

DARNED MERMAIDS

A MARTHA OAK ADVENTURE

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Darned Mermaids – A Martha Oak Adventure

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The English version was translated with the help of
ChatGPT and *DeepL* by me, the German author.

This is a shortened and free version of the novella!

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*This novella is inspired by
German fairytales, myths, and locations.*



For everyone,
who loves buddy comedies as much as I do – and celebrates it when women
swing their fists.

FOREWORD & CONTENT NOTES

Dear readers,

This is a **shortened** and **free** version of the novella because I wanted to show you a bit of the world and the character dynamic of Martha and Rosenrot.

Since this novella is inspired by brutal fairytales and creepy legends, I'd like to point out the following **content notes**:

» CONTENT ◉ NOTES «

- *Diseases such as cancer, Ebola, dementia (mentioned)*
- *violence (breaking bones), violent fantasies*
- *Brutality against animals/monsters*
- *Death, murder, blood*
- *Drug addiction (mentioned), drug abuse*
- *Mutilation*
- *Swear words (a lot of “fucks”)*
- *Necromancy, corpse mutilation*

FOREWORD & CONTENT NOTES



If I have forgotten anything, please let me know. The mental and emotional health of my readers is very important to me.

But for now, let's go and look for pearls,

Jule

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This novella takes place before “*The Wild Hunt*” (Christmas novella).

In the Christmas novella (under: **More Adventures**), Martha innocently opens her fridge – and yes, there really are mermaid pearls in a preserving jar. You can find out how she got hold of these glittering things in this story.

Don't worry, you don't need to have read the other novella to read this one. But if you know it, you'll find a few little *Easter eggs*.

Have fun!

PROLOGUE

MARTHA



With a gasping breath, Martha broke through the water's surface, gulping for air. Her lungs groaned as stars burst before her eyes, mingling with those in the night sky. She frantically paddled with her arms while simultaneously trying to pull the umbrella from her coat. Not the easiest task when fighting for one's life. But Martha had been in so many hopeless situations that this hardly threw her off balance. The only thing being thrown around here was her – mercilessly dragged downstream by the wild currents of the Isar.

On either side of the river, trees with dense canopies crowded in, watching her like frozen ghosts. Their leaves remained motionless in the night air, which pinched Martha's cheeks with icy claws. The branches within reach looked so fragile that she didn't even consider grabbing them. Not that stopping to fight her way to the shore was a good idea right now. That would only make her easy prey for her ruthless pursuers.

And besides, that would be a cruelly embarrassing death. One Martha absolutely refused to accept!

The false full moon shone down on her, illuminating the Herzog-Heinrich Bridge, which she was hurtling toward. This was her only chance. She had to fly onto the bridge with her umbrella. She just hoped her magic was still strong enough. She had already used far too much and was running on empty. If she failed to pull herself onto the bridge, she would end up smashed against the sharp rocks past the Leinthal Bridge anyway.

Martha swallowed back a curse. By Hecate's hounds, she would never stoop so low as to die like a pig on a spit!

"WE ARE GOING TO DIE, Master Oak! Unless you get out of the Isar this instant!" screeched Ra-Ra, her ever-loyal soul companion. The raven flapped in frantic circles above her, offering his ever-so-helpful commentary.

Martha almost laughed but wisely decided against it. She'd only end up choking. Besides, staying afloat required all her focus. Still, Ra-Ra seemed more unsettled than usual. She just hoped he wouldn't have a heart attack and plummet into the water. That was the last thing she needed right now.

"MASTER OAK, you must get out of the water! IMMEDIATELY!"

"Duh! What do you think I am doing?!" Martha sputtered, spitting out a mouthful of Isar water as the current picked up speed. Fantastic. Just fantastic. And to think the day had started off so peacefully.

At last, her fingers closed around the tiny umbrella in her coat pocket. Triumphant, she thrust it into the night air – *Ha ha!* – while kicking furiously to keep her head above water. Not as easy as she had hoped.

Maybe she should've gone swimming more often instead of flailing around now like a wood nymph on scorching asphalt. Her arms were already burning. By the holy moon, she really needed to fit more strength training into her schedule, if she survived this.

Then, suddenly, something brushed against her thrashing legs.

Oh, no.

Panic shot through Martha. Her heart pounded against her ribs, and a terrified scream crawled up her throat. She kicked her legs even more frantically while jerking the tiny umbrella through the air. Why wouldn't this damn thing open?!

"Master Oak! Don't tell me you still haven't fixed the umbrella latch?! I warned you just last week that this could be a matter of life and death! And look at that. Once again, I was absolutely right! By the holy spirits, we are going to DIE! This is it!"

Martha swallowed another mouthful of water as she tried to hurl a nasty curse at her infuriating soul companion. Oh, for fuck's sake! Maybe this was karma for not listening to Ra-Ra. But right now, that was the least of her problems.

Gasping, coughing, and fighting for her life, she shook the tiny umbrella. The Herzog-Heinrich Bridge was just ahead. Now or never! Her fear twisted into rage. Frustrated, seething rage clenched her chest, pushing aside the fear of whatever was slithering around her legs – if only for a moment.

"Come on!" she growled, which only sent another mouthful of water into her lungs, triggering a violent coughing fit.

But then – *finally!* – the umbrella snapped open.

Thank Hecate! Now she just had to snap her fingers. Just a little spark of magic, and–

"Master Oak! BELOW YO—"

Something clamped around Martha's ankles and yanked her violently underwater. She managed one last desperate gasp before murky Isar water swallowed her whole. Down and down she plunged, the concrete bridge sweeping past above her. Darkness closed in. And, of course, she lost her umbrella. Naturally.

Oh, just fantastic. Another brilliant turn of events even though the plan had been foolproof!

...Well, alright, maybe she hadn't exactly *followed* the plan. She had improvised. But that had never caused her any real harm before. She had always made it out somehow. Sure, with a few scratches and maybe the occasional broken bone, but still alive.

Martha fought the urge to scream, more out of frustration than fear. The deeper she was pulled, the colder the water grew. Dark, serpentine shapes slithered around her, circling like hungry shadows. Far too many glowing, murderous eyes locked onto her. Then, a flash of razor-sharp teeth.

Even underwater, she could hear the hissing demand for her death.

Shit.

CHAPTER I

ROSENROT

) ◯ (

*A few hours before it all
(Martha very much included)
went horribly wrong ...*

) ◯ (

It was early morning, and the summer sun was already beating down mercilessly on the streets of Munich. Heat shimmered in the air above Maxvorstadt. Normally, this neighbourhood was the city's lifeline, a place where humanity and fairytale magic pulsed together in chaotic harmony. Here, you'd find brainless trolls, lost Hans-in-Lucks, enchanted dimwits, Snow White's forgotten dwarves, and, most of all, clumsy, oblivious mortals – sipping coffee, strolling past little boutiques, or searching for the perfect bar to grab a *Feierabendbier*.

Which was precisely why most magical creatures tended to avoid the area. Especially, if they wanted to stay out of trouble. Or, more accurately: if they had no desire to be on the receiving end of Rosenrot's brand of justice.

Wrinkling her nose, the tall woman marched across the scorching pavement as a lone cyclist crawled past. Rosenrot would never understand humans' obsession with their bicycles – especially Munich locals.

What was so exhilarating about wobbling around on two wheels like an idiot who had never heard of traffic laws?

Her scarlet leather boots hammered against the asphalt. Despite the heat, she wore her high-waisted black jeans, fastened with a matching leather belt, its buckle engraved with delicate protective runes. Over them, she wore a black, off-shoulder sports top with a high collar and her deep red leather jacket.

Rosenrot had always preferred clothes that fit like a second skin. It had proven to be an advantage in fights. Like most fairytale creatures, she concealed her true form with illusion spells to avoid human attention. Not that Rosenrot needed them. She could walk around without attracting suspicion.

Well, *almost*. Her distinct, deliberately chosen style – red leather paired exclusively with black, practical fabrics – was bound to turn heads, even among humans. Her sister, Schneeweißchen, had once suggested she wear something *less* conspicuous. Rosenrot had dismissed that so-called well-meaning advice with a disdainful snort.

Bah!

Everyone knew that clothes made the woman. Or that first impressions mattered. *Blah, blah, blah...* whatever.

For Rosenrot, it wasn't about ego, unlike other creatures who craved attention. No, as the feared Chief of the Fairytale Police, she *had* to stand out.

Well, '*had to*' was the wrong way to put it. Rosenrot *wanted* to stand out. She wanted fairytale creatures to see her coming from a distance and tremble in fear. This had happened more than once in her career, and she had very much enjoyed it.

Irritated, Rosenrot pushed her sunglasses back up. They kept slipping down her sharp-edged nose, crooked from having been broken too many times. Schneeweißchen considered it a flaw, but Rosenrot

couldn't care less. She had no interest in beauty. Which meant she had no interest in her nose either.

To her, it was a badge of honour, proof that she took her job seriously. And that she had never backed down from a fight.

Rosenrot came to a stop in front of a small, unassuming shop, wedged between a hair salon and a fast-food joint, easy to overlook. Her eyes drifted to the old-fashioned sign, swinging above the entrance:

OAK – Antiques & Curiosities.

At first glance, the shop was nothing special – just one of many antique stores scattered throughout Maxvorstadt like moths drawn to a flame. Rosenrot pressed her lips together. She hadn't wanted to come here. And she *certainly* hadn't wanted to involve the shop's owner in her darned case. But no matter how much she had racked her brain, she hadn't found another solution. And nothing pissed her off more.

There were two things she was the best at: solving problems and breaking bones.

Sometimes, the two overlapped. A thrilling occurrence every time, and a key reason why she had become the feared Chief of Police she was today. Her reputation preceded her. More often than not, she only had to show up, and fairytale creatures spilled all their secrets. That fact alone filled her with pride. She had earned her reputation the *hard* way. Bone-crushingly hard. And she was damn good at her job. Thanks to her, crime and magical violations had dropped significantly.

But with this particular case, which had been placed in her capable hands, she hadn't found a bloody solution, despite breaking plenty of bones for it. Well, technically, there was a solution. But it involved that insufferable witch who lived in this little antique shop in the middle of Munich.

Rosenrot cast a wary glance over her shoulder. Good. No one had followed her. She turned back to the shop and was met with her own reflection staring back at her from the window. Her features were

sharp and unyielding, just like her calculating, azure-blue eyes that categorised everything and everyone in mere seconds – ally or enemy. There were no other categories for Rosenrot. Her dyed-red hair was pulled back into a strict ponytail. Freckles and scars speckled her pale skin, while her thin lips pressed together in disapproval. She allowed herself a quiet sigh, squared her wiry shoulders, and finally stepped inside.

The cheerful chime of a doorbell rang through the narrow shop, crammed with all sorts of peculiar objects spilling out from numerous mismatched wooden shelves. Rosenrot immediately felt the urge to rifle through them, tidy up, and reorganise everything. How could anyone live in such a mess?

She wrinkled her nose as the musty air hit her. Quickly, she shut the door behind her and cast another glance out onto the street, which was sizzling under the relentless heat. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed that a bird skull, hanging near the entrance, had turned to face her. Rosenrot found the skull grotesque and wondered what strange species of bird it had once belonged to. Knowing the witch who lived here, it was undoubtedly some kind of mythical creature that had fallen into her lap.

That was yet another reason Rosenrot generally avoided working with the infamous Martha Oak, because the witch was a magnet for the bizarre and the malevolent. Anything illegal or dangerous found its way to Martha Oak, just like fortune found a fool – without a hint of consequence, of course.

“Oak?” Rosenrot called into the dark corners of the shop, prompting an immediate reaction from the bird skull beside her. Its beak snapped open, and violet flames flared to life in its eye sockets. Even through her sunglasses, the sudden brightness made Rosenrot squint.

“Who’s there? And is it urgent? I’m busy,” a grumpy voice rasped from the bone beak, earning an exasperated eye roll from Rosenrot. Off to a great start, then.

“You’ll make time for me,” she replied, her tone brooking no argument.

“Who—Oh ... OOOH!” came the startled response from the skull, followed by a barely audible, “Fuck.” The violet flames snuffed out instantly, and the beak snapped shut with a sharp clack.

Rosenrot pushed her sunglasses up onto her head before folding her arms across her chest, waiting. She remained firmly by the door. She had no desire to step even a single foot further into this shop, which sent an unpleasant shiver down her spine. She forced herself not to scrutinise the shelves, knowing full well she’d find something illegal or at least highly questionable. Martha Oak didn’t just have a knack for attracting dangerous creatures. She also had a tendency to hoard illicit ingredients and dubious artefacts that danced along the very edges of the law.

If it were up to Rosenrot, she’d have thrown the witch into the Wallgraben ages ago, right alongside all the other dangerous trouble-makers. But unfortunately, Martha had supporters in high places.

Realising that her teeth were grinding – a bad habit whenever she felt indignant – Rosenrot forced herself to unclench her jaw. A loud thud yanked her attention away from her frustration over her tied hands when it came to Martha Oak. The noise had come from some shadowy, hidden nook of the shop. Rosenrot narrowed her eyes, but she could barely make anything out. In fact, visibility was poor in general. The only light came from the sun streaming in through the shop window behind her.

Then something clattered, and a raven let out a startled croak. Rosenrot swallowed down a sharp curse. Shit, she had completely forgotten about that pesky raven. Well, not forgotten. She had deliberately pushed him out of her memories, because the witch’s soul companion was just as insufferable as Martha Oak herself.

“Master Oak! Be careful!” the bird squawked through the dim shop, while Rosenrot shook her head. Unbelievable. Once again, she wondered how these two idiots managed to find the most dangerous artefacts and still come out alive. The latest rumour she’d heard

claimed that the witch had survived a bite from an Alp – death curse and all. Of course, she had. Martha Oak was like a cockroach, and Rosenrot had the overwhelming urge to crush her under her fine boots.

A glint caught her attention, and she spotted a large, golden pair of scissors mounted on one of the shelves against the wall. Narrowing her eyes suspiciously, she studied the blades. Was that dried blood? And why did these scissors look so familiar?

“Master Oak, this is the worst hiding place you’ve ever chosen. That’s where you keep the troll tee—”

“Ra-Ra! Shut your beak!” a woman’s voice hissed, followed by another loud thump.

“This isn’t a better hiding place either, Master Oak.”

“RA-RA! Shut it now!”

Rosenrot clicked her tongue in disapproval. *Troll teeth*? Where the hell had Oak gotten those? There were hardly any trolls left, and if they still existed, they lived hidden away in some remote mountain ranges – except for Henrietta, of course. The cook at the Old Bulldog and night watch of the Midnight Cemetery. She was already under the Fairytale Police’s watchful eye, given how much time she spent with the witch. Rosenrot made a mental note to go over Henrietta’s files more thoroughly.

“I’m not here because of your illegal ingredients, Oak,” Rosenrot called into the shop.

There was silence for a moment before a shrill, accusatory voice echoed through the shelves: “Why didn’t you tell me Rosenrot is standing in our shop!?”

With satisfaction, Rosenrot caught the tremor of fear in the raven’s voice.

“Our shop?” the woman’s voice interjected just as a raven suddenly shot out from the shadows. So suddenly, in fact, that Rosenrot’s body tensed on instinct, ready for a fight. Her fingers curled into fists, her knuckles cracking in response.

“Police Director Rosenrot, what an honour to see you!”

“This visit has nothing to do with honour,” Rosenrot shot back, watching as the witch stumbled after the raven.

She was wearing ripped jeans and a black shirt with a full moon printed on it. Her short white hair stuck out wildly – much wilder than usual. Her pale skin stood in stark contrast to the tattoos winding up from her wrists and disappearing beneath her shirt. Both arms were covered in an identical pattern of poppies, rosemary, runes, and skulls, which undoubtedly held some kind of enchantments. Rosenrot just hadn’t figured out which kind yet.

Meanwhile, the raven landed on a shelf directly beneath the large pair of scissors and gave a respectful nod. Rosenrot noted that he had chosen a spot close enough to talk to her but far enough to stay out of immediate reach. Smart.

“Apologies for my master’s manners. We weren’t expecting company.”

“Clearly.”

“Nice leather jacket, Rosi! Looks good on you,” Martha Oak chirped with a wide grin.

Rosenrot tensed her fingers, still clenched into fists, causing her knuckles to crack loudly. That was enough to make Martha freeze in place. With quiet satisfaction, Rosenrot noted the way the witch’s body instinctively stiffened.

“I’m not here for small talk, Oak,” Rosenrot said, her face unreadable. Then, in a deliberately calm voice, she added, “And call me *Rosi* one more time, and I’ll break every single one of your fingers.”

Martha crossed her tattooed arms over her chest, and despite the threat, the witch had the audacity to flash Rosenrot a mischievous grin. Rosenrot would have loved nothing more than to punch that grin right off her face.

“I figured this wasn’t a friendly visit,” Martha said with a wink. Rosenrot’s fist twitched, but Martha kept babbling undeterred. “And judging by that grumpy but rather pretty face of yours, I’d wager that the great and mighty Police Director needs my humble assistance.”

“Don’t flatter yourself, Oak. If there were anyone else with your abilities, I wouldn’t be here.”

Martha let out an impressed whistle and turned to her raven, who was watching the conversation with obvious distress.

“Did you hear that, Ra-Ra? Rosenrot says I have invaluable talents!”

Rosenrot ignored Martha’s remark and the frustration curling into a tight knot in her stomach. Oh, how she despised talking to this insufferable witch!

“I need you to get me some mermaid pearls,” Rosenrot declared, putting on her most severe expression.

Martha’s cocky grin vanished. Instead, her violet eyes widened, and Rosenrot could have sworn she went a shade paler. *Interesting*. Even the raven fluffed up his feathers in alarm. *Even more interesting*.

“Why do you need mermaid pearls?” Martha finally asked. The mischief had drained from her gaze, replaced by a healthy dose of suspicion. The witch who hoarded illegal ingredients and dangerous artefacts in her shop had *ethical concerns* when it came to mermaid pearls?

How very interesting indeed.

“Irrelevant,” Rosenrot replied and was about to continue, but Martha cut her off.

“Not for me. If the Fairytale Police wants one of the most dangerous drugs on the market, I need a reason.”

Martha held her gaze firmly. Rosenrot had never seen the witch this serious before. It unsettled her. Was the problem really the drugs, or was it the mermaids?

“The only reason you need to know is that I won’t shut down your shop and clear it out from top to bottom. I strongly doubt that troll teeth are your only problem.”

Martha let out a loud sigh. “Always with the threats. And here I was, certain that I would understand the truth. You know you can talk to me about anything, anytime.”

“How soon can you get me mermaid pearls?” Rosenrot asked, forcing herself not to sound snappy.

Martha leaned against a shelf that creaked dangerously. Thoughtfully, she looked up at her raven, who returned her gaze. Rosenrot had the distinct feeling that the two were communicating silently.

“It could take a while,” Martha finally answered. “My contact for... such requests is currently occupied with other things. But I’m sure if you throw in a bit of gold, then—”

“I need the pearls by tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?!” Martha’s voice had jumped an octave.

Rosenrot nodded, closely observing Martha’s reaction.

“Whoa, okay. But—”

“I don’t care how you get the pearls, Oak. As long as I have them by tomorrow. You have free rein. My officers will look the other way, no matter what you have to do.”

Martha studied Rosenrot, her dark eyebrows knitting together. Rosenrot could see the gears turning in the witch’s head. Fine lines creased her otherwise smooth skin, revealing that, despite her youthful appearance, Martha was older. Much older. Unfortunately, Rosenrot didn’t know exactly how old. Rumour had it that Martha Oak had been born during the European witch hunts. Back then, though, she had gone by a different name. That was all Rosenrot knew. For now.

“Why don’t you ask the mermaids directly?” Martha’s voice pulled Rosenrot from her thoughts. Their eyes met, both studying each other with equal curiosity. *Careful, Rosenrot.*

“That’s not an option.”

“I see... actually, I don’t see at all. But I suppose that doesn’t matter, according to you.”

Rosenrot could tell that Martha was offended, but that wasn’t her problem.

“And I need your witch’s oath that you won’t tell anyone I asked you to get the mermaid pearls.”

“You do realise you’re asking for a lot, Police Director,” the raven

suddenly chimed in. Rosenrot's gaze flicked toward the feathered nuisance.

Martha nodded in agreement. "What do we get in return?"

"How much gold do you want?" Rosenrot asked, disliking the way Martha took a step closer. The witch was a full head shorter than her, and Rosenrot knew she could break every bone in her body before Martha could even utter a spell. And yet, the witch looked up at her without a trace of fear.

As much as Rosenrot hated to admit it, she had always admired Martha's fearlessness. Secretly, of course. Just like she secretly admired the mysterious depth of those violet eyes, which were now locked onto hers, promising tantalising riddles to unravel. Rosenrot forced herself not to glance at Martha's lips as they curled into a lopsided smile.

"I want Jacob's book," Martha said. "The first edition. The one with his personal notes."

Rosenrot's face betrayed her. That didn't happen often. In fact, it never happened. She stared at Martha, stunned. How the hell did this damn witch know that the Fairytale Police had *that* book? That information was top secret! So secret that, besides Rosenrot, only three other beings even knew of its existence.

"Absolutely not!" The words burst out before Rosenrot could stop them, and she instantly regretted it. Martha took a step back, raising an eyebrow. The sudden withdrawal of her closeness scratched at Rosenrot's heart as she watched the insolent witch turn to her raven.

"Ha! See? I knew the Fairytale Police had it."

Rosenrot nearly smacked herself in the forehead. How could she make such a rookie mistake?! Of course, the witch hadn't known. She had thrown out bait, and Rosenrot had swallowed it like a gullible Prince Charming. Grinding her teeth, Rosenrot once again wondered why, of all people, Martha Oak found it so damn easy to break through her defences. A mischievous glint in her eyes, a lopsided grin. Sometimes, that was all it took for cracks to form in Rosenrot's otherwise impenetrable armour. She didn't even want to think about the conse-

quences of Martha knowing that Jacob's book was hidden away by the Fairytale Police. Her stomach clenched, nausea creeping up her throat. That could cost her her job.

"That's impossible. Pick another price."

"How about a copy? It doesn't have to be the original."

Rosenrot shot Martha such a dark look that the witch immediately raised her hands in mock surrender, quickly adding, "Okay, I get it. You don't want anyone reading Jacob's notes. But what if I give you another witch's oath? One that guarantees the book stays locked away in my secret collection, with no access for anyone as long as I live?"

Martha leaned back against the creaking shelf, stuffing her hands into her pockets with exaggerated nonchalance while flashing Rosenrot a broad grin.

"If that's still not an option, then I guess you'll just have to raid my shop. But that might take a while before you find every last little hiding spot. And – just a friendly heads-up – that could cost you a few officers. I've got a couple of artefacts in here that get... cranky when touched." Martha nodded toward one of the many dark, mysterious corners of the shop. "Best start over there. That's where I keep the really hot stuff."

She winked at her with a wicked glint in her eyes.

By Grimm's fairytales, Rosenrot hated this witch.

Rosenrot studied Martha intently, ignoring the hammering in her chest. She knew witches couldn't break their oaths. Their words were sealed with magic, etched into their very souls, and if they broke them, they would die – a slow, agonising death. Rosenrot had witnessed it once before, and it had been brutal. Even by her standards.

As much as she wanted to deny Martha the book, she needed those damn mermaid pearls even more. The only good thing about this mess was that Rosenrot now knew just how badly Martha wanted the book. She was willing to risk her beloved shop for it.

For a moment, Rosenrot considered calling her bluff. She had been itching to tear this place apart for ages, starting with that bizarre over-

sized pair of scissors. But orders were orders. Just as Martha was bound by her witch's oath, Rosenrot was bound by duty. Her lips pressed into a thin line, jaw tightening as she came to the conclusion she hated most: she had no choice. That was what she despised more than anything. It felt as if the cage that defined her life was closing in again.

Once more, she was the prisoner, desperate to escape before reality forced her to swallow the bitter truth. There was no way out. Just like so many other fairytale creatures, she was trapped by fate.

At least one thing was clear: the witch was far more motivated when she was offered something she truly desired. Just as obvious was the fact that Rosenrot was running out of time. She couldn't afford any delays. Forcing herself to unclench her muscles, she met Martha's curious gaze with a cold, unreadable expression.

A small consolation was that she could still arrest the witch once she had the pearls. Or make her quietly disappear. There were loopholes in every agreement, and Rosenrot was more than skilled at finding them. Still, the next words felt heavy on her tongue as she cracked her fingers in warning.

"Fine. But don't you dare try to trick me, Oak."

CHAPTER 2

MARTHA



Martha looked up at the two majestic towers of the Frauenkirche. The greenish, rounded domes shimmered in the midday sun, making her squint against the glare. Heat pricked at her face, searing across her skin. She quickly adjusted her coat, and a cooling ripple of magic washed over her body. Checking the protective talisman around her neck once more, she was satisfied to find that the humans gathered under the shady trees in front of the church took no notice of her. Even those who passed right by didn't spare her so much as a glance.

But then again, hardly anyone paid attention to a seventy-year-old woman.

After several experiments, Martha had discovered that the appearance of an elderly lady in unremarkable, old-fashioned clothing attracted the least attention. Old women were the ghosts of society. No one ever truly saw them.

Martha observed the humans around her. Most of them were glued to their smartphones anyway. Sometimes she wondered if she

even needed the talisman anymore, considering how utterly dependent humans were on their miniature computers.

Of course, she understood the advantages and the appeal of having such a powerful little miracle machine at one's fingertips. However, technology interfered with magic. Well, not directly, but it made spell casting more strenuous, more sluggish. It was like trying to swim through jelly. Not that Martha had any actual experience with that, but that was how she imagined it.

"Master Oak!" Ra-Ra croaked, panting as he hopped frantically back and forth at her feet. "Might I...," he wheezed, fanning himself with his wings like an aristocratic lady with a fan, "...suggest that this is... a stupid idea?"

"That goes without saying."

Martha marched towards the grand, ornamented gate of the Frauenkirche. It was unbelievable how, despite the heat, swarms of tourists still flocked to the site. Didn't they have anything better to do? What was so fascinating about places of Christian worship anyway? Germany had far too many of them as it was. It was an infestation, a testament to how deeply Christianity had embedded itself into the country's culture.

"You're agreeing with me and doing it anyway?!"

Martha glanced down at the raven. Ra-Ra hopped agitatedly beside her, carefully avoiding keeping his claws on the scorching asphalt for too long. He lifted his beak into the air like a schoolmaster brandishing a pointing stick.

"Don't worry, I'll keep a better eye on you this time," the witch assured him, scooping the chattering raven up from the ground.

"Master Oak! Of course, it was highly frustrating that I was nearly sold off to a foul-smelling hamster with gold teeth last time, but that's not what I meant by a stupid idea!"

Martha placed Ra-Ra on her shoulder and snapped her fingers in front of him. The moon mark on her neck itched as magic tugged at it. A moment later, a golden shimmering thread of energy wove itself from her neck to Ra-Ra's chest. It was a visible soul bond, making it

clear that Ra-Ra was her soul companion and not just a talking animal up for sale.

“Well, I must admit, the soul bond puts me a little at ease. Thank you. But are you absolutely sure you want to go to the *Schiachten* Market, Master Oak?”

Martha patted Ra-Ra’s chest feathers. Relief trickled through her body as she stepped into the shadow cast by the church. The sun disappeared behind the towers, and somehow, Martha found it poetically ironic that she was turning away from the light and walking into darkness – through a gate that promised humans the forgiveness of their sins, no less. She smirked to herself before realising that Ra-Ra was still watching her expectantly.

“Just stay on my shoulder, Ra-Ra. I’ll handle the rest.”

“That’s exactly what worries me, Master Oak.”

Martha merely grinned and pushed open the heavy entrance door, greeted by a rush of cool air tinged with traces of incense and hushed whispers. The moment the witch stepped over the threshold, her skin began to itch. Consecrated ground was, of course, to be expected in churches, but in the Frauenkirche, the reaction was somewhat milder – at least in the entrance hall. She had never ventured any further. But why would she?

The only reason to visit the Frauenkirche was the fact that one of the many strictly hidden entrances to the *Schiachten* Market was concealed within its walls. Martha found it rather amusing that the villains of fairytales and myths had decided to place the entrance to the black market inside a church. That was either brilliant or audacious. Or perhaps just a little bit foolish.

Martha glanced around briefly and spotted a group of tourists gathered around something, snapping excited photos. Oh, for fuck’s sake. Casually, she strolled towards the group, hands tucked into the pockets of her coat.

“This is an omen, Master Oak,” Ra-Ra remarked in a grave tone, though a faint tremor of fear laced his voice.

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic.”

“How can you be sure it isn’t? Your gift of prophecy is just as dreadful as your storm magic.”

“First of all: Ouch. Second: Omens can’t appear on consecrated ground or in Christian churches.”

Martha noticed how Ra-Ra clamped his beak shut and avoided eye contact.

“Ah,” she mused, smirking. “You thought I didn’t know that. Or that I’d forgotten again, didn’t you?”

Ra-Ra said nothing, but guilt clouded his eyes. For a brief moment, anger flared within Martha. He had tried to trick her. But she knew he only meant well. His constant worry for her always drove him to protect her, even from herself. Admittedly, that was understandable, given everything they had been through.

The real problem, however, was that Martha wanted to leave the past behind. Ra-Ra, on the other hand, refused to let go.

“That’s about the only thing I still remember about omens,” Martha remarked with a smirk, hoping to ease the tension between them. “Had you tried that trick somewhere else, I might have actually fallen for it.”

Ra-Ra tilted his head towards her, his eyes glinting. Martha knew her soul companion well enough to recognise that he felt flattered. After a quick wink, she turned her attention back to the tourists. Some of them whispered to each other as they wandered further into the church, while three remained behind, taking turns posing inside a footprint embedded in the floor. Martha watched as they pulled ridiculous faces for their photos.

And why exactly were fairytales and mythical creatures hiding from these humans again?

Well, the question wasn’t entirely fair or accurate. There had been a time when fairytales and myths had been woven into the everyday lives of humans. Humans, witches, and creatures had once coexisted. But even for Martha, those were only fleeting shadows of memories, before the hunts had begun and drowned their peaceful existence in blood.

“Do you think they know that’s supposed to be the Devil’s footprint?” Martha asked, trying to distract herself. She didn’t want to mourn a past that had long been forgotten.

“I assume so. Why else would they take such ridiculous photographs?”

Martha noticed Ra-Ra relaxing on her shoulder. After what felt like an eternity, the small group finally moved on – only for a new wave of excited tourists, phones at the ready, to take their place.

“Hecate, stand by me,” Martha muttered and snapped her fingers. Magic flared up within her soul. A strained sound escaped her lips as the power squeezed its way out of her. Yep, this had to be what it felt like to crawl through jelly – or to wade through knee-deep marshland. That, at least, was an experience Martha had already endured, and she wouldn’t recommend it. Especially not when being chased by a bog monster. She had only escaped back then by flooding herself with new moon water, raising bog corpses to attack the creature. The memory sent a shiver down her spine.

At last, her magic broke free, and a gust of wind swept through the entrance hall. With a resounding boom, the door slammed shut, making the tourists flinch in shock. A wave of unease washed over them, and the murmuring grew louder.

“Ha! So much for my storm magic being rubbish! That was a perfect gust of wind,” Martha muttered more to herself than to Ra-Ra. The raven merely tilted his head, unimpressed, and – *surprisingly* – held back any unnecessary remarks.

Meanwhile, Martha hurried toward the famous *Devil’s Footprint*. A Munich legend claimed that this was where the Devil himself had once entered the church. He had sought to sabotage its construction, but the builders had outwitted him by sanctifying the ground in advance. Enraged, he had stomped his foot, leaving behind the ominous mark in the stone. Other versions of the legend spoke of an architect who had made a pact with the Devil to complete the church. As was often the case, there was likely a sliver of truth in every myth.

Martha swiftly placed her boot into the dark footprint, and a

shiver ran down her spine. Silently, she requested entry, sending her magic through the Devil's Footprint. Ra-Ra's nervous talons dug into her shoulder, prompting her to glance back. The tourists were already approaching. This was going to be close.

WHAT IS MY NAME? whispered an undefinable voice in her thoughts, burning like smoke in her lungs. Martha forced herself not to recoil, even though her entire body screamed in alarm as a menacing presence drifted through her consciousness. Tempting and lustful promises brushed against her soul, likely dragging her straight to hell if she gave in to them.

RUMPELSTILTSKIN, Martha sent the answer to the voice, which let out an outraged scream in response. Her ears rang sharply, but before she could react in any way, she already felt the pull.

"I hate what comes next," Ra-Ra wailed, pressing himself closer to her just before they were sucked into the footprint.

This must be what it felt like to get sucked into a vacuum cleaner, Martha thought.

She reflexively held her breath until, an unpleasant moment later, she stumbled into a large, old-fashioned gymnasium. Her skull hummed, and for a moment, all sounds around her were muffled. Her skin itched horribly, and she felt an overwhelming urge to take a cold shower. Panting, Martha braced her hands against her thighs, forcing her fluttering heart to calm down. Ra-Ra shook out his feathers, the tips scratching against her neck.

"By the holy spirits, I hate this. Just look at my precious feathers! They're all messy now."

Ra-Ra began vigorously preening his feathers while Martha slowly and laboriously straightened up. Her vision finally started to clear. In front of her, a lively bustle of devilish grimaces, shaggy fur, murderous eyes, silky garments, and animalistic sounds filled the space. Sounds that resembled someone or something being skinned alive.

Yep, that sounded familiar – just like the *Schiachten* Market.

Martha felt relieved. One could never be entirely sure if they'd actually end up at the legendary *Schiachten* Market or somewhere

else entirely. The market itself always reminded her of one of those massive, bustling flea markets humans were so fond of. Hundreds of tables stood crammed together while merchants peddled their bizarre, obscene, and dangerous wares. The scent of exotic spices mingled with sulfur and burnt oil, blending with unsettling animal sounds and the delicate chime of a music box. Martha's senses were overwhelmed by the sheer variety of impressions, smells, and noises.

"Look at the moon, Master Oak," Ra-Ra's soft yet firm voice cut through the chaos.

Martha lifted her gaze to the high windows, revealing the deepest night beyond. Stars and two half-moons, turned away from each other, glittered against the darkness. The sight of the moon – or rather, the two celestial bodies that very much looked like moons – calmed her, grounding her from within.

No one knew exactly where the *Schiachten* Market was located. Some speculated that it was anchored in the In-Between Worlds, making it impossible for the Fairytale Police to track down.

For now.

Martha knew that Rosenrot was hunting the *Schiachten* Market like a relentless bulldog, and sooner or later, she would bring it down. No one doubted that she would succeed. It was only a matter of time. The woman with the ice-blue eyes was ruthless, unpredictable, and terrifyingly ambitious. If she weren't the police director, she'd probably be the merciless queen of the *Schiachten* Market instead. Martha shuddered at the thought.



The Schiachten Market is not for the faint-hearted.

*The wildest creatures cavort here and, of all things, the very people that
Martha has been successfully avoiding for centuries.*

To spare your nerves, I've left out a few particularly hair-raising details.

If you're brave enough, grab the full version.



“There’s Ida,” Martha said, pointing to the end of the row of tables. There stood a broad corner table, covered with various baskets filled with different kinds of fruit. As she got closer, she noticed small handwritten signs in delicate script explaining the effects of each fruit. From classics like *Death-Sleep Apples* to exotic novelties like *Cancer Cherries*, the selection had everything a poison-loving witch’s heart could desire.

Martha stepped up to the table, keeping her hands buried in her coat pockets to avoid the foolish temptation of touching one of the enticing fruits. She had made that mistake once before and ended up with a dreadful rash that lasted for weeks. Sometimes, she actually learned from her mistakes, though Ra-Ra always claimed otherwise.

“You’ve really expanded your selection, Ida. *Malaria Mango*? Seriously?” Martha admired the diverse assortment of fruits and produce.

“They’re quite popular at the moment,” Ida replied dryly, eyeing Martha with boredom. Her pale skin was covered in burn scars, which she had done her best to conceal with makeup. Her sleek black hair was styled into two buns perched on either side of her narrow head, resembling bear ears. Her green eyes were lined with heavy black eyeliner and so much mascara that Martha wondered how it all stayed in place without smudging. Probably magic.

Ida only ever wore black. Ever since Martha had known her, the evil stepmother had been in her goth phase. Silver chains and bracelets adorned with skulls and tiny daggers jingled as she leaned forward, raising her thinly plucked eyebrows.

“What do I owe the honour of a visit from the infamous moon witch, Martha Oak?”

Ida’s voice dripped with venomous sarcasm. Martha flashed a cheeky grin, ignoring the instinct to threaten Ida with her necromancy. Threats wouldn’t get her far – not with the poison witch, who would probably enjoy witnessing her organs slowly wither away. The better tactic with Ida was to charm her into a conversation.

“Infamous? Where’s that coming from?”

"Certainly not from me. I can think of far better words to describe you."

Martha studied Ida, unable to tell from her indifferent expression whether that was meant as a threat or a compliment. Then she felt Ra-Ra's claws twitching uneasily against her shoulder.

"I need... mermaid pearls."

Ida's eyes widened before she gave Martha a sceptical look. "Seriously? I thought drugs weren't your thing."

"They're not for me."

"I see." Ida gestured toward one of the crisp, red apples with her fishnet-gloved fingers. "Why not go for the classic? Always works when some fairytale bimbo gets on your ovaries. And it's a lot cleaner than turning someone into a drug addict. Unless, of course, you're into slow, agonising deaths." Ida leaned in closer, lowering her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "In that case, I do have something for you."

Her bony, black-polished finger traced a slow circle over a basket labeled *Dementia Dates*. Out of the corner of her eye, Martha noticed Ra-Ra staring at the evil stepmother in shock. His eyes were wide open, and his beak hung agape. His small, moral heart was probably on the verge of stopping altogether.

"As tempting as that sounds," Martha said, "but do you have any mermaid pearls?"

Ida leaned back in her folding chair, crossing her bony, scarred arms over her chest. The burn marks that covered her face extended across the rest of her skin. Most of it was hidden beneath her mesh gloves, but Martha still saw far too many scars. She had once tried to ask Ida about them, but ever since, the goth witch had kept her distance. Ida's gaze turned wary, skeptical. Martha knew better than to underestimate her. She wasn't just cursed with knowledge of poisons, she had a razor-sharp mind to match.

"Who's your client?"

"I can't tell you that."

Ida crossed one leg over the other, her eyebrows shooting up, carving little worry lines into her forehead.

"It's the Bonebreaker, isn't it?"

Martha knew that Ida was referring to Rosenrot. As always, her reputation preceded her, and on the *Schiachten* Market, she was despised. Probably because there wasn't a single creature here that hadn't ended up in Rosenrot's bone-breaking fingers at some point.

"Pff, as if I'd ever work with that bitch," Martha shot back indignantly, making an effort to look as offended as possible.

Ida's probing gaze bored into her.

"Do you have mermaid pearls or not?" Martha asked when Ida remained silent for a while. Suddenly, the goth witch burst into raucous laughter. It sounded like a hyena choking on something. And it drew all the attention to them, making Ra-Ra even more nervous. Martha could feel his trembling feathers against her neck.

"Are you fucking with me, moon witch?"

"No," Martha replied, confused, forcing herself to stay calm. Ida wiped tears from her eyes without smudging her makeup. Yeah, that had to be a spell.

"You are so fucked."

"Why?"

"There haven't been any mermaid pearls for months now."

"What? Why?"

"Oh, shit, you really don't know?" Ida snickered. "The mermaids stopped giving them out. No one knows why. The supply just... stopped."

"*Scheiße!*" Martha couldn't stop herself from cursing. Ida examined her nails as if the conversation bored her to death. "You could say that. Ever since good old Captain left Munich, the mermaids have withdrawn."

"Seriously? So that means you can't even talk to them anymore?"

"You can try, like all the fools before you who then suddenly vanished without a trace," Ida cackled. Her eyes gleamed with wicked amusement. "Guess you'll have to tell your mysterious client that *she* won't be getting any pearls after all."

Now Martha understood why Rosenrot had come to her. But if

even the *Schiachten* Market couldn't get its hands on mermaid pearls, how the hell was she supposed to?

Fuck, this was a huge problem. Sure, she could go straight to the source, but mermaids were unpredictable and dangerous. So far, only one person had ever been allowed to negotiate with them: Captain Störtebekker, who was off sailing somewhere in the world and completely out of reach. Fantastic. Just when Martha finally had a chance to cash in the favour that headless scoundrel owed her. Of course, he was nowhere to be found!

"I've heard rumours, moon witch," Ida whispered, catching Martha's attention. She looked at the goth witch. Worry flickered in her green eyes. Or was it fear?

"Rumours of experiments," Ida whispered conspiratorially, suppressing a shudder.

"Experiments?" Martha pressed, noticing how Ra-Ra leaned in curiously.

"For fuck's sake, you really don't hear a damn thing, do you? You should leave your little shop more often."

Ouch. That stung more than Martha was willing to admit.

"Get to the point, Ida."

Ida's nervous gaze briefly scanned the surroundings before settling on Martha. Her words were barely more than a foreboding whisper when she finally said, "Rumour has it that fairytale creatures are being experimented on in the Wallgraben."

That revelation sent a shock wave through Martha, though she kept up her carefree facade while worry tightened around her heart.

"Experiments? That sounds rather vague. Do you at least know why?"

Ida shrugged. "No one knows for sure. But why do you think the FTP bitch suddenly needs mermaid pearls? Certainly not to get high so she can tolerate those polished princes." She let out a scornful laugh and shook her head. "I'm telling you, Oak. Some real nasty shit is going down, and we don't even know the half of it."

Fear flickered in Ida's intense gaze, sending a chill down Martha's

spine. If even the evil stepmother, who handed out Dementia Dates as casually as chocolates, was scared, then it was probably more than just rumours. Besides, Ida wasn't the type to listen to every bit of gossip.

"How do you know that the Fairytale Police need mermaid pearls?" Martha pressed, alarm bells ringing in her mind. Under no circumstances could she reveal that she was currently working for them. In general, announcing such a thing in a market filled with Rosenrot's enemies – who were all probably thirsting for revenge – was a terrible idea. By Hecate's hounds, if anyone here found out about her collaboration with Rosenrot, she wouldn't make it out alive.

Ida tilted her head. Cunning flashed in her eyes. Martha knew she was watching her facial expressions like a hawk watching its prey. One wrong move, one strange twitch, and Ida would be certain that Martha was looking for the pearls on Rosenrot's behalf. Fuck.

"Well, the Bonebreaker tried to smuggle one of her officers in here," Ida said in a casual tone that made Martha uneasy.

"Oh, come on. That's ridiculous," the witch dismissed with a wave of her hand. Ida smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. It was cold, calculating.

"That's what we thought, too ... until we caught one. Two days ago."

Martha didn't really want to know, yet she still found herself asking, "And what did you do with them?"

Ida shrugged indifferently. "We sent the pig back to that bitch. Well, just the head, of course. Without the eyes and tongue."

Ra-Ra gasped in shock, his claws digging deep into Martha's shoulder.

"How considerate," Martha remarked dryly, inwardly cursing Rosenrot for conveniently leaving out that little detail. Instead, the bitch had let her walk straight into a trap, completely unaware. Anger twisted her stomach into knots, and she bit the inside of her cheek to stop herself from cursing out the police director aloud. But she had no desire to lose her head. Living without one just wasn't her style.

Ida plucked a juicy strawberry from a small basket labeled *Ebola Strawberries*. She popped it into her mouth and ate it without so much as batting an eye. The moment she swallowed, a shudder ran through her body. Her pale skin flushed a deep red, and the whites of her eyes turned bloodshot – just like her lips. Martha nearly dropped her jaw in shock.

“The holy spirits protect us!” Ra-Ra whispered, his unease radiating onto Martha as she stared at Ida. Had she really just eaten an Ebola Strawberry?

“Are you planning to keep gawking, witch? If you're not buying anything, get your ass away from my stall. You're scaring off my customers.”

Martha took a step back, watching as Ida's skin slowly returned to its normal colour. However, her eyes remained bloodshot. She had to remind herself that, despite everything, Ida was still the most reasonable and approachable creature on the *Schiachten* Market. Forcing a friendly smile, Martha kept her hands in her coat pockets, her fingers instinctively pressing together, ready to snap and hurl her magic at the goth witch's pierced ears if necessary. Sure, she appreciated Ida and her knowledge, but that didn't mean she trusted her.

“Thanks, Ida. I'll try my luck elsewhere. Have a poisonous day.”

“Yeah, yeah. Now piss off before I spit the rest of my strawberry in your face.”

“Thanks for the offer, but that's not really my kink,” Martha winked at Ida, who just snorted in response.

“Suit yourself, prude moon witch.”

Martha hurriedly left the stall, her hands clenching into fists and her brows drawing tightly together. Her thoughts were racing. She had come here believing it would be child's play to get a few mermaid pearls. After all, they were a popular drug among many fairytale creatures. Only mermaid pearls were strong enough to cloud their senses, granting them a fleeting moment of peace. Humans turned to alcohol; fairytale beings turned to pearls.

Though the comparison was flawed. Mermaid pearls were

instantly addictive. Martha knew far too many junkies who would do anything to get their hands on one. And if they didn't get their next fix, they lost their minds. Their sanity shattered, leaving them as little more than drooling, brainless husks cowering in a corner. It was a cruel fate.

For a brief moment, Martha wondered what had happened to all the addicts now that there had been no mermaid pearls for months. Had they all broken under the withdrawal? Or had the fairytale police swept them off the streets to cover it up?

By Hecate, she really hadn't noticed a thing! She should leave her shop more often.

"What do we do now, Master Oak?" Ra-Ra whispered into her ear.

Martha pushed aside her inner turmoil. She had a job to do, after all. But how was she supposed to get her hands on those damned pearls by tomorrow if the mermaids weren't giving out any? Were they even still producing them? And what if they weren't?

"How much do you know about mermaids, Ra-Ra?" Martha asked, keeping her head down as she followed the flow of visitors.

"To my great shame, I must confess that I know very little about the river creatures."

"Scheiße."

"I wouldn't have put it so vulgarly, but that sums it up quite well."

"Then it's time we learn more about those fish monsters."

Ra-Ra fluffed up his feathers excitedly and puffed out his chest. "Oh! How wonderful! Good thing I got us tea and biscuits, Master Oak!"

Martha held back a sarcastic remark. Only her soul companion could be this thrilled about dry, boring research.

CHAPTER 3

ROSENROT



*The insight into Rosenrot's world – especially into the fairytale police force –
is strictly confidential!*

*The police director doesn't trust anyone and doesn't like to show what she's
thinking and going through.*

If you want to gain her trust, then get the full version.



This chapter was confiscated by the fairytale police.

CHAPTER 4

MARTHA



The cool stone pressed against Martha's back. A welcome contrast to the heat making the air shimmer. Even though it was already late afternoon, it was still unbearably hot. Even here, in the shade of the massive stone statue with the charming graffiti, the heat was relentless. If not for the magic woven into her coat, she might have collapsed, panting and drenched in sweat. Instead, it sent a constant, cooling breeze over her skin. Unfortunately, that only helped the parts of her body actually covered by the coat. With an impatient swipe of her hand, Martha wiped away a bead of sweat creeping down from her hairline, dangerously close to dripping into her left eye.

Oh, how she hated summer.

Days like this were meant for retreating into her cool, beloved shop – not for roasting in the sun like a bratwurst on a grill. The distant rush of the Isar reached Martha's ears, offering a small measure of relief. With a sigh, she leaned her head against the statue's pedestal and gazed up at the half-naked woman carved from stone.

One hand held a cluster of grapes, while she lounged lazily across the broad stone bench. Her expressionless face was turned toward the Luitpold Bridge, where the occasional lost car rumbled past. Martha wished she could be sprawled just as comfortably in her reading chair, snacking on grapes.

But instead, she was here. Waiting. For none other than the police director herself. Seeing Rosenrot twice in one day was hardly Martha's idea of fun. But she needed her for what she had planned. Unfortunately. The witch wished there were another way to pull this off. One that wasn't quite so illegal. Or dangerous. Involving the police director was, of course, incredibly stupid. At least, that's what Ra-Ra had grumbled about nonstop since they'd left the shop.

Martha nervously chewed on her lower lip while the raven paced impatiently back and forth in front of her boots. Deep down, she hoped Rosenrot would come to her senses and grant her more time. Then she might be able to find another way. One that didn't require forbidden magic. Not that Martha minded. But she needed Rosenrot for this, and that was, to put it mildly, absolutely shitty. She might as well turn herself in right away.

Fuck, she could already picture the gleeful sparkle in Rosenrot's eyes when she finally got to slap the cuffs on her. Of course, the witch knew that Rosenrot had been trying to put her behind bars for years. That was no secret.

And now you are finally giving her the chance to do it if you aren't careful, Martha thought bitterly. She rubbed her fingers over her forehead as she felt the onset of a headache. Damn it. When Ra-Ra's scratching claws suddenly fell silent, Martha glanced down at her soul companion. His beak jutted challengingly into the air like a duelling rapier as he locked eyes with her.

"You have not entered into a binding contract with the police director, Master Oak," he stated, with an undertone that suggested he had just stumbled upon a profoundly important realisation. Martha raised an eyebrow and gave the raven a stern look.

"Ra-Ra, we're going through with this. Like always."

Ra-Ra opened his beak. The gleam in his eyes was an unmistakable sign that he had several fiery arguments ready on his tongue, all primed to vehemently contradict Martha. She immediately raised a warning finger.

“Don’t you dare drag me into one of your philosophical debates! I really don’t have the patience for that right now. Focus your energy on our plan instead.”

Ra-Ra stared at her for a moment, his beak pressed so tightly shut that it began to tremble. But just when Martha thought he might explode, he took a deep breath. The trembling subsided, and he shot her the driest look she had ever received from him.

“You mean the plan where you not only intend to gamble with your soul and your life but also risk being thrown into the darkest cell of the Wallgraben forever?”

“Mmh, somehow, when you say it like that, it sounds like a really stupid plan.”

“Because it is, Master Oak! Do you really want to take that risk and provoke a war with the mermaids on top of it?”

“Oh, come on, don’t be so dramatic. If the mermaids catch us, they won’t immediately declare war. I mean, that would be a bit of an over-reaction, don’t you think?”

“You’re planning to bring their deceased...” Ra-Ra quickly lowered his agitated voice. “...queen back to life!”

Martha grimaced. Well, that was true.

“Master Oak...,” Ra-Ra tried again, his tone carefully measured, though his trembling feathers betrayed his anger. “...if you’re really going through with this, I have to ask once more: do you have a death wish? Are you not happy with your life, or why are you so eager to throw it away?”

Martha wiped the sweat from her forehead again. By the holy moon, she was so tired of arguing with Ra-Ra about this. Of course, she didn’t want to die. Why would she? She liked her life. For years now, she had a stable home she loved. She had formed friendships in Munich, and she had made it her mission to help others, because she

knew just how hard it could be to fend for oneself. Of course, she didn't want to give up this life. Never.

But then there was that tiny, annoying fact that Martha desperately wanted Jacob's book with his secret notes. She had been searching for it for centuries. She had turned over every stone, followed even the faintest leads, and taken countless risks. And yet, she had never been this close to her goal. Sure, now she knew that the fairytale police had it. She had suspected as much for a long time. But she had no idea where they were keeping it hidden. And chances were, she would never be able to get to that heavily guarded secret stash on her own. At least, not without causing massive destruction.

That's why she needed Rosenrot just as much as Rosenrot needed her.

For now.

In Ra-Ra's dark eyes, she saw her own stubborn reflection staring back at him. Her arms were crossed over her chest, her chin jutted out defiantly. Maybe she was being too relentless. Maybe she should listen to Ra-Ra and find another way to get her hands on the book. And maybe this wasn't bravery at all. Maybe it was sheer recklessness to strike a deal with the fairytale police.

But Martha just couldn't let it go. She wanted that book. She *had* to have it. No matter the cost.

"Ra-Ra, this is about Jacob's book," Martha finally said, letting her arms drop to her sides in exhaustion. Her forehead smoothed as she wiped away more sweat. She met the raven's irritated gaze and noticed the hardness in his eyes fade. Instead, the deep black filled with something else – understanding, maybe even sympathy.

"Is it really worth it, Master Oak?" he asked quietly.

Martha nodded just as she spotted Rosenrot striding toward them. Immediately, she plastered on a sly smile.

"Rosenrot, how wonderful of you to come."

Rosenrot stepped behind Ra-Ra, who glared up at the police director with the kind of grumpy disdain that suggested she was

personally responsible for all the world's misery. And, to be fair, she probably was for a good portion of it.

"Police Director Rosenrot, as always, it is an honour," Ra-Ra greeted her politely, though Martha could hear the underlying resentment. Rosenrot kept her gaze locked on Martha, her light brows arched, her expression radiating irritation. She clearly didn't want to be here. Same.

Martha eyed Rosenrot's open leather jacket, her hands stuffed into the pockets with deliberate nonchalance. Her red boots gleamed in the evening sun. Why wasn't the woman sweating? Had she woven magic into her clothes too?

"Why am I here, Oak?"

Rosenrot's eyes bored into Martha's, as if she were studying every flicker of reaction. Martha knew that many fairytale creatures had crumbled under that gaze, but she had faced far more dangerous monsters. It would take a lot more to shake her. Besides, she had discovered something useful. Rosenrot's armour had cracks, and flirting could wedge them wider. Not that Martha was into Rosenrot. By the holy moon, absolutely not!

But the fact that it threw Rosenrot off balance, that it made her strict façade waver, was incredibly useful. Maybe even vital for survival someday. So Martha flashed the police director a cheeky grin and replied in a teasing tone,

"Because I missed you."

Martha watched with delight as Rosenrot snorted in irritation and broke eye contact.

"What do you want, Oak? I assume we're not meeting here in broad daylight just so you can hand me the pearls. That would be stupid. Even for you."

Martha mirrored Rosenrot's stance, shoving her hands into her coat pockets and letting the words roll off her like water off a duck's back.

"Speaking of pearls. You could've told me the mermaids haven't given any out for months."

Rosenrot's eyes flicked toward her. Her expression hardened, her armour thickened.

"Interesting. Does that mean the *infamous* Moon Witch didn't know?"

Urgh. Why did everyone call her *infamous*? Where did that even come from?

Martha tilted her head slightly. "Drugs aren't really my thing. Unlike the fairytale police." She hesitated briefly before adding, "But what do I know? It's not like I experiment with them."

Something shifted in Rosenrot's eyes, like a brief flicker of darkness. Martha also noticed the slight twitch at the corners of her mouth. So, was it true? Was the fairytale police experimenting on creatures in the Wallgraben?

Martha narrowed her eyes, now studying Rosenrot's every reaction. But instead of confirming her suspicions, Rosenrot did something unexpected. The police director smirked and shook her head in amusement.

"Is that the rumour going around the *Schiachten* Market? Good to know."

Martha wasn't sure what to make of that reaction. Rosenrot seemed to notice her irritation because her smile turned smug. What a bitch.

"And apparently, even you couldn't get any pearls there. What a shame. I had hoped the merchants might be more forthcoming if..." Rosenrot eyed her critically. "...one of their own was asking."

Martha shrugged. "Nope, no luck. But a little warning would've been nice. I'd rather not have lost my head over it."

She noticed a fleeting flicker in Rosenrot's otherwise cold eyes, and fine lines appeared at their corners as she narrowed them slightly. It was barely more than a blink, but Martha knew exactly what emotion had cracked Rosenrot's armour. It was one she knew all too well herself: grief.

Curiosity sparked in Martha. Did the feared Bonebreaker actually have a heart?

“Spit it out, Oak. Why am I here?” Rosenrot’s voice was clipped. “I’m a busy woman. I don’t have time to prance around illegal markets or play with troll teeth.”

Martha took a deep breath, rolled back her shoulders, and then, with newfound seriousness, asked, “You’d do anything to get the pearls, wouldn’t you?”

Rosenrot hesitated.

“Any means necessary, right?” Martha added, her tone light and casual, even though she knew full well that what she was about to propose was utterly insane – and illegal. But first, she had to make sure there’d be no consequences for her.

“What are you planning, Oak?”

Martha grinned. “Let’s just say the magic I intend to use isn’t exactly within legal boundaries. And it comes with a price. One I can’t pay alone.”

Rosenrot studied her intently, as if trying to extract more details from her face. But Martha knew she wouldn’t get anything out of her. To Rosenrot, a stern expression might have been an impenetrable mask, but for Martha, it was her mischievous grin. Rosenrot tore her gaze away and looked up at the sky. Her jaw tightened.

“What exactly do you need?” Rosenrot asked after a while, each word seemingly dragged from her mouth with great effort. Martha thought she even heard a faint cracking sound. The sound of fingers tightening into fists. A sound that she, and most fairytale creatures, knew all too well. And it usually meant only one thing: trouble.

Martha’s grin widened just a fraction. “You,” she answered sweetly, adding a wicked wink for good measure. Rosenrot’s lips pressed together so tightly they turned white. Her jaw clenched, grinding with barely restrained fury. And not just that, her whole body tensed, as if she were sitting on needles. Maybe, just maybe, Martha had gone too far this time.

“What’s your plan?” Rosenrot finally forced out, her voice vibrating with controlled rage.

“Well, pray tell, Master Oak, what *is* your incredible plan?” Ra-Ra chimed in, only to shoot Martha a dry look.

That little, feathered bastard! Martha kept her focus on Rosenrot, who was watching her expectantly. Fuck.

“I was kinda hoping you’d say no and buy me more time?” Rosenrot raised her eyebrows in a way that felt like a threat “Okay, guess not. So, we’re *really* breaking the law to get the pearls then?” Rosenrot’s brows knitted together. Was it just Martha’s wild imagination, or had her eyes just darkened? The witch had a bad feeling that bones were about to break. So she quickly raised her hands playfully. “Hey, hey. I was just double-checking. *Maybe* we’d get some extra time and not have to risk our lives, you know?”

Martha made an elegant gesture, signalling Rosenrot to take the lead. Rosenrot huffed before setting off. Martha cast one last glance at Ra-Ra, who met her gaze with concern. And it wasn’t just worry for their lives they were recklessly endangering. It was the very real possibility that Rosenrot could arrest them at any moment. After all, they were about to commit a crime with the *police director*. Martha’s heart fluttered nervously at the thought.

Maybe Ra-Ra was right and she *had* gone completely suicidal.

Martha urgently needed something to use against Rosenrot. Something solid and binding, something the police director couldn’t easily wriggle out of. Her stomach twisted, a wave of nausea washing over her. She *wanted* to trust Rosenrot. She really did. But time and again, the woman had proven that she wouldn’t hesitate to lead Martha straight into a trap. And if things went south, Martha’s head would undoubtedly be the next to roll.

She rubbed her neck, tracing the slight ridge of the moon mark on her skin. Absentmindedly, her finger followed the curve of the crescent as she watched Rosenrot turn back toward her, impatience written all over her face. Snapping out of her daze, Martha hurried to catch up.

“What do you know about mermaids?” Martha asked as she caught

up with Rosenrot, who was marching along the Isar riverbank. The Isar flowed peacefully beside them, its gentle currents whispering against the shore. Tall trees lined the path to their left, casting cool shadows over the two women – a relief Martha was grateful for. Yet, once again, she couldn't help but wonder why Rosenrot showed no sign of sweating, as if the heat had no effect on her. There had to be a concealment spell at play. People cycling or strolling past them didn't seem to notice them at all. Despite the fact that they must have made for a rather odd pair.

For one, neither of them was dressed appropriately for a hot summer day, and for another, they were both simply too eye-catching – from their striking outfits to their vividly coloured hair. Rosenrot's tight ponytail swung through the air, and in the setting sun, her red hair seemed to glow, just like her leather jacket and boots. Martha couldn't help but wonder: Did Rosenrot actually like the colour red, or did she only wear it because of her name?

Rosenrot's grim voice pulled Martha from her thoughts. "I know that they're fish-like, disgusting monsters that lurk in the depths of bodies of water and feed on life energy. And that they can supposedly stun their prey with their song," Rosenrot explained as she marched alongside Martha. Her posture was alert and tense, her eyes scanning the surroundings and the people approaching them.

"Supposedly? Have you never encountered a mermaid before?"

"No." Rosenrot glanced toward the Isar and added quietly, "I'm not a fan of... water."

"What? How can you not like water?"

"Not water in general, you idiot. I mean things like a river or a lake... or the sea. I don't like it when I can't see what's lurking around in there."

Martha glanced up at Ra-Ra, who was gliding above them in elegant arcs. He was watching them but remained silent. She had once asked him why he was always so quiet around Rosenrot, but the raven had refused to tell her. Tearing her gaze away from his black feathers, Martha grinned at Rosenrot.

“Ra-Ra would probably call that a fear of the unknown. Probably, because you can’t control it.”

Rosenrot shot her an icy-glare. “Cut the damn small talk and tell me how we’re getting the pearls.”

Martha smiled. Looked like she’d hit a nerve.

“Okay. So, since you actually know nothing about mermaids, which is pretty embarrassing for the feared police director...” Rosenrot’s expression darkened, and Martha feared she might get smacked, so she quickly continued: “...I’ll fill you in on everything Ra-Ra and I have discovered. Unlike sirens, mermaids aren’t beautiful or known for enchanting humans with their looks and singing. They’re, in fact, hideous, fish-like monsters – especially the German ones. Locally, they’re also known as *Nixen*. Imagine an anglerfish, an eel, and a mermaid having a baby.” Rosenrot’s face twisted in disgust. “Yep, that was my reaction too, when I first saw one. Wouldn’t recommend showing it, though. They’re super sensitive about their appearance. For some reason, they live under the delusion that they’re just as gorgeous as sirens. So if you ever need something from them, it’s smarter to let them believe it.”

Martha raised a finger. “*Nixen* live in packs, so they also have a leader. Or let’s say: a queen. But she stays hidden deep underwater and rarely comes to the surface. It’s kind of like bees, where the worker bees buzz around gathering food while the queen stays at home.”

“I see,” Rosenrot muttered, kicking a small stone as she frowned in thought. “That means catching a lone mermaid to ask about the pearls won’t be easy.”

“Unless, of course, she’s dead.”

Rosenrot’s head snapped toward Martha. “What?”

“Well,” Martha said casually, “Ra-Ra and I found out where the old mermaids swim off to die. That’s where we’re going now. To ask them about the pearls.”

She conveniently left out the part about them being the deceased queens of the mermaids. According to her and Ra-Ra’s research, only

royal mermaids had an actual burial site. The others simply dissolved into water foam and merged with the Isar. Kind of poetic, really.

What truly fascinated Martha, though, was the fact that the royal graveyard was located under the Maximilian Bridge near Schwind Island – right in the middle of Munich, in a popular spot for humans. How mermaids managed to find their final rest there remained a mystery. But ancient traditions were ancient traditions. Just because a few humans threw parties on the island or lounged in the sun didn't mean the mermaids would suddenly change their ways.

Martha was already catching sight of part of Schwind Island, where the Isar split ahead of them. The river's rushing sound grew louder as she and Rosenrot continued toward the Maximilian Bridge. Martha veered slightly to get closer to the water, and Rosenrot followed swiftly until they stood at the iron railing that kept them from tumbling into the river. Directly across from them, the tip of Schwind Island jutted into the water, crowded with human sunbathers. *Urgh*.

Rosenrot placed a hand on the narrow railing. Martha noticed that the knuckles on her right hand were swollen. Wow. While she had been buried in books, Rosenrot had clearly been busy in her own way.

"Are you sure about this, Oak?" Rosenrot asked, her voice edged with doubt. "The place is crawling with humans."

Martha positioned herself beside Rosenrot, leaned over the railing, and gestured toward the fish ladder hugging the island. The Isar's waves rushed over it in full, untamed force, and for a brief moment, Martha felt the urge to jump in. That would certainly be a refreshing way to cool off.

"We need to get across. Under the bridge. That's where the resting place is," she said. *Allegedly*, she added in her mind. Rosenrot's thin lips tightened, her skepticism plain as day. Even her crooked nose crinkled in displeasure.

"Oak, I hate to repeat myself, but: are you really sure about this?"

"Trust me."



*Martha doesn't like to talk about her past.
Sorry. At least, not here in the abridged, free version.*



And yet, the police director merely crossed her arms over her chest and raised a grumpy eyebrow.

“We need to get over there,” the witch said casually, gesturing toward the opposite shore of Schwind Island. Tall trees rose from the island's steep embankment, their dense foliage hiding the winding paths below. A narrow paved walkway hugged the bank, disappearing beneath the Maximilian Bridge as a blue tram rumbled overhead. Of course, they could just walk across the bridge and climb down from there, but where would be the fun in that?

“I can take you with my umbrella if you'd like,” Martha offered, flashing the most charming smile she could manage. “You just have to hold on to me. Tight.”

“Oak.”

The dark undertone in Rosenrot's voice made Martha tense up. The setting sun flickered in her blue eyes, casting an eerie light over her sharp features.

“Am I correct in assuming that you actually plan to resurrect a dead mermaid – which is highly illegal and strictly forbidden – just so we can ask her about the pearls?”

Why did that sound like a threat coming from Rosenrot's mouth?

Martha sighed and leaned back against the railing. She rested the mini-umbrella casually on her shoulder while slipping her other hand into her coat pocket. Secretly, she tapped into her magic. She knew Rosenrot could twist her next words into a confession and arrest her right here and now. But she was tired of beating around the bush.

“Good deduction, Sherlock,” Martha replied with a grin. “I'm starting to understand why you're the police director.”

Her fingers in her coat pocket were ready to snap. She would never go to prison. She'd rather give up her quiet life in Munich and her

beloved shop. She'd even flee to the ends of the earth, knowing full well that Rosenrot would surely follow. But Martha would rather be hunted by Rosenrot than waste away in a tiny cell.

Right now, the Isar beneath her boots seemed oddly tempting. All she had to do was let it carry her away ...

"And you need me because the required magic costs life energy?"

Martha was surprised that Rosenrot knew that. Surprised, and alarmed. She had to be careful not to underestimate her, especially when it came to her knowledge of forbidden magic.

"Ding, ding, ding! And the winner is Rosenrot."

Rosenrot's expression remained stone-cold. Martha waited for her reaction. Would she try to grab her? Of course, she'd made sure to stand just outside Rosenrot's reach. Her fingers twitched nervously, and she was grateful that Rosenrot couldn't see it.

Then the police director surprised her. Again. She vaulted over the railing without hesitation. Effortlessly, she swung herself down the stone embankment to the Isar's shore, rolled to absorb the impact, took a running start, and leapt gracefully across the fish ladder onto Schwind Island.

Martha's jaw dropped. She hadn't expected that level of acrobatics. That woman was full of surprises.

"OAK!" Rosenrot bellowed across to her. "Get over here and do your thing. I don't have all day."

Ra-Ra landed on Martha's shoulder and murmured, "Master Oak, if I may remind you once more: We have no binding contract with the menacing police inspector. We could simply leave."

Yes, they could. She could leave Rosenrot, standing there on the island and... probably say goodbye to her shop as well, which Rosenrot would no doubt burn to the ground in retaliation.

"But where's the fun in that, Ra-Ra?"

Ra-Ra gave her a dry look. "The fun would be *not* dying or getting arrested."

Martha sighed and lowered her voice to a whisper. "Ra-Ra, first of all, if we ditch Rosenrot now, she'll hunt us to the ends of the earth

just to break every single one of our bones.” Ra-Ra gulped, his beady black eyes darting anxiously to Rosenrot, who was inspecting the massive pillars of the bridge. “And second,” Martha continued, “this is our only chance to get our hands on Jacob’s book. We’ve never been this close! And how long have we been searching for it? Two hundred years?”

“This is our doom. I can feel it in the tips of my feathers.”

Martha tossed the tiny umbrella into the air and snapped her fingers. It expanded to its full size before she caught it with practiced ease.

“We’re just doing a *small* necromantic ritual. What could possibly go wrong?”

CHAPTER 5

ROSENROT



Rosenrot stared at the ugliest creature she had ever seen in her life. When the witch had claimed that mermaids were a cross between an anglerfish, an eel, and a human, she had assumed Oak was messing with her. But now, staring at it in shock, she realised Oak had been absolutely right.

Oh, *Scheiße* – it was revolting! Disgusting! ... It was just–*Bah!*

Rosenrot was both horrified and fascinated by the visceral reaction the creature stirred in her. Sure, she had always known she hated fish, but she had never felt *physically ill* just from looking at one. Normally, she had a high tolerance for the grotesque, the repulsive, and the bloody. Good to know that zombie mermaids were where she drew the line.

The mermaid's oversized, bulging black eyes stared into a lifeless void, while its scaly skin was mottled with patches that Rosenrot could only describe as mold. With jerky, laboured movements, the grotesque fish-creature dragged itself out of the Isar.

Rosenrot spotted jagged bones jutting from decayed flesh. The mermaid hadn't been dead for long. That much was obvious. Yet there were no signs of foul play; no wounds, no marks of violence. It must have died of natural causes, she concluded after another careful glance, though her stomach churned with every second she kept looking.

By Grimm's fairytales, she was *never* setting foot in the Isar again. Not even a toe.

The Isar's water sloshed against the scaly body as it slowly edged toward them. Its movements were aimless, awkward. Like the dead mermaid no longer remembered how to use its limbs.

Urgh, oh fuck, the stench!

It took all of Rosenrot's willpower not to vomit as the stench of decay and fish filled her nose. Martha, on the other hand, remained unfazed beside her. Her violet eyes gleamed in the bridge's shadow, which shielded them from prying eyes. Either the witch was exceptionally good at hiding her disgust, or the reek simply didn't bother her. Her tattooed arms were outstretched. Once again, Rosenrot had the unsettling impression that the ink on Martha's skin was shifting. But she couldn't be sure. She only ever caught the supposed movement from the corner of her eye. It almost seemed as if the symbols froze whenever she looked at them directly.

Martha's slender fingers were pointed at the mermaid, whose bones cracked as it straightened to its full height. A sharp exhale escaped Martha's lips, her fingers tensing and moving as if she were manipulating the undead creature with invisible, magical strings. Rosenrot couldn't describe it any other way: Martha was the puppeteer, and the corpse was her marionette.

Was it always like this with necromancy? Did the witch have to guide the dead with magic?



A necromancy is not for the faint-hearted.

But above all, Rosenrot doesn't want certain information to get out, so unfortunately I had to take some things out here.



“Police Director Rosenrot, my master cannot maintain the magic much longer,” the irritating raven spoke up. Rosenrot had completely forgotten about the stupid bird, which was perched on the ground behind Martha, daring to glare at her in annoyance. Once again, it had positioned himself just out of her reach – a fortunate decision. Otherwise, she might have kicked him.

“Mermaid, where do you hide the pearls?” Rosenrot addressed the swaying creature. The mermaid hissed and lashed out at her. Its claws slashed toward the closest target: Rosenrot’s thigh. Fuck! She hadn’t noticed how the zombified fish had crept closer. What a rookie mistake! This was going to hurt. Before she could react, Martha moved her hand in a flash.

CRACK!

A surprised sound escaped the mermaid’s maw as its grotesque arm snapped in two. With a dull plop, the severed front half – claws and all – landed just in front of Rosenrot’s boots, never even getting close to her thigh. She was impressed. And a little shocked. The witch had torn an arm apart with a single, fleeting hand movement?

She realised then how little she truly knew about Martha or her magical skills. But that was exactly what made Martha Oak the infamous moon witch, carrying as many secrets as there were stars in the night sky. When Martha let out a strained groan, Rosenrot leaned toward the stinking zombie fish. She held her breath to keep herself from gagging.

“One more time: Where are you hiding the pearls?”

The mermaid hissed at Rosenrot, its scaly skin tearing open in the process. Beneath it, rotting flesh, wriggling maggots, and splintered bones were revealed. She stumbled back, barely stopping herself from throwing up on the zombie mermaid as a wave of decay hit her. She spun around hastily, coughing and gagging.

“Okay ... Plan B,” Martha growled. Before Rosenrot could react, Martha’s hand suddenly slapped against her bleeding palm. She flinched in shock as the witch’s warm fingers wrapped around her rough skin. Her mouth opened for a loud protest, but before she could say a word, Martha had already launched herself at the zombie fish. Rosenrot stumbled after her, caught off guard.

“Hey! What the-?!”

The curse died in her throat as Martha plunged the fingers of her free hand straight into the zombie mermaid’s bulging, wide-open eyes. A piercing screech erupted from its maw. Rosenrot swore loudly as pain exploded in her ears. Suddenly, her senses clouded. Her vision blurred, and she felt Martha’s magic pulling, tugging, wrenching at her chest.

Rosenrot groaned in agony and fell to her knees as a wave of weakness crashed over her. She tried to yank her hand free from Martha’s grip, but her muscles throbbed, and her blood burned like fire between their joined palms. Her iron hold didn’t waver. Rosenrot was on the verge of blacking out when, at last, the witch released her.

She hit the ground hard, landing on her back with a dull thud. Gasping for breath, she lay there, her world spinning violently. A fresh wave of nausea rolled through her. This time, she couldn’t fight it back. She retched. Her head pounded. The dizziness clung to her like a vice, but – slowly, painfully – her vision cleared.

“Fucking hell... what... what was that?”

Rosenrot pushed herself up, every movement draining what little strength she had left. She had never felt so utterly exhausted in her life. All she wanted was to sleep – for a week, if possible. She barely registered Martha crouching in front of her, placing a hand on her chest. Before she could flinch away, a surge of warmth shot through her body, tingling through her veins and jolting her weary limbs awake. She blinked, dazed, into Martha’s violet eyes, which were watching her with concern.

“Whoops, that might’ve been a bit too much soul energy, huh?” Martha’s voice reached her ears, but Rosenrot was too distracted by

the hand on her chest, radiating a pleasant warmth. She knew enough about witchcraft to understand that Martha was giving her some of her own life energy. It felt... wrong somehow. Wrong, yet good. Like a soothing balm for her battered soul. A gruff, horrified, and very explicit curse slipped from Rosenrot's lips.

Had she completely lost her mind? What the hell was that for a sappy thought?!



Sorry, but Rosenrot threatened to punch me in the face if I left the moment between Martha and her in here.

(I did manage to sneak it into the full version though!)



"I didn't mean to hurt you that badly. But it was the only way to get the information." A sheepish smile flickered across Martha's lips. "There aren't many beings with a soul strong enough to dive into the memories of the dead."

Rosenrot tore her gaze away from Martha's lips and focused instead on her hand, noticing that the swelling had gone down. Then her eyes drifted to the mermaid corpse lying behind them. Its eyes had burst open into hollow cavities, oozing a strange greenish slime that dripped onto the ground. Its mouth was twisted open in a grotesque manner, as if the jawbones had been snapped apart. Rosenrot felt sick.

"But why did you stab it in the eyes?" she asked, disgusted.

Martha shrugged casually. "Well, the peepers still looked pretty alive and not as rotten as the rest. So, I figured I might be able to pull some memories from them. Basically, see what the mermaid saw before it died. Talking wasn't really an option, after all."

Rosenrot shuddered. "You stabbed the fish in the eyes and sacrificed my soul energy on a hunch?"

"And I was right, thank Hecate! So it wasn't all for nothing. Yay!"

Martha winked at Rosenrot, who didn't find it funny in the slightest. Rage surged through her.

How dare the witch? And how stupid had she been to trust that Martha actually had a well-thought-out plan?

Martha let go of Rosenrot's hand and grinned at her. "Do you want to know what I found out? Or would you rather sulk because I improvised?"

Rosenrot wanted to scream at her. She wanted to tell her how reckless and foolish she was! And that she would lock the unbearably annoying witch in a cell where she wouldn't be able to improvise her way out!

But then her gaze fell on her hand. All the boiling, sharp words stuck in her throat as she watched the cut on her palm heal within moments. Only a faint scar remained. Fascinated, she flexed her fingers and was pleased to find they were no longer stiff. She could clench her fist without issue.

"No worries! All you need is a plate of *Käsespätzle*, a good night's sleep, and your life energy will be as good as new!"

"What was in that ointment?"

"I'll tell you once we finally get those pearls... and survive."

Martha pushed herself to her feet but wobbled, briefly losing her balance. She stumbled and clutched her left leg.

"Are you hurt?" Rosenrot asked, but Martha waved her off as she carefully tested her weight on her left foot. She frowned, as if standing on it was a completely new experience.

"What's wrong? What's with your foot?" Rosenrot asked, noticing that even Martha's raven was eyeing it with concern. "Is that worry I hear?"

Rosenrot's expression darkened instantly as Martha grinned at her. "Don't get any ideas, Oak."

Martha let out a delighted laugh before turning her attention back to her foot. Rosenrot narrowed her eyes suspiciously. She had the distinct feeling that the witch was hiding something from her. But that was nothing new. Once Martha was standing firmly on both feet again, looking pleased with herself, she held out her hand to Rosenrot.

"Up you get, Rosilein. Our pearl hunt isn't over yet."

Rosenrot slapped the offered hand away before slowly rising to her feet without help. Her legs were still a little shaky, but otherwise, she felt ready for duty. She cracked her fingers and rolled her shoulders. Yep, that would do – whether for a fight or if she suddenly felt the urge to smack the witch. For now, though, Rosenrot’s curiosity was stronger. So, she decided not to break Martha’s bones just yet. Despite the audacity of calling her such a ridiculous nickname.

“Are you gonna hit me now because I called you *Rosilein*?”

Martha’s hands rested casually in her coat pockets, but her eyes remained sharp. Rosenrot suspected she had her fingers poised, ready to snap at a moment’s notice. The witch wouldn’t hesitate to use her magic against Rosenrot any more than Rosenrot would hesitate to use her fists against her. The thought almost made Rosenrot smirk, but her expression stayed serious.

“If you dare do it again, then yes. But for now, I’d rather conserve my strength.”

Martha smiled before her face turned serious. “So, do you want to know what I saw in the mermaid’s memories? Or are we going to keep playing cat and mouse?”

Rosenrot held Martha’s gaze while the witch stood beside her, feigning an air of nonchalance. But the strain of necromancy was written all over her. Her face was paler, her posture sluggish, and the mischievous glint in her eyes had dulled.

“I didn’t know you could do that, Oak,” Rosenrot said in a casual, almost conversational tone. “Or that soul magic could pluck memories from the dead.”

“Pluck is actually a pretty good way to put it,” Martha smirked before turning her attention to her raven, which hopped toward her. “Though it’s trickier than that and doesn’t always work. But in this case, we got lucky.”

“Luck seems to be something you have more of than sense.”

Martha shot her a wounded look as the raven landed on her shoulder. Once again, Rosenrot got the distinct feeling that the two were communicating without words. The moment the bird settled,

Martha's demeanour became more guarded, more closed off. Rosenrot didn't like that. Not one bit.

"Back to the pearls," Martha continued, crouching down beside the mermaid's corpse. "Only queens can produce them. Regular mermaids can't, which I find rather fascinating."

"That explains why the mermaids stopped giving out pearls," the raven remarked.

Rosenrot crossed her arms. "And what exactly is that supposed to mean?"

Martha looked up at Rosenrot while the raven fluttered onto the mermaid's head, inspecting it more closely.

"This is the last queen," Martha explained, nodding toward the corpse just as the raven pecked at the gaping, broken maw. Rosenrot's stomach lurched, and she quickly turned away.

"So that means... the mermaids don't have a queen to produce pearls right now?" she deduced, trying her best to ignore the unsettling noises behind her. Great. Just great. As if today hadn't already been a nightmare, now she could add desecrating a corpse to the ever-growing list of crimes Martha had roped her into – Martha and *herself!*

By Grimm's fairytales, no one could *ever* find out about this.

"Exactly," Rosenrot heard Martha reply, her voice drawing closer – along with her footsteps. "Which means there won't be any pearls until there's a new queen."

Rosenrot tilted her head to look at Martha as she stepped up beside her.

"But," Martha continued, "*I did* manage to gather from our decaying majesty's memories that the new queen is always chosen through some kind of ritual by the other mermaids. And then... well, I don't know exactly *how* it works, but something happens and – poof! She can produce pearls."

Rosenrot grimaced. "And when is this *ominous* ritual supposed to take place?"

"That, I *don't* know," Martha admitted. "But I *do* know where it's going to happen."

Rosenrot cracked her fingers and clenched her jaw. This was unacceptable. She needed the pearls *tomorrow*! The flutter of wings yanked her from her thoughts as the raven landed on Martha's shoulder. It held something blood-smeared and tubular in its beak, which it promptly dropped into Martha's outstretched hand.

"What the hell is that?!" Rosenrot burst out as Martha casually tucked whatever the raven had retrieved from the mermaid into her coat pocket.

"A little souvenir," the witch replied with a shrug as the raven turned to Rosenrot. "Mermaids can't survive long without a queen, so I'd wager the ritual will take place soon."

"We *can't* wait for them to perform their damn ritual," Rosenrot growled, shoving her hands into her pockets to stop herself from cracking her fingers again.

Martha tilted her head. "Why not, actually? Why do you need the pearls so urgently?"

Rosenrot shot Martha a warning glare, but the brazen witch just grinned at her cheekily.

"Master Oak, I can't believe I'm suggesting this, but what if we *provoke* the ritual?"

"What do you mean?"

Martha's head snapped toward her raven, and Rosenrot was relieved that those violet eyes were no longer fixed on her.

"Did you see what phase the moon was in during the ritual?"

"It was a full moon."

"When's the next full moon?" Rosenrot cut in.

"In three days," Martha murmured, furrowing her brow as she exchanged a long look with her raven. "We *could* trick the mermaids into believing it's a full moon, but... ugh, Ra-Ra, that would take a *lot* of magic, energy... and preparation! We'd never pull it off by tonight. If we even *can* pull it off. The illusion would have to be incredibly strong and convincing for the mermaids to fall for it."

Rosenrot looked up at the dusky sky. The sun was already setting,

casting Munich in a silky, eerie red. She bit the inside of her cheek, swallowing down a harsh curse. *Shit. Bloody shit.*

“Police Director Rosenrot, forgive me, but you look like you have an idea.”

Rosenrot’s gaze flicked to the raven and its sharp, intelligent eyes. *Little, feathered bastard.* These two idiots were seriously testing the last shreds of her patience. But of course, she had an idea. An idea that was reckless, dangerous, and would cost her dearly.

“Where is the ritual supposed to take place?” she asked Martha, whose eyes were filled with questions. Questions she would *never* get answers to. Not if Rosenrot had anything to say about it.

“At the weir. Midnight,” Martha answered hesitantly.

“Oak, if you’re lying to me about this, then—”

“Yeah, yeah, you’ll break all my bones and throw me into some dark cell,” Martha cut her off, her voice carrying a vulnerability that momentarily stunned Rosenrot. “I told you the truth, Rosenrot, okay? What do I have to do to make you trust me?”

Martha met Rosenrot’s gaze fearlessly, almost pleadingly. There was no mischief, no mockery in her eyes, just sincerity – raw and direct. For a fleeting second, a thought flitted through Rosenrot’s mind: *Could they actually become friends?* Could she ever truly trust Martha? But she shoved that ridiculous notion aside immediately. *As if!*

Martha was nothing more than a lousy criminal who was lucky that the Fairytale Council protected her, for whatever reason. And the moment that protection so much as cracked, Rosenrot wouldn’t hesitate.

“We meet there at half past eleven,” Rosenrot finally broke the uncomfortable silence between them.

“What are you planning?” Martha asked. Rosenrot ignored her and prepared to jump. She needed to get off this godforsaken island. She needed to get away from Martha. And she *definitely* didn’t want to do what she now had to do.

“Rosenrot,” Martha tried again, her voice tinged with concern.

“Half past eleven. Don't be late,” Rosenrot snapped. Then, after a brief hesitation, she added, “Keep your enchanted mirror ready.”

With that, Rosenrot leapt over the Isar, landing smoothly on the opposite bank. From there, she took off – not just walking, but nearly sprinting. She didn't have much time. And she had no idea if her plan would work.

CHAPTER 6

MARTHA



The full moon shone in the starry sky, and though it looked like the real moon, Martha could still sense that it was an illusion. But a damn convincing one. So convincing, in fact, that the mermaids had actually appeared on a secluded shore near the weir. Martha had never seen so many of them at once. They swam restlessly through the waves of the Isar, occasionally raising their heads above the water to gaze at the moon. Purring, clicking sounds blended with the nocturnal backdrop as Martha and Ra-Ra waited for the river monsters to fall for the fake moon. Somehow, this was absurd – even by Martha’s standards.



*I don't know what happened, but Martha snapped – and poof!
Part of the story was gone ... I think it said something about gods?
I'd have to look it up again in the full version ...*



“Wow. You’re actually on time.”

Martha flinched as Rosenrot’s voice rang out behind her.

“And you’re jumpy.”

Was that a chuckle? Martha shot Rosenrot an annoyed look as the police director knelt beside her. Immediately, Ra-Ra slid protectively between them, his expression dark.

“My master is many things, but she has never been late,” the raven declared in a serious, almost defiant tone, as if he needed to defend Martha’s honour. Rosenrot ignored him, her sharp blue eyes scanning the scene through the gaps between the branches and leaves. She didn’t look the least bit nervous. Just stoically cool, as always.

“What’s the situation?”

“They’re here, and they seem confused.” Martha cast a sideways glance at Rosenrot. “By the way, respect. That’s a very convincing illusion. What was it you called it earlier, Ra-Ra?”

“A *divine* masterpiece, Master Oak.”

“Ah, right. That.”

Martha and Ra-Ra watched Rosenrot closely. Would she tell them which god was behind this? Would she admit it?

“We wait until we see the pearls before making a move. Understood?” Rosenrot said, her face an unreadable mask. Ra-Ra shot Martha an exasperated look. He hated being ignored. Martha just shrugged and gave his head a quick pat.

“Oak?” Rosenrot grumbled. “Did you hear me?”

“Yeah, yeah, we watch as the new queen lies down under the moonlight, gets sung to, and then hope some pearls roll out that we can steal. Without them noticing we’re here. Got it.”

Rosenrot turned to her, reaching into her leather jacket. “Why do you sound so skeptical? Isn’t this the kind of thing you do all the time?”



Yep, here she snapped again.

*Allegedly because she was uncomfortable with what she thought about
Rosenrot?*



Rosenrot's red leather jacket shimmered under the false moonlight. Her back was straight, and her fingers rested loosely on her thighs. Now that Martha was this close, she noticed the scars hidden between Rosenrot's freckles. She remembered what she had felt in her soul: sharp thorns, deep bitterness, and aching fury. That was what made up the feared police director, what had shaped her. But it was also what gave her that unyielding strength.

"Shit, they're fast," Rosenrot muttered, her eyes widening. "That's unexpected. I thought they'd be sluggish on land."

Martha followed her gaze through the undergrowth, watching as two mermaids slithered effortlessly across the riverbank like serpents on the hunt. They opened their mouths in sharp, soundless cries. At least, Martha assumed they were cries. Their greenish skin gleamed eerily, revealing jagged scales. Their hair wasn't hair at all but slimy strands of algae clinging to their heads and bodies. Large, bulging black eyes flashed with a predatory glint. And those long, jointed arms ending in murderous claws with spines rising like a crest along their backs – there was no mistaking it: these were predators. Not the alluring sirens of fairytales, luring sailors to their doom, but jaguars of the water. And, apparently, of the land, too.

Fuck. That really was unexpected.

"Their ugliness is almost impressive," Rosenrot whispered, shuddering slightly. Martha couldn't help but be amused. The infamous, stone-cold police director, unnerved by mermaids. One of the grotesque heads suddenly snapped in their direction, and both Martha and Rosenrot instinctively ducked lower. Martha's heart pounded against her ribs. Ra-Ra pressed himself against her leg, trembling so hard she could feel it through her jeans. Without thinking, she reached out and ran her fingers over his feathers in a soothing gesture.

“It’s starting,” Rosenrot murmured, tension lacing her voice.

“May the holy spirits protect us,” Ra-Ra muttered, shaking out his feathers. Martha knew he’d been hoping desperately that the ritual wouldn’t happen. That the mermaids would see through the trick with the false moon. To be fair, she’d hoped for the same. But hope was never something Martha had relied on.

Curious, Martha peered over Rosenrot’s shoulder through a narrow gap in the leaves. Another mermaid emerged from the Isar, while the two onshore waited for her. Her movements were majestic, fluid. The way she carried herself left no doubt: this was their new queen. As the surprisingly rounded body of the mermaid pulled itself onto the shore, Martha caught sight of the golden scales shimmering under the moonlight and the coral-like crown rising high like a trident.

Yep. Definitely the queen.

More and more mermaids poked their heads out of the Isar, swimming closer to the shore. The queen lay on her back, stretching out her arms, her breathing growing laboured as the others swayed from side to side. Her massive tail fin still floated in the river, moving in a slow, steady rhythm. The motion sent ripples outward in perfect concentric circles, gliding across the water’s surface. For a brief moment, Martha was tempted to pull out her earplugs, just to hear what the mermaids’ song sounded like.

〰〰〰

Snip – and this part is gone.

Yes, I know. Martha can just be annoying.

〰〰〰

Then suddenly, her eyes widened. Without warning, she grabbed Martha’s sleeve and yanked her closer with surprising force. Their cheeks were nearly touching. Martha became acutely aware of the sudden proximity, and it was ridiculously uncomfortable. By the holy moon!

"Tell me you see it too, Oak. That the pearls ... are in *there*," Rosenrot gasped in shock. Martha gently pried Rosenrot's grip from her arm as she took a moment to look around. The mermaids were still performing their ritual, singing to their new queen. So far, so good. Then her gaze drifted to the queen, who was writhing in the moonlight while glowing lumps swelled at her hips.

What... what the hell was that?

Martha narrowed her eyes and realised that these pulsating lumps were some kind of skin pouches. Beneath the thin, white membrane, round shapes pressed outward.

"Well, that's wild," Martha muttered. "So that's how they produce their pearls."

"Yeah, but it looks just like... like..."

Martha pulled away from Rosenrot to glance at her. "Eggs?"

"Yes! Exactly. I mean... by Grimm's fairytales, does that mean mermaid pearls are actually..." Rosenrot shuddered at the thought.

"...their eggs?" Martha finished, as Rosenrot's face twisted in pure disgust and shock. For a second, Martha feared she might actually throw up. She had gone noticeably paler, her crooked nose standing out starkly against her ashen complexion.

"That is so fucked up," Rosenrot stated, forcing herself to breathe evenly, probably battling a gag reflex.

"Yep."

"Yep? That's all you've got to say about this?"

Martha raised her hands in defence. "Hey, I already suspected something like this when they said only the queen could produce pearls. I mean, yeah, it's wild, but it's not exactly shocking to me." She turned to Ra-Ra. "Are you ready?"

Ra-Ra stretched his neck to meet her gaze. "Are you, Master Oak?"

But in his eyes, she read something else entirely: *Can we please not do this, Master Oak?*

"Of course I am," she replied with a grin. Ra-Ra's expression darkened as Martha pulled a hollowed-out, cleaned bone from her coat. One that had once belonged to the former queen. After Ra-Ra had plucked it from

her throat, Martha had scrubbed it clean in her shop and blessed it with ancient Germanic runes. She was rather proud of her handiwork. Carefully, she placed the neck bone in front of Ra-Ra. The raven wrapped his claws around it, his warning gaze locking onto Rosenrot's curious stare.

"I'm counting on you, Police Director Rosenrot, to keep my master alive and make sure she doesn't make any foolish, impulsive decisions that might cost her life."

Martha was about to protest, but before she could get a word out, Ra-Ra had already shot off into the night. Sometimes, she forgot just how fast that raven was at making an exit.

"This is going to work, right?" Rosenrot asked, watching as Ra-Ra vanished into the darkness.

"What? Keeping me from making foolish, impulsive decisions?"

Rosenrot pulled a face. "No, the bone."

"Now you're insulting my witch's honour."

"What honour?"

"Ouch." Okay, maybe she *was* just a cold-hearted bitch.

Rosenrot pinned Martha with a sharp look. "Seriously now, Oak, this neck bone *will* be enough to distract them, right?"

"Yeah, it will," Martha grumbled. *Hopefully*. "Like I already explained back at the enchanted mirror. Once Ra-Ra dips the bone into the water, it'll mimic the former queen's song. That should confuse the mermaids long enough for us to snatch the pearls without any trouble."

She tore her gaze away from Rosenrot's piercing stare – the kind only a police director could master – and peered through the undergrowth.

"But I'd bet those two mermaids on the shore will still be guarding their new queen."

"Leave that to me. You focus on the pearls, I'll keep the mermaids off your back."

Rosenrot reached behind her, under her leather jacket, and drew out two pitch-black steel rods, sleek and narrow. They were about the

length of her forearms and just thick enough for her to grip comfortably with her slender fingers. She ran her thumbs over the smooth surface, and suddenly, two thin needles snapped out from the bottom ends.

“Whoa, what the—”

Martha’s words caught in her throat as Rosenrot drove the needles straight into her thighs. She didn’t even flinch, just let out a sharp breath. With another swift motion, she yanked the bloody needles back out, and they vanished with a barely audible hiss. The weapons began to glow with an eerie light. Rosenrot blinked rapidly, pain flickering across her face, before she rolled her shoulders and forced herself back into a stoic stance. She spun the steel rods through the air with a showy flourish before sinking into a battle-ready crouch. Martha stared at the sinister weapons, realising they were undoubtedly part of the reason Rosenrot had earned her reputation as the *Bonebreaker*.

“Nice toys you’ve got there,” Martha remarked, tapping into her magic. “But what’s with the little blood sacrifice?”

“You’ll see in a second,” Rosenrot replied, her grip tightening around the steel rods until her knuckles turned white. “It’s working. Look.”

Martha followed Rosenrot’s gaze and saw the mermaids heads slowly vanishing beneath the river’s surface. At least, that’s how it seemed. The two mermaids standing guard over the queen had stopped singing. Instead, they were shifting uneasily, their heads snapping toward the Isar again and again, as if confused. It was now or never. They wouldn’t get a second chance.

“Okay, Oak. I’m going to—Hey!”

Martha had had enough of waiting, and she definitely wasn’t in the mood to listen to Rosenrot’s orders. So she just jumped over the bushes, rolled, and – *bam!* – she was on her feet, sprinting toward the queen. The two mermaids spotted her instantly, of course. Not that she’d tried to be quiet. Why should she? She reached for her magic,

but before she could cast anything, something shot past her head so fast and so close that she actually felt the air shift.

Like an arrow, one of Rosenrot's cursed clubs pierced straight through the first mermaid's skull. It sliced through like butter. The head snapped backward, and the body collapsed lifelessly to the ground. A fan of blood spread across the grass before the corpse dissolved into foam, leaving only the crimson stain behind. Martha stared at it, shocked.

Fuck.

The second mermaid met the same fate a moment later. The second steel rod whistled through the air and punched through her head like an apple shot clean through with an arrow.

Fuuuuck.

With a sharp whir, the two steel rods flew over the Isar before snapping straight back to their owner. Rosenrot caught them effortlessly and stomped toward Martha, her face twisted in fury. It was like her eyes were spitting fire. But Martha didn't feel fear, just anger. Anger that Rosenrot had simply killed the two mermaids. She could have knocked them out! If Martha had known that *this* was what she'd meant by *keeping the mermaids off her back*, she would have handled them herself first.

"If you *ever* dare to—"

"Oh? And what then?" Martha cut her off, her voice dripping with venom. "Will you skewer me with your cursed clubs too? Like you did those *innocent* mermaids?"

"If you hadn't charged in like an absolute idiot, I wouldn't have *had* to kill them," Rosenrot shot back.

"Oh, please. Don't act like you didn't *enjoy* it, *Bonebreaker*."

The words dripped from Martha's mouth like poison as she fought the childish urge to shove Rosenrot straight into the Isar.

"Spare me your moral sermon, Oak, and just grab the damn pearls so we can get out of here."

Martha trembled with rage as she searched Rosenrot's face for even a flicker of regret. Some sign of guilt. But there was nothing. Just

that cold, calculating hardness. Why did she feel so *betrayed*? She *knew* Rosenrot was ruthless. She *knew* she was a stone-cold bitch. So why had she expected anything else?

Martha bit back another venomous remark and stepped closer to the queen, who was staring at the false moon as if in a trance. Her chest rose and fell in a jagged rhythm, claws digging deep into the ground while her fishtail swayed back and forth. She didn't react, not even when Martha leaned directly over her and waved a hand in front of her face. Behind her, Rosenrot let out an impatient huff.

Martha's gaze drifted to the strange skin pouches on the queen's scaly hips. They looked like they might burst at any moment – so ripe were they with pearls. Quickly, she removed her left earring, tossed it into the air, and snapped her fingers. Midair, the dagger pendant shifted, transforming into her silver *athame*, which settled into her hand with unsettling ease. Almost too perfectly, for her taste. The engraved violets on the blade shimmered under the moonlight, and Martha's breath grew heavier. She usually avoided using the dagger. It reminded her too much of her foster mother. And with that memory came a familiar ache, one that clung to her soul with merciless tenacity. She had spent centuries learning to ignore it – just like Rosenrot's impatient fidgeting in the background.

"Hurry up, Oak."

"Stop pushing me. Unless you'd rather cut the pearls out yourself?"

Rosenrot huffed and positioned herself between Martha and the Isar. Any moment now, the place would be swarming with mermaids. She was right. Martha had to move fast. Quickly, she focused on the strange pouches of skin where the pearls sloshed around. By the holy moon, that looked absolutely disgusting. She really didn't want to cut into that. It was probably like poking a blister on your foot. Ugh...

"Oak!"

"Yes!"

Martha rolled her eyes in annoyance before carefully pressing her *athame* to the spot where the scaly skin met the strange pouch. The

blade had barely touched the membrane when it burst open. With a startled scream, Martha stumbled backward, colliding with Rosenrot, who let out a choking sound.

“Oh, shit... That’s disgusting! What is this slime?!”

Rosenrot grabbed Martha’s shoulder and yanked her away from the gooey substance oozing from the pouch, bubbling as it spread across the ground. And just like that, the pearls tumbled free... rolling straight into the Isar.

“The pearls!” Martha cried out in alarm, tearing herself free from Rosenrot. She was about to grab them when she caught movement in the river. Oh no. A split second later, a spray of Isar water splashed into her face. Reflexively, she squeezed her eyes shut, frozen in place, knowing full well she wouldn’t be able to dodge in time. She braced herself for the painfully inevitable impact with the mermaid. But then, with a loud curse, Rosenrot slammed into her. Startled, Martha’s eyes flew open just in time to see the mermaid soaring past them. Its claws slashed through empty air, its face twisted with murderous rage.



Okay, so, chaos breaks loose.

It gets pretty brutal and Martha does some pretty stupid things.

Things she doesn't necessarily want to show here, dear reader.

But don't worry, you can read it all in the full version.



So, now Martha was underwater, surrounded by mermaids who wanted her dead. Which, to be fair, was entirely understandable. After all, she had just used their queen as a pony and stolen their pearls. Unfortunately, that also meant she had not a single spark of magic left in her, and this fake full moon was doing nothing but casting a dim, glittering light through the water. A mermaid shot toward her, mouth gaping, claws flashing. Martha braced herself for the impact. Her hand tightened around her consecrated dagger. She wasn’t completely helpless, and she sure as hell wasn’t going to make this easy for them.

But just before the mermaid reached her, something suddenly broke through the water and crashed into the attacking creature. Martha could only make out vague shapes, but she saw the fish monster's limbs thrash as it was forced down into the depths.

Huh.

Moments later, something brushed against Martha's arm. Whatever it was, it left a trail of tiny bubbles behind and... came back? The slim, black shape shot past her again, heading toward the surface.

Oak! Rosenrot's breathless voice thundered in her ears. The silver chain around her neck flared up, reacting to her next words: *Grab one of my batons! They'll pull you out!*

The object that had slammed the mermaid into the depths zipped past Martha's nose, narrowly missing it. She gasped in shock – bad idea! Air burst from her lungs, and panic flared in her chest. Fuck! Her body screamed for oxygen. A mermaid sank her teeth into Martha's shoulder, but her enchanted coat flared with protective magic before they could break through her skin. The creatures were blasted away, but one managed to sink its claws into her calf. Pain shot through her body, and she had no idea how she stopped herself from screaming.

Hello?! Can you grab one of my bloody batons already?!

A harsh curse crawled up Martha's throat as one of Rosenrot's rods smashed against her shoulder, nearly dislocating the joint. But thanks to her quick reflexes, she managed to grab the rod with her other hand. Just as the mermaids surged toward her again, the steel rod yanked her out of the Isar at breakneck speed. Martha burst through the water's surface. She barely had time to scream, breathe, or react in any way before she found herself staring straight into Rosenrot's wide, shocked eyes.

"Oh, *Scheiße!*" Rosenrot blurted out just before Martha crashed into her with full force. Something cracked, painfully. From the sharp agony that followed, Martha quickly realised it was her left shoulder. Rosenrot let out a pained groan as the two of them tumbled across the ground, finally coming to a stop against a massive tree trunk. Martha's

head was pounding, and for a brief moment, she considered just staying down.

“You need to get away from the Isar! Quickly!” Ra-Ra’s panicked voice pierced through Martha’s foggy senses like a blaring alarm. Her whole body throbbed with pain, her muscles ached, and her bones creaked. Fuck, she was getting old.

“You’re repeating yourself, bird,” she heard Rosenrot growl beside her. With great effort, Martha pushed herself up against the tree trunk, quickly realising that her left shoulder was dislocated. Fantastic. That arm was useless now.

Rosenrot got to her feet beside her, breathing heavily, as if she had just run the marathon of her life. Which, to be fair, wasn’t far from the truth. She had sprinted along the Isar to pull Martha out of the water. Not for Martha’s sake, of course, but for the pearls. Still, somewhere in the tangled mess of pain and exhaustion, the witch felt a flicker of gratitude. Rosenrot braced herself against the tree next to her. Her usually neat ponytail had come loose, and her face was smeared with sweat and blood. Martha spotted a fresh, deep gash on her right cheek.

“They’re coming! WE’RE GOING TO DIE!” Ra-Ra screeched, circling above them around the tree. “By the holy spirits, I never thought I’d say this, but: run into the creepy woods, Master Oak! Now! OR WE DIE!”

Martha wanted to point out that they could just as easily die in the *creepy* woods, but her chest hurt so brutally that it made her dizzy. So, she decided to save her strength. Panting, she managed to hook her dagger back onto her belt, freeing her uninjured hand. Rosenrot’s ice-blue eyes locked onto Martha.

“Your raven is seriously getting on my last nerve,” she grumbled, raising a hand to catch one of her cursed clubs – without even looking, of course. What a show-off.

“But he’s right. We need to move. Now.”

DARNED MERMAIDS

Rosenrot and Martha barely manage to escape the mermaids.

It was really close, though.

*But the two of them don't want to talk about it here because it was a bit
crass.*



Eventually, they reached a gravel path with a lone bench. With a sigh of relief, Martha let herself drop onto it, stretching out her legs while rubbing her chin, which was still lightly bleeding. Her entire body pulsed with pain, her muscles protested, and her eyelids grew heavy with exhaustion. Ra-Ra landed on the backrest beside her, puffing up his chest feathers.

“Master Oak, that was the dumbest and most reckless thing you’ve done in a long time! How could you do that to my poor heart? Do you have any idea how worried I was about you?!”

“Sorry,” she grumbled and pulled out the salve she had already used on Rosenrot. Letting her realigned, throbbing arm rest in her lap, she carefully smeared the ointment onto her chin with her other hand. Meanwhile, Ra-Ra’s head snapped toward Rosenrot, who stood stoically beside the bench, adjusting her ponytail.

“And how could you allow this, Police Director Rosenrot?! I entrusted my master to you and explicitly asked you to make sure she didn’t make any stupid, impulsive decisions! What do you have to say in your defence?”

Martha raised her eyebrows in surprise. Was Ra-Ra actually scolding Rosenrot? Curious, she glanced over at the police director, who had shoved her hands into the pockets of her leather jacket. Her ponytail was once again smooth, strict perfection. Her posture betrayed no exhaustion. Martha was beginning to understand why some fairytale creatures believed Rosenrot was made of stone.

“Do you have the pearls?” Rosenrot turned to Martha, ignoring Ra-Ra’s indignant glare. Martha closed the salve’s tin and tossed it to Rosenrot.

“Here. For your scratches. Especially that one on your cheek.”

Rosenrot didn't move, letting the tin clatter to the ground by her boots. "Okaaay. Or just ignore it. Whatever."

"Do you have the pearls, Oak?"

Martha studied Rosenrot carefully as she leaned back with caution. Shit, everything hurt. Ra-Ra muttered sulkily under his breath about how no one ever listened to him and how utterly foolish that was.

"If I do, are you going to arrest me?" Martha wanted to know. Right now, she felt too weak to even snap her fingers, but if Rosenrot pushed her, she would scrape together the last remnants of her magic. Even if it might cost her life. But at least she'd take Rosenrot down with her. Something plenty of fairytale creatures would probably be grateful for.

Rosenrot's gaze was unreadable, while Martha met it with cool defiance. The tension between them thickened until, suddenly, Rosenrot sighed. Her shoulders sank, and for a fleeting moment, Martha saw just how exhausted the police director truly was. She glanced up at the false full moon stuck to the night sky.

"If I'm being honest, that was my plan," Rosenrot finally admitted. "But since you just risked your life to retrieve the pearls, I'm willing to give it up."

"How generous."

"If you give up on Jacob's book, I'll even forgo a witch's oath."

"Nice try, but no. I sure as hell didn't risk my life just to save your sweet, firm arse. I want the book, Rosenrot. I've earned it."

"And then what? What do you expect to find? Jacob's notes make no sense. It's just the ramblings of an arrogant man who wanted to play god."

Martha tilted her head, debating how much she should reveal to Rosenrot.

"My master doesn't want the book for herself, Police Director Rosenrot," Ra-Ra explained in a firm, steady voice. The one Martha secretly called his teacher's voice. "She hopes to find clues in it on how

to free fairytale beings – like you – from the chains of their stories without shattering their souls in the process.”

Martha was stunned. Ra-Ra had told Rosenrot the truth. But why? She tried to guess what tactic her soul companion was playing at. But honestly, all she really wanted was her warm, cozy bed.

“There’s nothing about that in the book,” Rosenrot said, her voice laced with bitterness. Then, the police director bent down to pick up the tin of salve. A quiet, strained groan escaped her tightly pressed lips.

“Oh, so the mighty Rosenrot is feeling the strain too,” Martha smirked, which immediately earned her a sharp side glance from Rosenrot.

“Well, perhaps the notes make no sense to you, Police Director Rosenrot, because you are one of the fairytale beings who suffers from them.”

Rosenrot flinched as if Ra-Ra had pecked her right in the chest. She opened her mouth but closed it just as quickly. Her brow furrowed, and her posture suddenly became distant. Martha could feel how deeply those words had unsettled her.

“I know Ra-Ra can be annoying, but when it comes to things like this, he’s usually right,” Martha said gently.

Ra-Ra’s head snapped toward Martha. “*Usually?* Master Oak, surely you don’t want me to list in front of the Police Director just how often I have been right compared to you. That would only be embarrassing for you.”

“If anyone embarrassed themselves in front of Rosenrot, it was you – flapping around like a panicked chicken instead of actually helping.”

Ra-Ra puffed up indignantly, ready to fire back a sharp retort, when Rosenrot let out a loud sigh and sat down beside Martha on the bench. Both Martha and Ra-Ra watched as Rosenrot stretched out her legs, rolling her ankles, her red boots creaking with the motion. Meanwhile, she carefully dabbed some of the ointment onto the cut on her cheek. Ra-Ra hopped onto Martha’s thigh, keeping his tiny eyes fixed

on Rosenrot's hands. His wings were tense, as if he were just waiting for Rosenrot to lash out. Rosenrot's gaze flicked to Ra-Ra, who immediately dug his claws into Martha's leg.

"Please tell me you have the pearls, Oak, because I am not going through that kind of shit with you again."

Rosenrot's gaze locked onto Martha's as the witch gently touched one of Ra-Ra's claws with her finger. The raven instantly relaxed.

"Oh, come on. You handled yourself brilliantly, and might I add, you're quite good at improvising."

Rosenrot's lips curled into an amused smile. "Your stupidity seems to be rubbing off on me."

"Hey!"

"I've felt that way for quite some time," Ra-Ra agreed.

"HEY!" Martha huffed, glaring at her soul companion, who was calmly preening his feathers. "It's not stupidity, okay? It's a talent."

Rosenrot raised an eyebrow in mock challenge as she handed Martha the tin of salve. "Talent? That's a bold choice of words."

"Keep it. You'll need it more than I will."

"If you say so."

Rosenrot tucked the tin into her leather jacket, leaving her hands in her pockets as she leaned back and took a deep breath.

"I have the pearls," Martha finally admitted, watching for Rosenrot's reaction. But the police director's gaze was lost in the night sky and her own thoughts.

"I knew it," Rosenrot replied with a cautious grin, tilting her head to look directly at Martha.

"I'd suggest washing them at my shop first and putting them in a pouch or something. Unless you'd like to keep some of that white slime?"

"No, thanks."

Martha pushed herself to her feet with great effort as Ra-Ra hopped from her lap onto the backrest. She made no attempt to hide just how sore her muscles were or how old she felt at that moment.

“By the holy moon, Rosenrot, I think you need to carry me in your strong arms.”

Rosenrot snorted and rolled her eyes. “Not a chance.”

Then, in one swift motion, she jumped up! Like she was ready to conquer the world and break a dozen bones in the process. What the actual fuck?! Even Ra-Ra stared at the police director, dumbfounded.

“Oh, come on. You look like you’re still full of energy! And you’re way younger than me!” Martha tried again.

“Take one more step, and I’ll smack you.”

Martha grumbled and rubbed her injured arm. Ugh, this was going to be a long walk home. Stifling a yawn, she started moving, and to her surprise, Rosenrot stayed by her side while Ra-Ra lazily glided above them. Without much grumbling or another word, they walked – Martha limping, Rosenrot strolling – down the gravel path, back toward Munich, toward her beloved shop.

CHAPTER 7

ROSENROT

) ◉ (

Yay! They did it! They stole some pearls!

) ◉ (

There are **two more** chapters in the full version. Let's just say that not everything went so smoothly at the end.

Rosenrot finds out – *unfortunately* – why the Fairytale Council always looks the other way when it comes to Martha.

CHARACTERS & MYTHS

*Here you will find an overview of all the characters,
their mythology and the German customs
that appear in the story.*

MARTHA OAK

... is an adventurous witch who likes to throw herself headfirst into the strangest situations. But her faithful soul companion, **Ra-Ra**, doesn't like that at all! Because all he wants to do is eat biscuits and read in peace. The two of them currently live in Munich, where Martha has opened her antiquarian bookshop, where she sells magical relics and artefacts under the table.

ROSENROT (GRIMM FAIRYTALES)

... is the feared police director of the fairytale police and she's notorious for her uncompromising way of beating the truth into the light (literally, if necessary). Sure, her methods are brutal, but Rosenrot has her heart in the right place – well hidden under grim determination and an annoyed snort.

IDA (GRIMM FAIRYTALES)

... is none other than the evil stepmother/queen from the fairytale *Snow White*. She lives in exile and earns her living with poisonous mixtures. Her speciality, the *Death-Sleep Apple*, is one of her most popular products on the *Schiachten* Market. She can usually be found there with her goth look and intelligent eyes.

» MONSTERS «

NIXEN (GERMAN MYTHOLOGY)

... are the predators of the rivers in Germany and are related to the famous mermaids. However, they are not pretty, half-naked women who seduce men. Instead, they stun their prey with their song and then slowly suck the life energy out of them. They always appear in packs and make the Isar unsafe.

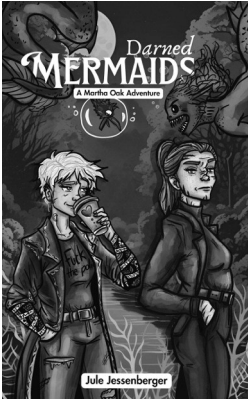
» CUSTOMS ☉ LEGENDS «

CHARACTERS & MYTHS

THE DEVIL'S FOOTPRINT (MUNICH LEGEND)

... is a footprint in the stone floor of the Frauenkirche – complete with spur! Allegedly, the footprint belongs to none other than the devil himself, who is the subject of several legends. The devilish footprint leads to the *Schiachten* Market, the black market for all fairytale and mythical creatures.

MORE ADVENTURES



DARNED MERMAIDS

Get ready for creepy monsters, brutal action, and an unlikely team-up that could end up in murder
... accidentally, of course!



THE WILD HUNT

(The Christmas Novella)

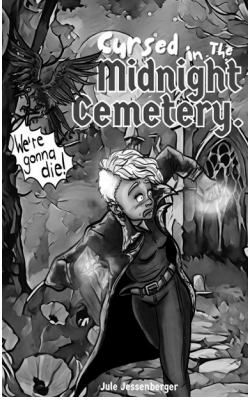
Martha Oak only wanted to catch a lost soul in secret. But suddenly the dreaded Christmas demon Krampus appears before her and asks her, of all people, for help.



CURSED IN THE MIDNIGHT CEMETERY

(Free Short Story)

Martha and Ra-Ra break into the midnight cemetery to steal a blue poppy.



However, things don't go according to plan and Ra-Ra suddenly has to cry so that Martha survives.



If you want to know more about Martha and her adventures, check out my homepage:

MARTHA OAK ADVENTURES

www.julejessenberger.com/martha-oak-adventures

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

HI! SERVUS!

My name is Jule Jessenberger and I love monsters, fairytales and witches. Unfortunately I couldn't become Indiana Jones (my back won't let me), so I write urban fantasy stories that take me on adventurous journeys.



When I'm not writing, I'm dancing around my flat, drinking far too much coffee, and fangirling over my current favourite shows, films, monsters or abstruse fairytales.



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