

CHAPTER 2

DRESDEN, GERMANY. PRESENT DAY

"Should immortals have the right to die?"

A laugh burst out of the young man's mouth. Across from him, the young woman grinned impishly.

"An oxymoron, no?" she said. "Humor me. What do you think?"

He rubbed his hands together at this, the fourth or fifth of these questions they'd traded back and forth across the little bistro table all afternoon. Around them now, the tables began to fill up with patrons, on their way home from work and errands.

His date was a woman young in appearance, with a long, silky brunette ponytail and a dark blue scarf wrapped with apparent carelessness around her slender neck. Her fingers drummed on the side of her mug of beer. She had a tiny tattoo of a spreading oak tree on her wrist, which she touched absently every now and again. The man had the same mark.

"It's not fair." He laughed. "In order to remain consistent in my arguments, don't I have to say yes? I've been arguing for freedom of choice all afternoon."

"And so convincingly," she said snidely.

"Hey! You've been playing devil's advocate. I know you agree with me."

She grinned, and her eyes glinted. She downed the last of the beer, swiped the foam off her upper lip, and set the mug down with a bang. She raised her eyebrows at the man. "Well?"

He felt a prickle at the back of his neck. He didn't know why. He pushed away from the table and stood up. "Let's walk," he said.

When he'd paid for their drinks, they stepped out onto the cobblestone street. The sun just peeked over the edge of the roofs of the old, yellow-brick buildings. A church bell tolled out six times.

"Such heavy conversation," the woman said. She tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow and gripped his arm. "I promise you, this isn't my typical first date conversation material."

He laughed. "Should I be honored or concerned?"

"I'm impressed. I thought I'd have long since scared you away."

She tipped her head back and smiled up at him. "Where do you live? Are you taking me there?"

"Shall I?" the young man wondered what that meant. "It's on Ausburgerstrasse. It's not far."

Her hand on his arm tightened, "Let's go there."

"Alright." He didn't mind, not at all. His little flat was only two rooms, plus the toilet, and most of it was taken up by easels and canvasses, splattered with paint. He'd had women in there before. The tortured artist ambiance was practically an aphrodisiac.

"But you never answered my question." She rested her chin on his shoulder and dug it into his flesh.

"Well," he said slowly, "I personally don't know any others, but I hear many of us attempt suicide."

"Mhmm."

"If a person doesn't want to live, then they shouldn't have to. But that's... that's theoretical, right?" He hadn't done the reading he was supposed to, on their history and law and such. He'd skimmed the basic points—it seemed death would be a basic point. There was no mention of death in the laws. It seemed like a given, in an immortal society. You couldn't outlaw something that doesn't exist.

She tilted her head to the side, chin still pressed into the soft muscles in his shoulder, and hugged his arm. She just let his question hang in the air. He couldn't tell if he'd answered right or wrong.

The young man turned onto Ausburgerstrasse and led her through into a little alley and up three narrow, concrete steps. They paused in front of the black, metal door.

The woman released his arm and turned to face him. "Do you want to live?" She gazed at him frankly.

"Of course," he said, fighting the urge to squirm under her gaze. Instead, he shoved his key into the lock and jimmied it back and forth until it opened. "Are you coming up?"

She followed him up the skinny little staircase, three flights up to the top floor. As he fumbled for his key in the dingy hallway, her hand came down on his arm. He looked up as the key slid into the lock.

"Um," she said. "I..."

"Yes?"

She grabbed his face and kissed him.

The shock was gone in an instant. He wrapped her up with one

arm, tangling his mouth with hers and fumbling to open the door with his free hand. They crashed together into the flat. He kicked at the door.

"Ohh," she sighed. Her hand strayed to his neck and pressed against the throbbing vein there.

"Hmmm."

Suddenly he felt a prick, then a burn in his neck.

"What the—" he tried to twist to look, but her arms restrained him.

"Shhhh," she breathed in his ear, "it's going to be okay." Her voice dragged in his ear, lower and lower like a bad recording.

His eyes focused over her shoulder on an abstract painting, all splashed with blood red. The whole apartment tilted slowly. He fell.



"No, don't touch his hair."

Something whined by the young man's ear, barely registering in his foggy mind.

"I said don't touch it, Jordan!" the same shrill, female voice said.

The whine stopped.

A hand stroked his hair, and the woman said, "I like it."

"But I need to attach my electrodes—" a male voice grumbled.

"Oh God!" The young man snapped wide awake. He bucked against the hand and struggled to sit. The room, bright white concrete, spun. He fell back, gasping.

"Hey, hey." The hand stroked his hair again. The woman's face came into focus above him. Her dark hair was in a braid now, wrapped in a coronet across her brow. She held his head firmly. Her lean arms were bare, exposed by a tight, white tank top. She smiled at him, as if nothing were amiss. "Everything will be fine."

"What do you want from me?" The young man jerked away from the electric razor that the man with a soft, round face and wire glasses brandished at him.

The woman slapped it away. "Freedom of choice," she said in a hard voice, "you are about to help me exercise it." She leaned in close to his ear, "There was an immortal that died, you know. No one knows how he did it, no one but those three bastards we pretend are Lords over us." Her voice became a whisper. "Don't

you want to know how he did it?"

"How?" he asked in a strangled voice. He meant to say no, but he couldn't, not looking into her glaring, glinting eyes.

She sat back abruptly. "I changed my mind. Shave his head."

"How?" the young man cried.

She stood up. "I don't know. We shall have to find out, together."

"Hold still," Jordan said. The razor whined and came down roughly, sloughing away his dark curls.

The young man twisted. The razor nicked his ear.

Jordan slammed his elbow into the young man's face, into his eye socket. The young man cried out.

"Inject him now," the woman's cold voice came from across the room. Her footsteps approached. "This is two-hundred milligrams."

A syringe loomed over the young man. He gasped and rolled away.

"Hey, none of that. Hold him, Jordan!"

Jordan's weight fell heavy upon him as the man straddled him and pinned his arms. The young man struggled, but his slight frame could hardly budge the man. Jordan's fist slammed into his face. "Stop! You are goddamned immortal. Stop struggling."

"This won't kill you." The woman bent over him. The syringe pricked his neck. "Not permanently. It's only a baseline. We have much more interesting things to try."

"Don't!" The young man lay limp. "Please don't. I haven't done anything to you. Don't hurt me."

"Shhhh." Her breath brushed his throbbing face as she bent low over him.

The needle pierced his neck. Heat flowed through it into him. The young man's eyes opened wide. "No—" died on his lips, and he was gone.

