly doubted that the red carpet had just lost its colour, I headed for the wing door to find out what had soaked the carpet.

Something was wrong here.

It was almost four in the morning, the clubs here closed at three at the latest, without exception. Nevertheless, all the windows of this club were lit, even if only diffusely. Each, with the exception of the light source behind the entrance door, was illuminated by a deep, dark Bordeaux red.

The same colour that beamed at me in the mirror every day, as my hair was exactly the same shade.

But this commonality was certainly not a good omen here. I even strongly doubted that the lamps in this club always shone in this shade. It seemed far too gloomy for one of these posh necromancer's sheds.

My feet hit the velvet carpet and caused a loud smacking noise there. The carpet was not only damp, it was soaking wet.

Although every step on the carpet made a disgusting sound, I moved slowly forward. Something was wrong here and I had to find out what it was. The closer I got to the door, the more I felt a strange magic pouring out of the building that I couldn't place. I only felt that it did not belong here at all.

As I cautiously reached out my fingers and gently pressed the door against the cool glass, I was not surprised to find that it swung open inwards without any problems. Still, the fact that I didn't find a doorman worried me. Or any other human being. There was not a living creature for miles around in the entire

entrance area, although it really did offer enough space for it, being the size of a hotel lobby.

I stepped a few steps further inside and looked with growing suspicion at the expensive-looking grey and white tiled marble floor. It looked smart and very clean. Why was it so clean in here when right outside the door the damn building was bleeding out?

I took another step into the room, where there wasn't much to see. There was a large, circular leather sofa in the middle, and on the walls I could make out a few paintings that must have been of very famous dead guys. Three crystal chandeliers hung from the ceiling, where a single light bulb probably cost a fortune.

For being one of the necromancers' party clubs, it looked more like one of their luxury brothels. Or luxury hotels. They probably had the same interior designer for everything.

But I couldn't care less about that. Much more interesting was the area at the end of the room, where the wardrobe was, full of jackets and coats - there was a garment hanging on every hook.

Maybe one guest forgot his jacket, but certainly not all of them.

So the club was full, but there was dead silence. No buzz of voices, no music. My gaze slid to the right and I discovered that next to the cloakroom, a wide staircase led in a semicircle to the upper floor.

So the party was one floor up, but the upper area couldn't be that well soundproofed, could it?

Before I started up the first step, I turned around and took a step backwards, which caused me to bang against the wood of the cloakroom counter.

Now I saw why the building was only bleeding out in front of the closed door. I was beginning to take the bleeding literally. The red liquid flowing down the wall from the edge of the ceiling and collecting around the door frame looked very suspiciously like blood.

The door directed the growing trickle around its own frame to the floor, where it steadily soaked the carpet.

I wondered how much blood and how long it took to soak the carpet as it was now. I let my gaze wander back to the stairs.

I would probably get my answer upstairs. I just wasn't sure I really wanted it.

The staircase ended in a circular corridor from which five identical-looking doors led away. At least almost identical. Height, width and decorations were the same, only the colours differed. Probably to separate the different areas from each other.

I remained undecided on the top step of the stairs. From that point of view, it didn't seem to matter which door I chose. Blood seeped out from under each one and covered the floor with a deep red trail.

Wonderful! I could definitely throw my boots away then. I would never get the stains out again.

I took a deep breath, raised one hand and pointed to the individual doors to count off. "Eeny, meeny, miny, moe ... and out you go ..."

It was just a waste of time, of course. I already knew which of the doors I would open first. The one whose room was, in my estimation, above the entrance area. Blood flowed out from under each of the doors, yet it had only flowed down one wall at the bottom. There was certainly a reason for that.

Ignoring my growing reluctance, I started moving and dipped my boot much deeper into the pool of blood than I had expected.

Apparently the ground was lowerd a few centimetres up here, which at least explained why the blood had not yet flowed down the stairs.

The stairs were higher. But if it was now seamless with the pool of blood ... The thought made me swallow hard.

That was a lot of blood, really damn much blood.

I stopped once more in front of the door and let my hand hover indecisively in the air in front of it. This was where that unknown touch of magic was strongest. Taking another deep breath, I pressed my fingertips against the door, which swung open without much resistance. So obviously the door had only been left ajar, not locked. Nevertheless, apart from everything else here, I found it very strange that each of the doors had been closed at least far enough to prevent a quick glance into the rooms behind. Which, however, was probably an advantage, given the view I was now presented with.

Although I had already expected something terrible, I nevertheless pressed both hands over my mouth in horror and staggered backwards a few steps.

The blood splashed up my legs and I felt it soaking my jeans.

I was really not one of the squeamish. But the picture that presented itself to me was simply cruel and unbelievably grotesque. The opposite wall was paved with people. Corpses, if you wanted to define it more precisely. Body parts, if you wanted to be even more precise.

I had wondered how these huge amounts of blood had come about. Now I knew. When you cut a hundred or so people into their individual parts, it caused a whole lot of blood.

It took me some effort again, but eventually I managed to lower my hands, force my rebelling stomach to calm down and take another deep breath as I walked through the door.

My eyes scanned the room and I tried to take stock quickly. Something fierce had raged in here, and I wasn't referring to the dismembered bodies. The bar, the mixer, the speakers ... everything had been reduced to rubble.

But the fact that the windows were still intact puzzled me. However, I now understood why they were glowing dark red from the outside. They were completely covered in blood, as was every lamp in the room.

I took a few careful steps further into the room, trying hard not to step on any body parts. This proved to be not so easy. There were a lot of body parts stuck to the wall, but not much less scattered on the floor.

I turned my attention back to the wall. How had it been fixed there? And above all, why?

I stared at the wall for a long time, but came to no realisation. What I got instead was a very violent stomach rumble that forced me to avert my gaze again, close my eyes and take a few deep breaths - hoping not to vomit all my stomach contents onto my feet at any moment.

A hope that remained unfulfilled, if only for the simple reason that the air in this room was anything but pleasant. For as soon as I had closed my eyes, I became more aware of the other acrid smells in addition to the smell of blood. Intestines, urine, faeces ... I turned on my heel, reached the door frame and vomited.

It took me several minutes to catch my breath and sit up again.

Then I faced "Carrie's prom" at my back again and paused in surprise. The body parts were not arranged randomly on the wall at all, they formed a pattern.

I took another step forward, squinted a little and looked at the arrangement of the body parts again more closely. Rings!

One larger ring in the middle, eight slightly smaller ones arranged around it.

They just didn't catch the eye immediately because of the other body parts that were almond-shaped around each ring.

But maybe they shouldn't. It was certainly to be seen as a whole picture.

I tilted my head so far to the side that my ear almost touched my shoulder, and in the next moment I refrained from slapping my hand against my forehead.

Eyes! The circles and the surrounding area represented eyes. Why hadn't I noticed that right away?

I stepped even deeper into the room, but although I could now see the eyes quite clearly, the great realisation was missing. I could not think of any magic that involved a symbol with nine eyes. Was that a symbol of any magic at all?

Maybe some lunatic had watched the Hannibal series too often and had made his own version of it a reality here.

I could feel the strange after-effect of magic, but I was also in Lapis Lazuli and this was the territory of the necromancers. So the magic could have existed here before and had simply been extremely disrupted.

My musing was abruptly interrupted when I heard a creaking above me.

My pulse quickened as I put my head back and stared at the ceiling. Another creak, and another. Those were footsteps. Someone was moving up there.

CHAPTER 2

THE COUNCIL

Again a step was taken. Slowly, carefully.

Someone very carefully crossed the room above me. I continued to listen to the footsteps until they changed. A different manner of appearance. No, a different surface. Steps.

One of the doors on my floor obviously did not lead to another club room, but to a staircase, and this to another level.

Inwardly I cursed my carelessness. I had not considered that the person who had caused this massacre could possibly still be here. And I ruled out a survivor of this slaughterhouse. The steps were too careful for that. Far too eager not to be noticed. I turned my gaze to the open door, counting the steps with each successive step, followed by the creaking of the door. Whoever it was would appear in my field of vision at any moment.

I rejected any thought of hiding somewhere. If only because the stranger's brief pause told me that he had noticed me.

I only realised that I had been holding my breath when the tall figure shifted into my field of vision and exhaled again quietly.

My suspicion of meeting a man was confirmed. Nevertheless, the sight of him made me swallow hard.

Out of tension and surprise in equal measure. Surprise because he was attractive. Really attractive, and I really didn't expect that.

James' height and massive build he didn't have. But I still estimated him at a good 6'3", and the muscles that stretched under his black T-shirt betrayed regular training. His hair was shorter on the sides, longer on top, and its colour looked as if it couldn't decide whether it wanted to be dark blond or brown. The eye colour, on the other hand, could be clearly defined: a rich green. And this in a face

with strikingly symmetrical features. If da Vinci's grid of the perfect face were superimposed, it would certainly find a hundred percent match.

I was expecting someone more like John Wayne Gacy in a clown costume. So this sight really threw me for a moment - because I would have expected to find such a hot guy on a GQ cover instead of in a blood-soaked club in the middle of a massacre. Because, as already mentioned, the tension also made me swallow hard. And the tension was due to his blood-stained hands. He was smeared dark red up to his elbows, and what the black T-shirt hid was clearly visible on the blue jeans: Loads of little blood splatters.

Well, if that wasn't typical again. You'd run into an attractive, well-built guy who was either taken, gay, taken and gay or a psychopathic mass murderer. There was always something.

"Who are you?" he said for the first time and the deep voice sent a shiver through my body. Of the pleasant kind, though. He might be a mad killer, but the voice fitted the whole package. Dark and attractive. The intense gaze with which he eyed me also caused a tingling inside me.

Unfortunately, however, I had to assume that this look did not indicate that he liked what he saw, but that he was specifically looking for a weak spot that he could use to dismantle me into my individual parts as well.

This thought and a glance back at his hands reminded me again that one could also overdo it with the bad boy. And slaughtering hundreds of people was really, really bad. He didn't have to be a lady-killer in the truest sense of the word.

"Little Red Riding Hood who got lost?" I answered his question about who I was, earning a sceptical look in return.

Wait, she was eaten by the wolf at the end, wasn't she? Mmh, I had clearly drawn better comparisons.

He slowly took a few steps forward, like a predator stalking its prey, and was then barely two metres away from me.

"I'll ask the question again: Who are you? What is your name? And how long have you been here?"

"That's actually three questions," I stated, helpful as I was.

He must have thought differently, because my remark did not seem to make him happy. His expression became angrier and he took another threatening step towards me.

"You will accompany me!" he suddenly commanded, which now earned him a frown from me. He didn't seriously believe that I would go with him, did he?

"Thank you for this invitation, which I am sure comes from the heart. But I'm afraid I have to decline. My mum taught me that I'm not allowed to go with strangers. Besides, you didn't even offer me any sweets."

For these words I earned a derisive snort.

"I didn't get the impression I was looking at a five-year-old."

"And that disappoints you?"

His eyes narrowed dangerously.

Seriously? A mass murderer who went against the grain to be mistaken for a child murderer as well?

"No. I prefer the direction of what you have to offer," he replied, pointing his eyes unmistakably at my feminine charms.

Wow. So he did like what he saw. Why didn't that make me feel any more confident? "Oh, so that was more like a date invitation?" I snapped my fingers as if something great had slipped through my fingers.

"How annoying. I'm afraid I've already made a firm commitment to Jack the Ripper today. He's offered me a romantic tour of London."

"No. I prefer my dates to know when it's time to shut up."

"Ah, I knew it. Our relationship was doomed from the start," I replied, mockingly imitating disappointment.

He took another step towards me and then tried to reach for me. Okay. That was really close enough.

I dodged it, raised my hand and moved it away from my body in a circular motion. I used one of my favourite abilities, telekinesis.

Blood and scattered extremities spilled in a high wave against the wall and through the door. My counterpart slid backwards a good metre, but otherwise remained upright. This brought me to a halt. He should have been thrown backwards in a high arc! So why wasn't he lying outside the room? Or stuck to a wall? Or at least slid down one in pain, for fuck's sake?

His gaze slid down very slowly. My attack had also thrown the blood against him and soiled his clothes even more. He raised his hand and wiped off a drop of blood that had hit his cheek with his knuckles. A very pointless action. His bloodied hands made his face even dirtier.

His eyes bored into mine and he registered the ice-blue discolouration of my irises very attentively.

"A witch!" he snorted. "I hate witches!"

With these words, he was on me faster than I could blink. His hand closed around my throat, then he lifted me up until my feet lost contact with the ground and I could only make a few pitiful attempts to pull on his arm, wriggling helplessly in the air.

My fingernails dug into the back of his hand, but he didn't even bat an eyelid. The lack of physical reaction mattered less to me than the fact that despite direct physical contact, I failed to penetrate his mind. I bounced off him as if against a stone wall. Who the hell possessed such a pronounced resistance to magic?

He lowered me a little and lifted my face so close to his that for a brief moment the irrational thought flashed through my mind whether he intended to kiss me. But when I realised what his movement actually meant, only my restricted air supply prevented the curse that was on my lips. In the next second, he flung me off him with inhuman strength.

After flying across the room and my back making painful acquaintance with the window, I came to some realisations.

Point one: the windows had not been destroyed for one simple reason - unlike the rest of the room: because someone had obviously drawn a spell around the building. If I had to make assumptions, it was probably to prevent the club-goers from escaping. Point two: It was not a particularly strong spell circle. Because it could not withstand a 1.60 metre tall witch being thrown against it like a baseball by a berserker gone wild.

The window around me shattered. The pain of the glass shards cutting into my back and the magic of the bursting spell circle elicited a scream from me and prevented me from reacting quickly enough. Therefore, my "levitation" spell only crossed my lips when I had almost reached the ground, and therefore slowed down my impact barely noticeably.

Coughing, I turned to the side and tried hard to get back on my feet. For the sound of heavy boots on asphalt told me that not only isolated body parts of the dead had come down with me.

"Anyway. Nice ass," he commented on my backside, which I just presented to him as I supported myself on my hands and knees.

"But that doesn't stop me from ripping you open. So are you going to come with me voluntarily or do you want to experience for yourself what it's like to be torn apart?" Wow. I was used to some dubious compliments from my work in the bar. But one that was so threatening at the same time was new.

Once again, it spoke for my luck that the first guy in a long time who appealed to me on the outside was a psychopathic killer who tried to kill me. Moreover, there was also some evidence that I had a huge roof damage, because now I really thought about it and even felt a slight regret. Because under other circumstances ... or in another life ... his compliment would have pleased me. I would also have given him plus points for being able to lift me up without any problems.

Because I could think of a lot nicer things he could have done to me instead of throwing me through a fucking window!

"Why?", I gasped, pushing myself up from the floor before standing completely on my feet again.

"Don't you have enough to choose from up there?"

Obviously not, because in the next second he was already with me again.

He was really fast, but so was I. I ducked and dodged his fist. At the same time I tried to kick his legs away, but he just jumped over my outstretched leg. Turning, I straightened up again, dodged another punch and closed my fingers around his forearm to push him away. I threw myself forward with all my weight to put more force into my punch. But unfortunately my fist didn't even reach his face, as he jerked the arm he was clutching upwards and me right along with it.

His movement was again so fast that I simply lacked the time to react, which is why his next attack was successful this time. He thundered his elbow into my stomach with such force that I felt like he was being forced out of my body. I spat bile and my fingers disengaged from his forearm. Now his hand closed around my wrist and prevented me from being thrown away by his attack. But only so that he could catapult me in the opposite direction immediately afterwards. I slammed into the wall of the house and slid down it. But before I reached the ground, his fingers closed around my neck again and pulled me upwards.

I was really getting fed up with being constantly deflated. Angrily, I drove my fingernails into his arm again and the pained cry only moments later gave me immense satisfaction.

He let go of me, stumbled back and held his bleeding arm. This time it was his own blood seeping through five very clearly visible holes.

I wasn't a shape-shifter, but I knew one or two little spells to change one's appearance. For the trick I used, I had taken inspiration from X-Men 2 - lengthening the fingernails à la Lady Deathstrike.

He looked appraisingly at my claws, which were a good 30 centimetres long, and I could tell from his face what he was up to, so I had them retracted again before he could break them off. It was only a spell that lengthened them, but they were

my own nails after all and I appreciated it when they stayed on my fingers. Besides, it meant I no longer had the element of surprise on my side, and if there was one thing I was sure of by now, it was that I had to bring out the really heavy guns on this psychopath. He came towards me again, but then stopped. Oh damn! He sensed it! That meant the bastard was not only exceptionally resistant to magic, he also perceived it very clearly.

"What are you going to do?" he asked, his deep voice almost a growl.

I didn't bother to answer him, he would see in a moment anyway. At least the result. My jacket finally hid my arm and with it the blue flashing symbols that were just pushing their way to the surface, stretching from my wrist to my shoulder.

In the past, it had caused me enormous pain to summon this weapon that I carried hidden in my body, but by now it was no more than a brief sting and a tingling in my hand.

Already my fingers were closing around the hilt of Nemesis, the sword that had been in my possession for almost ten years and that had almost killed me when I took it. Because Nemesis was special in several ways.

Starting with its appearance: In terms of shape, it corresponded to a medieval long sword. Ornaments extended over the hilt, the guard and from there about 20 centimetres over the blade.

The blade itself was the most striking thing. It did not look metallic in any way. It looked like it housed a galaxy. Blue, purple, red, black. All the colours stretched across the blade like mist. Peppered with bright, shining dots. Like tiny little stars.

"That's the fucking blade," my counterpart commented, sounding in no way as impressed or intimidated as I had hoped.

"It won't save you either," he said calmly, after he had eyed Nemesis for a moment longer, obviously assessing how dangerous I could be to him.

"We'll see," I replied, now grasping the hilt with both hands and raising the sword higher.

I made my voice sound firmer and more confident than I felt. Because the bastard was more resistant to magic than any other being I had encountered so far.

But whether he could also stand up to Nemesis?

I hoped not.

After all, because of the curse it contained, the sword fed on the magic of the person wielding it. If the magic was too weak or non-existent, it used the life energy of its owner. Hence the evil epithet, "cursed blade".

However, the advantage of having enough magic, as I did, to wield Nemesis without taking damage was that the entwined magic was amplified in such a way that tremendous power was unleashed in the sword.

Such power that, if necessary, one could also destroy an opponent with one blow.

So let's see how long the handsome one would continue to look so arrogant.

The next second he went for a frontal attack. I yanked Nemesis up and his fist thundered against the blade. The blow sent me sliding backwards, but him as well thanks to Nemesis.

I could tell by looking at him that he hadn't expected the sword to help me gain such strength. But he was obviously quite good at adapting to new situations, and that was clearly to my disadvantage. He attacked head-on once more and I jerked my arms up to slam the blade back down with force. I did not expect my blow to decapitate him, even though I brought the blade down like an executioner. But the fact that I didn't manage to hit him at all made me stumble.

Nemesis hit the ground and the magic of the blade cut a deep swathe down to the road. I paid little attention as I tried to follow his movements.

He had dodged me and was now trying to get behind me. I spun with him and hit him again with Nemesis. This time I did not miss him. Nemesis' blade hit his arm and blood splattered in a fan shape against the wall of the house behind him.

After a cry of pain, he looked at the deep cut with a frightening calm. As if it wasn't his arm and not his blood either, which ran over his skin and stained his shirt and jeans even darker. Maybe he just couldn't believe that I had really hit him.

I didn't give him time to come to terms with it, but started the next blow. This time I aimed for his neck. No matter who or what this psychopath was, in my experience just about anything could be killed if you knocked the head off the body. Nemesis hissed through the air and the blade met its target.

At least I was firmly convinced I had hit it. But when the recoil made me stagger backwards, his head was still firmly on his shoulders.

Was he messing with me? I had scored. I'm sure of it! But there was not even a small cut on his neck. My eyes darted feverishly over his face and neck. Looking for a wound, a scratch, anything. But there was nothing. Or ... there was.

When he turned his head, the skin on his neck shimmered. It was only a brief moment, but it looked like ...

"Dandruff?", I asked, barely audible.

The realisation paralysed me and I almost pulled Nemesis up too late to fend off his attack. I could do no more than parry. One blow followed another like a barrage. With every second he grew faster. Superhumanly fast. Not surprising, considering that he was not one hundred per cent human.

First the shimmer on his skin and now his eyes gave me proof of what he was. His pupils had deformed into slits and the iris had lost every last shade of green and given way to a swirl of red, brown and yellow.

That definitely earned me a nomination at the douche award. Because I stupid cow hadn't just messed with a psychopathic mass murderer. I had picked out a fucking beast of the guild. No sane person would willingly mess with a normal shapeshifter. A crazy shapeshifter who had already killed hundreds of people. Of course, the witch had to scream "Here!" again.

I parried his next blow with flying colours, but I didn't see his kick coming in time. He hit me with full force, I hit the ground and felt Nemesis slip from my fingers.

I didn't even get to groan. Then another pain hit me, because he pressed my wrist firmly to the road with his shoe.

His weight nailed my arm to the floor and I became seriously afraid that my bones would break under the pressure at any moment. He pressed his hand over my mouth and his fingers dug roughly into my cheeks.

"I've had enough. We'll end this now!" he growled.

He released his foot from my wrist and pulled me upwards until my feet lost contact with the ground. I was once again wriggling helplessly in the air and tried again to drive my fingernails into his arm. But he didn't give me that much time this time. I heard the splintering in my ears before I felt the pain.

Splinters, because he had destroyed the magic seal that protected my body from life-threatening internal injuries. Now razor-sharp claws bore through my belly and emerged at my back. At least that's what it felt like. I could not see how deep the claws had bored into my body. I only felt the burning pain and the pressure in my throat before I vomited a torrent of blood against his hand.

My senses faded, I lost all strength in my fingertips and slipped off his arm.

Powerlessly, my arms dangled beside my body, which suddenly felt terribly heavy. That was also the last thing I felt before everything around me went pitch black.

I felt horrible. But I guess the fact that I felt like that meant I was still alive. That was good, wasn't it?

I ventured a cautious inventory. I felt every muscle in my body and every one of them hurt like hell. Nemesis ... Nemesis had returned to my body. I probably had the sword to thank for not having crossed the Jordan yet.

Although it probably just didn't want to give up its food source, there was something comforting about the fact that it probably didn't want me to die in the end.

Next I tried to move first my fingers and then my hand to feel my belly, but apart from pain I got no real feeling in my limbs. Let alone a sense of control over them. Definitely less good.

So I lay still and limited myself to breathing. Which turned out to be hard enough. My ribs ached with every little breath and there was a strange pressure on my chest and stomach area. Not really heavy, but still noticeable.

I would certainly regret it, but since I felt almost nothing except pain, I could no longer hope for my inner perception.

I collected myself for another moment, then I opened my eyes. The shock instantly displaced the pain and filled my body again with enough strength that I could roll to the side.

The two huge spiders that had been resting on my chest tumbled to the side and landed ... I looked briefly at the glow around me ... a magic circle, great ... they landed outside the red glowing lines and scrambled hastily away. I shuddered at the sight. I hated spiders!

With difficulty I managed to get onto my knees, then I looked at the circle.

It was a mini version of a spell circle drawn around my body to keep me trapped in place. I looked at the lines, the eight-pointed star, the symbols ... it was neat work. Definitely witchcraft. Strong enough that I couldn't get out in my current state.

"How nice. You're awake. I was afraid you wouldn't make it through the next hour." My gaze jerked forward and followed the spiders that crawled to a gallery made entirely of pitch-black wood. Behind it, slightly elevated, were five thrones - the term chairs was no longer appropriate. The metal and the velvet seat covers were also black. Three of them were occupied.

I looked at the person on the middle throne, at whose side the spiders were settling. They were not the only ones. Three more of their kind were cavorting around the petite blonde with the busty figure of a pin-up girl. I was anything but flat-chested, but even I couldn't keep up with that considerable bust. This was also extremely emphasised by her tight black minidress and my gaze involuntarily lingered on her cleavage longer than necessary. Long blonde curls surrounded her heart-shaped face, which was too heavily made up for my taste, but still very pretty. Her deep grey eyes, rimmed with thick dark lashes, met mine.

I met the young woman for the first time today and yet I knew very well who I had in front of me.

"Arachne ...", I murmured softly as my gaze wandered to the next person, although I knew where I was even before I looked at the dark-skinned man in his dark blue suit. He was lean and muscular, though not bulky, and even sitting with one leg crossed over the other, it was possible to estimate that he must be very tall. His skull was shaved bald and covered with tattooed symbols and writing. A small diamond sparkled on his left ear and I was sure it was a gemstone because his whole appearance reeked of money.

His face showed average attractiveness, but with an almost creepy feature. He had ice-blue, almost dead-looking eyes. This looked eerily fierce in combination with his dark skin tone.

I also knew him from stories. His name was Orpheus and he was the boss, or more precisely the lord of the necromancers.

That left the person in chair number three.

All in white, but without a bouquet of flowers, but with a belt embroidered with roses around her nun-like costume, sat a lady about seventy years old. Because of the strange bonnet, no features were recognisable on her, except a wrinkled old face and alert, bright eyes.

I didn't know her name, but I knew who she belonged to. She was a La Dame Blanche. A white woman. Enchantresses, highly skilled in the healing arts. If nothing else.

My gaze slid from her back to Orpheus and back to Arachne.

Oh yes, I knew exactly where I was. I had been put in front of the High Council of Lapis Lazuli. Great! Could it get any better?!

I wasn't sure if I wouldn't prefer the psychopath to this team.

"You know why you are here, witch?", Arachne took the floor again.

It hurt to answer her and keep myself relatively upright on my knees, but I didn't let on and tried to sound as unconcerned as possible, almost bored.

"Frankly, no. But I'm pretty sure you're about to enlighten me."

The blonde's perfectly plucked eyebrows lifted in surprise.

"You have been caught red-handed sacrificing ... slaughtering ... over a hundred people for your dark arts!"

"Pardon???"

I opted for the more polite-sounding retort. Because "Are you out of your mind?" seemed to me to be the wrong tone to use towards the council. After all, the High Council was the judiciary here in Lapis Lazuli.

The five seats were always filled by a different representative of the magical community every five years. Officially, by drawing lots, which magical species were allowed to appoint a representative of their kind to the Council.

Unofficially, however, it was always clear which race would be represented on the Council in any case. That is why one of the thrones has always been adorned by one of the necromancers since its foundation. That was as certain as the Amen in the church. Just as certain as that the butt of a witch would never sit on one of these seats. Not because we weren't important to the magical population, no, in fact we were pretty damn important to every single race. But because the witches were simply too unpopular, since we were the bankers of the magical population. And the currency was called magic.

We sold the magic that the individual peoples lacked. This made us as important as we were unpopular. For we naturally demanded a fair return for our spells. Not always money ... but preferred. Often it was quite a lot of money. Depending on the strength of the desired spell. Our coven consisted of witches. Not charitable Samaritans. And it didn't suit everyone that we didn't hand over the power we were supposedly sitting on for free.

Most people in Lapis Lazuli just didn't understand that every magic had its price. You could not receive something without being prepared to give something in return. The value in return had to be there and it had to be reasonable. Not too much, but not too little either.

And there was also magic - spells that were simply not affordable.

However, since virtually every being in Lapis Lazuli had its own magic, many of them did not understand about the equivalent value. They saw no difference between the magic that was in the blood and that which had to be given.

Arachne clicked her tongue and flicked her finger in annoyance.

"Don't play dumb, witch! You insult the council with that."

"Enju!", I shouted.

"What?" asked Arachne, irritated.

"Enju. Not just witch. My name is Enju and I haven't killed anyone!"

"You were picked up right at the scene of the crime ... Enju," Orpheus took the floor. He leaned forward with an interested expression and glared at me with his ice eyes. Creepy.

The fact that he let my name melt on his tongue like a piece of chocolate didn't make me feel any better. I was really not a fan of necromancers. They just had this cold air of death about them. There was nothing they could do about that. It was the magic that was in their blood.

"I wasn't the only one there. How about taking a look at the guy who was sneaking around there before me?" I replied, clearly more annoyed, even if it caused me pain to raise my voice.

"What guy?" asked Arachne.

I shrugged my shoulders and regretted the move at the same moment.

"I don't know his name. But he was a shape-shifter, and from the looks of it, he probably graces the cover of Sexiest Psychopath of the Year Magazine."

The granny gave a snorting laugh.

"Your defence is built on pointing the finger at the Beasts' Alpha?" she asked, making me swallow hard.

"The ... what?"

"Kayneth Ainsworth, Alpha of the Beasts. Current master of the shapeshifters," the old woman explained, as if I were slow on the uptake.

"He picked you up and reported that you tried to resist arrest."

I was already opening my mouth to say something back, but the old woman's gaze flitting over me managed to make the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

"Oh, oh ...", I whispered barely audibly and slowly turned my head to follow the direction of the sorceress' gaze.

He had washed and changed his clothes. He was wearing clean jeans and had changed his T-shirt for a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows and a black waistcoat. It looked so strangely neat and ... incredibly sexy.

But before I could start drooling over the sight, my aching body reminded me that the guy had tried to kill me. That brought me back down to earth relatively quickly.

I raised an eyebrow mockingly as I continued to study him, leaning against the wall, arms folded in front of his muscular chest, returning my gaze with a look I couldn't make out.

"Are the chairs upstairs too uncomfortable?", I asked pointedly before turning back to the other three.

The Beasts were represented on the council, and as the acting alpha, he was supposed to sit up there too. So why didn't he?

My gaze lingered on Arachne again. Maybe because of her?

Arachne was a plus anima. Someone with the ability to control a particular species of animal. In her case, they were spiders. Plus-Anima were not to be confused with shapeshifters. In the case of the Beasts, the animal's soul resonated with that of the human, allowing them to take on this intermediate form. Plus-Anima formed a bond with an animal species and then controlled the animals to their will if necessary. However, they could not transform themselves into any.

To my knowledge, the two groups were not enemies, but the Beasts did not like the Plus-Anima very much because of their abilities. For example, if a Plus-Anima had the ability to control wolves, it was quite possible that this control could also be extended to a Wolfbeast. Which was otherwise almost impossible, because the minds of the beasts ticked differently than those of normal humans or animals. I remembered all too well that even with my power, you couldn't get inside a Beast's head. I suppressed a groan at the memory of it. Not just messed with a Beast, but the Boss! Alpha! This was no longer a nomination for the douche award, I was, after all, the undisputed winner! Right at the top of the podium. "So?" the old woman took the floor again.

I closed my eyes for a moment and tried to collect myself. This would not end well for me.

"I didn't kill anyone. I just followed the trail of this strange magic and ended up in this massacre. Until His Highness here decided to give me a free flight out of the window and then impale me," I defended myself.

"So you want us to believe that you had nothing to do with it? This is now the seventh incident within a short period of time. We are beginning to see a pattern in this! Now you, a witch, have been picked up at one of these scenes. Where it is common knowledge that blood magic is a popular medium for your kind," Arachne replied.

"First ...", I pointed my finger at Orpheus,

"... the necromancers, as far as blood magic and death are concerned, are probably much further up the list. Secondly, seven? There have been seven such incidents? And none of you thought to issue a warning in Lapis Lazuli? Are you completely stupid?" They didn't like my words, but I didn't care now. Over a hundred people had died today. And it was apparently not an isolated case. But instead of dealing with this properly, the only thing the council could think of was to hide it?

"The number of victims has never been as high as tonight. It did not seem advisable to provoke a mass panic until now," Orpheus explained.

His voice sounded absolutely uninvolved. As if he was only talking about the latest business figures. That gave me a thought.

"Or to stop business from slumping, eh? Slaughter in the necromancers' clubs or hotels isn't very good for business, I suppose."

Orpheus' gaze had been icy all along, simply because of the colour of his eyes. But now it felt as if the temperature in the room had dropped several degrees. How close to the truth had my biting remark been?

"Ignore her provocative attempt to deflect from the subject!", Arachne interrupted the brief moment of silence, waving her perfectly manicured hand boredly as if trying to shoo away a fly.

"It is not the council's handling of the case that is under indictment here, but you, witch!"

"Wait! Accusation? You're accusing me? On what basis? Because I was in the wrong place at the wrong time?", I asked, unable to keep the bewilderment out of my voice. "In the wrong place at the wrong time? So a coincidence?"

The old woman's voice dripped with derision.

"As if there were such a thing as coincidence with you witches. Don't you always boast that there are no such things in this world? Everything happens for a reason and so on?"

Yes, unfortunately, that did sound like us. But I refrained from answering, because it clearly wouldn't help me here. This seemed to be turning into a literal witch hunt anyway.

"Orphelia is not wrong. If anything is unsurpassed among witches, it is their penchant for calculated action. They do not believe in chance and therefore leave nothing to it. Even we necromancers are said not to be half as foresighted and manipulative as you witches. So I agree that it is very unlikely that Enju was simply in the wrong place and had nothing to do with the matter," Orpheus said and I regretted that the spell circle set my powers to zero. I would have been only too happy to let him and his arrogant grin fly for those words.

"I didn't do anything!", I hissed again. "So what is this macabre spectacle? You have at most a scintilla of evidence against me and you pounce on it like a bunch of Weight Watchers participants on the last piece of cheesecake! Are you really that desperate?" "We should execute them. That would speak for or against them. Either the murders stop right now or it proves her innocence," Orpheus turned to the two ladies on his left as if I hadn't said a word.

"Post mortem!", I interjected loudly.

Were they trying to fuck with me here? I was to be executed for a crime I hadn't committed, just to see if the murders stopped after my death? And if they didn't, I would be proven innocent, but I wouldn't get anything out of it. Had these idiots got their seat on the council by finding a trading card in the cereal box, or what? A lottery was held to determine which nations sat on the council, but the respective representatives were elected by their own people. At least that's what I had assumed until now. Now I wasn't so sure about these morons. I felt like I was going to snap at any moment, but as the fine hairs on the back of my neck and forearms stood up, I began to relax. Finally!

The double door at my back almost flew off its hinges and I didn't have to turn around to see who had entered the room uninvited. The electricity that instantly

filled the air needed no further confirmation. My aunt Celenike, or also known as the thunderstorm witch, entered the room with furious steps.

But despite the overwhelming power she radiated, her appearance was not quite as impressive as usual thanks to the large curlers and the pink flowered bathrobe with matching plush slippers.

Should I not be executed, I would in any case point out to her again that she was only forty and not a hundred. So she really shouldn't walk around like that.

Her appearance had clearly surprised those present, but I was surprised that no one made any move now. Kayneth was still leaning relaxed against the wall and had only raised one eyebrow slightly. The other three watched Celenike's every move with growing tension. Only the spiders around Arachne had changed their position. Obviously, the suddenly electrically charged atmosphere made them nervous. Celenike stopped at my height, her grey eyes scrutinised me briefly before glinting angrily upwards towards the gallery.

"Celenike ...", Orpheus began in an attempt at a polite greeting, but my aunt cut him off.

"Save it, Orpheus! What do you think you're doing, keeping my niece here? Do you have the faintest idea who you have captured?"

I cleared my throat inconspicuously. If I had wanted my position among the witches to be known, I would have already made myself known.

Celenike did not miss my clearing of the throat, as I could tell from the disapproving look she gave me.

"A witch from the black coven. We're aware of that, Celenike. But that certainly doesn't give her immunity. There are serious reasons why she is here and has to answer," Orpheus replied, to which I gave an indignant snort.

"Oh, please! I happened to be at the scene of the crime, and I've already explained why I was there," I hissed. It nearly killed me, but I managed with difficulty to get back on my feet. I was swaying dangerously inside the circle, but I was standing.

"That's all they have to show for it. And the only suggestion that has been made so far is to take me around the corner and see if that stops the murders!"

I addressed the last sentence to Celenike, who returned it with a frown.

As I swayed again, she came to my side and grasped my upper arm to keep me upright. Interesting. I couldn't step out of the circle. But reaching in to me was possible.

"Who elected you?" asked Celenike, addressing the three in the gallery.

Orpheus did not show any emotion, but the women showed an angry blush on their faces.

"She was at the scene of the crime. In the middle of a massacre with clear traces of dark magic. You, a witch! We can't just overlook that. It is very incriminating evidence!" growled Arachne.

"We can let them prove their innocence in another way!" Kayneth spoke up for the first time.

I turned my head slowly in his direction and beside me Celenike gave a low whistle. "Wow! Mother Nature really did everything right for once," she whispered.

"Now is not the time!", I hissed back.

"Your Majesty?" asked the old woman, Orphelia, in amazement.

Kayneth's gaze rested on me, and I didn't at all like that hint of a smile that played around the corners of his mouth.

"She claims she has nothing to do with it. So let her prove it. Bring us the murderer and you're exonerated!"

I was already opening my mouth to tell him quite clearly what I thought about the fact that I was clearly forced to do their job, but Orpheus was quicker.