

Legends II

OUTLANDER

DIANA GABALDON

OUTLANDER(1991*)

DRAGONFLY IN AMBER(1992)

VOYAGER(1994)

DRUMS OF AUTUMN(1997)

THE OUTLANDISH COMPANION(nonfiction, 1999)

THE FIERY CROSS(2001)

A BREATH OF SNOW AND ASHES(forthcoming)

THE LORD JOHN GREY BOOKS:

“Hellfire” (novella—published in

the U.K. anthology PAST POISONS, 1998)

LORD JOHN AND THE PRIVATE MATTER(2003)

LORD JOHN AND THE BROTHERHOOD OF THE BLADE

(forthcoming)

In 1946, just after World War II, a young woman named Claire Beauchamp Randall goes to the Scottish Highlands on a second honeymoon. She and her husband, Frank, have been separated by the war, he as a British army officer, she as a combat nurse, and are now becoming reacquainted, rekindling their marriage, and

thinking of starting a family. These plans hit a snag when Claire, walking by herself one afternoon, walks through a circle of standing stones and disappears. The first person she meets, upon regaining possession of her faculties, is a man in the uniform of an eighteenth-century English army officer—a man who bears a startling resemblance to her husband, Frank. This is not terribly surprising, as Captain Johnathan Randall is her husband's six-times-great-grandfather. However, Black Jack, as he's called, does not resemble his descendant in terms of personality, being a sadistic bisexual pervert, and while attempting to escape from him, Claire falls into the hands of a group of Highland Scots, who are also eager to avoid the Captain for reasons of their own.

Events culminate in Claire's being obliged to marry Jamie Fraser, a young Highlander, in order to stay out of the hands of Black Jack Randall. Hoping to escape from the Scots long enough to get back to the stone circle and Frank, Claire agrees—only to find herself gradually falling in love with Jamie.

The *Outlander* books are the story of Claire, Jamie, and Frank, and a complicated double marriage that occupies two separate centuries.

* All dates are first U.S. hardcover publication, unless otherwise noted.

They are also the story of the Jacobite Rising under Bonnie Prince Charlie, the end of the Highland clans, and the flight of the Highlanders, after the slaughter of Culloden, to the refuge and promise of the New World—a world that promises to be just as dangerous as the old one. And along the way, the *Outlander* series is an exploration of the nuances, operation, and moral complexities of time travel—and history.

The series encompasses hundreds of characters, both real and fictional. Among these, one of the most complex and interesting is Lord John Grey, whom we meet originally in *Dragonfly in Amber*, and who appears again in the succeeding books

of the series. A gay man in a time when that particular predilection could get one hanged, Lord John is a man accustomed to keeping secrets. He's also a man of honor and deep affections—whether returned or not.

Lord John's adventures are interpolations within the story line of the main *Outlander* novels—following the same timeline (complex as that may be), and involving the same universe and people—but focused on the character of Lord John Grey.

LORD JOHN

AND THE SUCCUBUS

DIANA GABALDON

Historical note: Between 1756 and 1763, Great Britain joined with her allies, Prussia and Hanover, to fight against the combined forces of Austria, Saxony—and England's ancient foe, France. In the autumn of 1757, the Duke of Cumberland was obliged to surrender at *Kloster-Zeven*, leaving the allied armies temporarily shattered and the forces of Frederick the Great of Prussia encircled by French and Austrian troops.

CHAPTER 1

DEATH RIDES A PALEHORSE

Grey's spoken German was improving by leaps and bounds, but found itself barely equal to the present task.

After a long, boring day of rain and paperwork, there had come the sound of loud dispute in the corridor outside his office, and the head of Lance-Corporal

Helwig appeared in his doorway wearing an apologetic expression.

“Major Grey?” he said, “Ich habe ein kleines Englischproblem.”

A moment later, Lance-Corporal Helwig had disappeared down the corridor like an heel sliding into mud, and Major John Grey, English liaison to the First Regiment of Hanoverian Foot, found himself adjudicating a three-way dispute among an English private, a gypsy prostitute, and a Prussian tavern owner.

“A little English problem,” Helwig had described it as. The problem, as Grey saw it was rather the lack of English.

The tavern owner spoke the local dialect with such fluency and speed that Grey grasped no more than one word in ten. The English private, who normally probably knew no more German than “Ja,” “Nein,” and the two or three crude phrases necessary to accomplish immoral transactions, was so stricken with fury that he was all but speechless in his own tongue as well.

The gypsy, whose abundant charms were scarcely impaired by a missing tooth, had German that most nearly matched Grey’s own in terms of grammar—though her vocabulary was immensely more colorful and detailed.

Using alternate hands to quell the sputterings of the private and the torrents of the Prussian, Grey concentrated his attention carefully on the gypsy’s explanations—meanwhile taking care to consider the source, which meant discounting the factual basis of most of what she said.

“... and then the disgusting pig of an Englishman, he put his [incomprehensible colloquial expression] into my [unknown Gypsy word]! And then ...”

“She said, she said, she’d do it for sixpence, sir! She did, she said so—but, but, but then ...”

“These-barbarian-pig-dogs-did-revolting-things-under-the-table-and-made-it-fall-over-so-the-leg-of-the-table-was-broken-and-the-dishes-broken-too-even-my-large-platter-which-cost-six-thalers-at-St.-Martin’s-Fair-and-the-meat-was-ruined-by-falling-on-the-floor-and-even-if-it-was-not-the-dogs-fell-upon-it-snarling-so-that-I-was-bitten-when-I-tried-to-seize-it-away-from-them-and-all-the-time-these-vile-persons-were-copulating-like-filthy-foxes-on-the-floor-and-THEN

...”

At length, an accommodation was reached, by means of Grey’s demanding that all three parties produce what money was presently in their possession. A certain amount of shifty-eyed reluctance and dramatic pantomimes of purse and pocket searching having resulted in three small heaps of silver and copper, he firmly rearranged these in terms of size and metal value, without reference as to the actual coinage involved, as these appeared to include the currency of at least six different principalities.

Eyeing the gypsy’s ensemble, which included both gold earrings and a crude but broad gold band around her finger, he assigned roughly equitable heaps to her and to the private, whose name, when asked, proved to be Bodger.

Assigning a slightly larger heap to the tavern owner, he then scowled fiercely at the three combatants, jabbed a finger at the money, and jerked a thumb over his shoulder, indicating that they should take the coins and leave while he was still in possession of his temper.

This they did, and storing away a most interesting gypsy curse for future reference, Grey returned tranquilly to his interrupted correspondence.

26 September 1757

To Harold, Earl of Melton

From Lord John Grey

The Township of Gundwitz,

Kingdom of Prussia

My Lord—

In reply to your request for information regarding my situation, I beg to say that I am well suited. My duties are . . . He paused, considering, then wrote, interesting, smiling slightly to himself at thought of what interpretation Hal might put upon that, . . . and the conditions comfortable. I am quartered with several other English and German officers in the house of a Princess von Lowenstein, the widow of a minor Prussian noble, who possesses a fine estate near the town.

We have two English regiments quartered here; Sir Peter Hicks's 35th, and half of the 52nd—I am told Colonel Ruysdale is in command, but have not yet met him, the 52nd having arrived only days ago. As the Hanoverians to whom I am attached and a number of Prussian troops are occupying all the suitable quarters in the town, Hicks's men are encamped some way to the south; Ruysdale to the north. French forces are reported to be within twenty miles, but we expect no immediate trouble. Still, so late in the year, the snow will come soon, and put an end to the fighting; they may try for a final thrust before the winter sets in. Sir Peter begs me send his regards.

He dipped his quill again, and changed tacks.

My grateful thanks to your good wife for the smallclothes, which are superior in quality to what is available here.

At this point, he was obliged to transfer the pen to his left hand in order to scratch ferociously at the inside of his left thigh. He was wearing a pair of the local German product under his breeches, and while they were well laundered and not infested with vermin, they were made of coarse linen and appeared to have been starched with some substance derived from potatoes, which was irritating in the extreme.

Tell Mother I am still intact, and not starving, he concluded, transferring the pen back to his right hand. Quite the reverse, in fact; Princess von Lowenstein has an excellent cook.

Your Most Affec't. Brother,

J.

Sealing this with a brisk stamp of his half-moon signet, he then took down one of the ledgers and a stack of reports, and began the mechanical work of recording deaths and desertions. There was an outbreak of bloody flux among the men; more than a score lost to it in the last two weeks.

The thought brought the gypsy woman's last remarks to mind. Blood and bowels had both come into that, though he feared he had missed some of the refinements.

Perhaps she had merely been trying to curse him with the flux?

He paused for a moment, twiddling the quill. It was rather unusual for the flux to occur in cold weather; it was more commonly a disease of hot summer, while winter was the season for consumption, catarrh, influenza, and fever.

He was not at all inclined to believe in curses, but did believe in poison. A whore would have ample opportunity to administer poison to her customers . . . but to what end? He turned to another folder of reports and shuffled through them, but saw no increase in the report of robbery or missing items—and the dead soldiers' comrades would certainly have noted anything of the kind. A man's belongings were sold by auction at his death, the money used to pay his debts and—if anything was left—to be sent to his family.

He put back the folder and shrugged, dismissing it. Illness and death trod closely in a soldier's footsteps, regardless of season or gypsy curse. Still, it might be worth warning Private Bodger to be wary of what he ate, particularly in the company of light-frigates and other dubious women.

A gentle rain had begun to fall again outside, and the sound of it against the windowpanes combined with the soothing shuffle of paper and scratch of quill to induce a pleasant sense of mindless drowsiness. He was disturbed from this trancelike state by the sound of footsteps on the wooden stair.

Captain Stephan von Namtzen, Landgrave von Erdberg, poked his handsome blond head through the doorway, ducking automatically to avoid braining himself on the lintel. The gentleman following him had no such difficulty, being a foot or so shorter.

“Captain von Namtzen,” Grey said, standing politely. “May I be of assistance?”

“I have here Herr Blomberg,” Stephen said in English, indicating the small, round, nervous-looking individual who accompanied him. “He wishes to borrow your horse.”

Grey was sufficiently startled by this that he merely said, “Which one?” rather than Who is Herr Blomberg? or What does he want with a horse?

The first of these questions was largely academic in any case; Herr Blomberg wore an elaborate chain of office about his neck, done in broad, flat links of enamel and chased gold, from which depended a seven-pointed starburst, enclosing a plaque of enamel on which was painted some scene of historical interest. Herr Blomberg’s engraved silver coat buttons and shoe buckles were sufficient to proclaim his wealth; the chain of office merely confirmed his importance as being secular, rather than noble.

“Herr Blomberg is Buergermeister of the town,” Stephan explained, taking matters in a strictly logical order of importance, as was his habit. “He requires a white stallion, in order that he shall discover and destroy a succubus. Someone has told him that you possess such a horse,” he concluded, frowning at the

temerity of whoever had been bandying such information.

“A succubus?” Grey asked, automatically rearranging the logical order of this speech, as was his habit.

Herr Blomberg had no English but evidently recognized the word, for he nodded vigorously, his old-fashioned wig bobbing, and launched into impassioned speech, accompanied by much gesticulation.

With Stephan’s assistance, Grey gathered that the town of Gundwitz had recently suffered a series of mysterious and disturbing events, involving a number of men who claimed to have been victimized in their sleep by a young woman of demonic aspect. By the time these events had made their way to the attention of Herr Blomberg, the situation was serious; a man had died.

“Unfortunately,” Stephan added, still in English, “the dead man is ours.” He pressed his lips tightly together, conveying his dislike of the situation.

“Ours?” Grey asked, unsure what this usage implied, other than that the victim had been a soldier.

“Mine,” Stephan clarified, looking further displeased. “One of the Prussians.”

The Landgrave von Erdberg had three hundred Hanoverian foot-troops, raised from his own lands, equipped and funded from his personal fortune. In addition, Captain von Namtzen commanded two further companies of Prussian horse, and was in temporary command of the fragments of an artillery company whose officers had all died in an outbreak of the bloody flux.

Grey wished to hear more details regarding both the immediate death and—most particularly—the demoniac visitations, but his questions along these lines were interrupted by Herr Blomberg, who had been growing more restive by the moment.

“It grows soon dark,” the Buergermeister pointed out in German. “We do not wish to fall into an open grave, so wet as it is.”

“Ein offenes Grab?” Grey repeated, feeling a sudden chill draft on the back of his neck.

“This is true,” Stephan said, with a nod of moody acquiescence. “It would be a terrible thing if your horse were to break his leg; he is a splendid creature. Come then, let us go.”

“What is a s-succubus, me lord?” Tom Byrd’s teeth were chattering, mostly from chill. The sun had long since set, and it was raining much harder. Grey could feel the wet seeping through the shoulders of his officer’s greatcoat; Byrd’s thin jacket was already soaked through, pasted to the young valet’s stubby torso like butcher’s paper around a joint of beef.

“I believe it is a sort of female . . . spirit,” Grey said, carefully avoiding the more evocative term, “demon.” The churchyard gates yawned before them like open jaws, and the darkness beyond seemed sinister in the extreme. No need to terrify the boy unnecessarily.

“Horses don’t like ghosts,” Byrd said, sounding truculent. “Everybody knows that, me lord.”

He wrapped his arms around himself, shivering, and huddled closer to Karolus, who shook his mane as though in agreement, showering water liberally over both Grey and Byrd.

“Surely you don’t believe in ghosts, Tom?” Grey said, trying to be jocularly reassuring. He swiped a strand of wet fair hair out of his face, wishing Stephan would hurry.

“ ’Tisn’t a matter what don’t believe in, me lord,” Byrd replied, “What if this lady’s ghost believes in us ? Who is she, anyway?” The lantern he carried was

sputtering fitfully in the wet, despite its shield. Its dim light failed to illumine more than a vague outline of boy and horse, but perversely caught the shine of their eyes, lending them a disturbingly supernatural appearance, like staring wraiths.

Grey glanced aside, keeping an eye out for Stephan and the Buergermeister, who had gone to assemble a digging party. There was some movement outside the tavern, just visible at the far end of the street. That was sensible of Stephan. Men with a fair amount of beer on board were much more likely to be enthusiastic about the current prospect than were sober ones.

“Well, I do not believe that it is precisely a matter of ghosts,” he said. “The German belief, however, seems to be that the succubus . . . er . . . the feminine spirit . . . may possess the body of a recently dead person.”

Tom cast a look into the inky depths of the churchyard, and glanced back at Grey.

“Oh?” he said.

“Ah,” Grey replied.

Byrd pulled the slouch hat low on his forehead and hunched his collar up around his ears, clutching the horse’s halter rope close to his chest. Nothing of his round face now showed save a down turned mouth, but that was eloquent. Karolus stamped one foot and shifted his weight, tossing his head a little. He didn’t seem to mind either rain or churchyard, but was growing restive. Grey patted the stallion’s thick neck, taking comfort from the solid feel of the cold firm hide and massive body. Karolus turned his head and blew hot breath affectionately into his ear.

“Almost ready,” he said soothingly, twining a fist in the horse’s soggy mane.

“Now, Tom. When Captain von Namtzen arrives with his men, you and Karolus will

walk forward very slowly. You are to lead him back and forth across the churchyard. Keep a few feet in front of him, but leave some slack in the rope.”

The point of this procedure, of course, was to keep Karolus from stumbling over a gravestone or falling into any open graves, by allowing Tom to do it first.

Ideally, Grey had been given to understand, the horse should be turned into the churchyard and allowed to wander over the graves at his own will, but neither he nor Stephan were willing to risk Karolus’s valuable legs in the dark.

He had suggested waiting until the morning, but Herr Blomberg was insistent. The succubus must be found, without delay. Grey was more than curious to hear the details of the attacks, but had so far been told little more than that a Private Koenig had been found dead in the barracks, the body bearing marks that made his manner of death clear. What marks? Grey wondered.

Classically educated, he had read of succubae and incubi, but had been taught to regard such references as quaintly superstitious, of a piece with other medieval Popish nonsense like saints who strolled about with their heads in their hands or statues of the Virgin whose tears healed the sick. His father had been a rationalist, an observer of the ways of nature and a firm believer in the logic of phenomena.

His two months’ acquaintance with the Germans, though, had shown him that they were deeply superstitious; more so even than the English common soldiers. Even Stephan kept a small carved image of some pagan deity about his person at all times, to guard against being struck by lightning, and the Prussians seemed to harbor similar notions, judging from Herr Blomberg’s behavior.

The digging party was making its way up the street now, bright with sputtering torches and emitting snatches of song. Karolus snorted and pricked his ears;

Karolus, Grey had been told, was fond of parades.

“Well, then.” Stephan loomed suddenly out of the murk at his side, looking pleased with himself under the broad shelf of his hat. “All is ready, Major?”

“Yes. Go ahead then, Tom.”

The diggers—mostly laborers, armed with spades, hoes, and mattocks—stood back, lurching tipsily and stepping on each other’s shoes. Tom, lantern held delicately before him in the manner of an insect’s feeler, took several steps forward—then stopped. He turned, tugging on the rope.

Karolus stood solidly, declining to move.

“I told you, me lord,” Byrd said, sounding more cheerful. “Horses don’t like ghosts. Me uncle had an old cart horse once, wouldn’t take a step past a churchyard. We had to take him clear round two streets to get him past.”

Stephan made a noise of disgust.

“It is not a ghost,” he said, striding forward, prominent chin held high. “It is a succubus. A demon. That is quite different.”

“Daemon?” one of the diggers said, catching the English word and looking suddenly dubious. “Ein Teufel?”

“Demon?” said Tom Byrd, and gave Grey a look of profound betrayal.

“Something of the kind, I believe,” Grey said, and coughed. “If such a thing should exist, which I doubt it does.”

A chill of uncertainty seemed to have overtaken the party with this demonstration of the horse’s reluctance. There was shuffling and murmuring, and heads turned to glance back in the direction of the tavern.

Stephan, magnificently disregarding this tendency to pusillanimity in his troops, clapped Karolus on the neck and spoke to him encouragingly in German.

The horse snorted and arched his neck, but still resisted Tom Byrd’s tentative

yanks on his halter. Instead, he swiveled his enormous head toward Grey, jerking Byrd off his feet. The boy lost his grip on the rope, staggered off balance, trying vainly to keep hold of the lantern, and finally slipped on a stone submerged in the mud, landing on his buttocks with a rude splat.

This mishap had the salutary effect of causing the diggers to roar with laughter, restoring their spirits. Several of the torches had by now been extinguished by the rain, and everyone was thoroughly wet, but goatskin flasks and pottery jugs were produced from a number of pockets and offered to Tom Byrd by way of restorative, being then passed around the company in sociable fashion. Grey took a deep swig of the fiery plum liquor himself, handed back the jug, and came to a decision.

“I’ll ride him.”

Before Stephan could protest, Grey had taken a firm grip on Karolus’s mane and swung himself up on the stallion’s broad back. Karolus appeared to find Grey’s familiar weight soothing; the broad white ears, which had been pointing to either side in suspicion, rose upright again, and the horse started forward willingly enough at Grey’s nudge against his sides.

Tom, too, seemed heartened, and ran to pick up the trailing halter rope. There was a ragged cheer from the diggers, and the party moved awkwardly after them, through the yawning gates.

It seemed much darker in the churchyard than it had looked from outside. Much quieter, too; the jokes and chatter of the men died away into an uneasy silence, broken only by an occasional curse as someone knocked against a tombstone in the dark. Grey could hear the patter of rain on the brim of his hat, and the suck and thump of Karolus’s hooves as he plodded obediently through the mud.

He strained his eyes to see what lay ahead, beyond the feeble circle of light cast by Tom's lantern. It was black-dark, and he felt cold, despite the shelter of his greatcoat. The damp was rising, mist coming up out of the ground; he could see wisps of it purling away from Tom's boots, disappearing in the lantern light. More of it drifted in an eerie fog around the mossy tombstones of neglected graves, leaning like rotted teeth in their sockets.

The notion, as it had been explained to him, was that a white stallion had the power to detect the presence of the supernatural. The horse would stop at the grave of the succubus, which could then be opened, and steps taken to destroy the creature.

Grey found a number of logical assumptions wanting in this proposal, chief among which—putting aside the question of the existence of succubae, and why a sensible horse should choose to have anything to do with one—was that Karolus was not choosing his own path. Tom was doing his best to keep slack in the rope, but as long as he held it, the horse was plainly going to follow him.

On the other hand, he reflected, Karolus was unlikely to stop anywhere so long as Tom kept walking. That being true, the end result of this exercise would be merely to cause them all to miss their suppers and to render them thoroughly wet and chilled. Still, he supposed they would be yet more wet and chilled if obliged actually to open graves and perform whatever ritual might follow—
A hand clamped itself on his calf, and he bit his tongue—luckily, as it kept him from crying out.

“You are all right, Major?” It was Stephan, looming up beside him, tall and dark in a woolen cloak. He had left aside his plumed helmet, and wore a soft-brimmed wide hat against the rain, which made him look both less impressive and more approachable.

“Certainly,” Grey said, mastering his temper. “How long must we do this?”

Von Namtzen lifted one shoulder in a shrug.

“Until the horse stops, or until Herr Blomberg is satisfied.”

“Until Herr Blomberg begins wanting his supper, you mean.” He could hear the Buergermeister’s voice at a distance behind them, lifted in exhortation and reassurance.

A white plume of breath floated out from under the brim of von Namtzen’s hat, the laugh behind it barely audible.

“He is more . . . resolute? . . . than you might suppose. It is his duty, the welfare of the village. He will endure as long as you will, I assure you.”

Grey pressed his bitten tongue against the roof of his mouth, to prevent any injudicious remarks.

Stephan’s hand was still curled about his leg, just above the edge of his boot.

Cold as it was, he felt no warmth from the grasp, but the pressure of the big hand was both a comfort and something more.

“The horse—he goes well, nicht wahr?”

“He is wonderful,” Grey said, with complete sincerity. “I thank you again.”

Von Namtzen flicked his free hand in dismissal, but made a pleased sound, deep in his throat. He had—against Grey’s protests—insisted upon making the stallion a gift to Grey, “in token of our alliance and our friendship,” he had said firmly, clapping Grey upon both shoulders and then seizing him in fraternal embrace, kissing him formally upon both cheeks and mouth. At least Grey was obliged to consider it a fraternal embrace, unless and until circumstances might prove it otherwise.

But Stephan’s hand still curled around his calf, hidden under the skirt of his

greatcoat.

Grey glanced toward the squat bulk of the church, a black mass that loomed beyond the churchyard.

“I am surprised that the minister is not with us. Does he disapprove of this—excursion?”

“The minister is dead. A fever of some kind, die rote Ruhn, more than a month since. They will send another, from Strausberg, but he has not come yet.” Little wonder; a large number of French troops lay between Strausberg and the town; travel would be difficult, if not impossible.

“I see.” Grey glanced back over his shoulder. The diggers had paused to open a fresh jug, torches tilting in momentary distraction.

“Do you believe in this—this succubus?” he asked, careful to keep his voice low. Rather to his surprise, von Namtzen didn’t reply at once. At last, the Hanoverian took a deep breath and hunched his broad shoulders in a gesture not quite a shrug.

“I have seen . . . strange things from time to time,” von Namtzen said at last, very quietly. “In this country, particularly. And a man is dead, after all.”

The hand on his leg squeezed briefly and dropped away, sending a small flutter of sensation up Grey’s back.

He took a deep breath of cold, heavy air, tinged with smoke, and coughed. It was like the smell of grave-dirt, he thought, and then wished the thought had not occurred to him.

“One thing I confess I do not quite understand,” he said, straightening himself in the saddle. “A succubus is a demon, if I am not mistaken. How is it, then, that such a creature should take refuge in a churchyard, in consecrated ground?”

“Oh,” von Namtzen said, sounding surprised that this was not obvious. “The

succubus takes possession of the body of a dead person, and rests within it by day. Such a person must of course be a corrupt and wicked sort, filled with depravity and perversion. So that even within the churchyard the succubus will suitable refuge find.”

“How recently must the person have died?” Grey asked. Surely it would make their perambulations more efficient were they to go directly to the more recent graves. From the little he could see in the swaying light of Tom’s lantern, most of the stones nearby had stood where they were for decades, if not centuries.

“That I do not know,” von Namtzen admitted. “Some people say that the body itself rises with the succubus; others say that the body remains in the grave, and by night the demon rides the air as a dream, seeking men in their sleep.”

Tom Byrd’s figure was indistinct in the gathering fog, but Grey saw his shoulders rise, nearly touching the brim of his hat. He coughed again, and cleared his throat.

“I see. And . . . er . . . what, precisely, do you intend to do, should a suitable body be located?”

Here von Namtzen was on surer ground.

“Oh, that is simple,” he assured Grey. “We will open the coffin, and drive an iron rod through the corpse’s heart. Herr Blomberg has brought one.”

Tom Byrd made an inarticulate noise, which Grey thought it wiser to ignore.

“I see,” he said. His nose had begun to run with the cold, and he wiped it on his sleeve. At least he no longer felt hungry.

They paced for a little in silence. The Buergermeister had fallen silent, too, though the distant sounds of squelching and glugging behind them indicated that the digging party was loyally persevering, with the aid of more plum brandy.

“The dead man,” Grey said at last. “Private Koenig. Where was he found? And you mentioned marks upon the body—what sort of marks?”

Von Namtzen opened his mouth to answer, but was forestalled. Karolus glanced suddenly to the side, nostrils flaring. Then he flung up his head with a great “Harrumph!” of startlement, nearly hitting Grey in the face. At the same moment, Tom Byrd uttered a high, thin scream, dropped the rope, and ran.

The big horse flexed his hindquarters, slewed round, and took off, leaping a small stone angel that stood in his path; Grey saw it as a looming pale blur, but had no time to worry about it before it passed beneath the stallion’s outstretched hooves, its stone mouth gaping as though in astonishment.

Lacking reins and unable to seize the halter rope, Grey had no recourse but to grip the stallion’s mane in both hands, clamp his knees, and stick like a burr.

There were shouts and screams behind him, but he had no attention to spare for anything but the wind in his ears and the elemental force between his thighs.

They bounded like a skipping cannonball through the dark, striking the ground and rocketing upward, seeming to cover leagues at a stride. He leaned low and held on, the stallion’s mane whipping like stinging nettles across his face, the horse’s breath loud in his ears—or was it his own?

Through streaming eyes, he glimpsed light flickering in the distance, and realized they were heading now for the village. There was a six-foot stone wall in the way; he could only hope the horse noticed it in time.

He did; Karolus skidded to a stop, divots of mud and withered grass shooting up around him, sending Grey lurching up onto his neck. The horse reared, came down, then turned sharply, trotted several yards, and slowed to a walk, shaking his head as though to try to free himself of the flapping rope.

Legs quivering as with ague, Grey slid off, and, with cold-stiff fingers,

grasped the rope.

“You bigwhitebastard ,” he said, filled with the joy of survival, and laughed.

“You’re bloody marvelous!”

Karolus took this compliment with tolerant grace, and shoved at him, whickering softly. The horse seemed largely over his fright, whatever had caused it; he could but hope Tom Byrd fared as well.

Grey leaned against the wall, panting until his breath came back and his heart slowed a bit. The exhilaration of the ride was still with him, but he had now a moment’s heed to spare for other things.

At the far side of the churchyard, the torches were clustered close together, lighting the fog with a reddish glow. He could see the digging party, standing in a knot shoulder to shoulder, all in attitudes of the most extreme interest.

And toward him, a tall black figure came through the mist, silhouetted by the torch glow behind him. He had a moment’s turn, for the figure looked sinister, dark cloak swirling about it—but it was, of course, merely Captain von Namtzen.

“Major Grey!” von Namtzen called. “Major Grey!”

“Here!” Grey shouted, finding breath. The figure altered course slightly,

hurrying toward him with long, stilted strides thatzigged andzagged to avoid obstacles in the path. How in God’s name had Karolus managed on that ground, he wondered, without breaking a leg or both their necks?

“Major Grey,” Stephan said, grasping both his hands tightly. “John. You are all right?”

“Yes,” he said, gripping back. “Yes, of course. What has happened? My valet—Mr. Byrd—is he all right?”

“He has into a hole fallen, but he is not hurt. We have found a body. A dead

man.”

Grey felt a sudden lurch of the heart.

“What—”

“Not in a grave,” the Captain hastened to assure him. “Lying on the ground, leaning against one of the tombstones. Your valet saw the corpse’s face most suddenly in the light of his lantern, and was frightened.”

“I am not surprised. Is he one of yours?”

“No. One of yours.”

“What?” Grey stared up at the Hanoverian. Stephan’s face was no more than a black oval in the dark. He squeezed Grey’s hands gently and let them go.

“An English soldier. You will come?”

He nodded, feeling the cold air heavy in his chest. It was not impossible; there were English regiments to north and to south of the town, no more than an hour’s ride away. Men off duty would often come into town in search of drink, dice, and women. It was, after all, the reason for his own presence here—to act as liaison between the English regiments and their German allies.

The body was less horrible in appearance than he might have supposed; while plainly dead, the man seemed quite peaceful, slumped half sitting against the knee of a stern stone matron holding a book. There was no blood nor wound apparent, and yet Grey felt his stomach clench with shock.

“You know him?” Stephan was watching him intently, his own face stern and clean as those of the stone memorials about them.

“Yes.” Grey knelt by the body. “I spoke to him only a few hours ago.”

He put the backs of his fingers delicately against the dead man’s throat—the slack flesh was clammy, slick with rain, but still warm. Unpleasantly warm. He glanced down, and saw that PrivateBodger’s breeches were opened, the stuff of

his shirttail sticking out, rumped over the man's thighs.

"Does he still have his dick, or did the she-thing eat it?" said a low voice in German. A faint, shocked snigger ran through the men. Grey pressed his lips tight together and jerked up the soggy shirttail. Private Bodger was somewhat more than intact, he was glad to see. So were the diggers; there was an audible sigh of mass relief behind him.

Grey stood, conscious all at once of tiredness and hunger, and of the rain pattering on his back.

"Wrap him in a canvas; bring him . . ." Where? The dead man must be returned to his own regiment, but not tonight. "Bring him to the Schloss . Tom? Show them the way; ask the gardener to find you a suitable shed."

"Yes, me lord." Tom Byrd was nearly as pale as the dead man, and covered with mud, but once more in control of himself. "Will I take the horse, me lord? Or will you ride him?"

Grey had forgotten entirely about Karolus, and looked blankly about. Where had he gone?

One of the diggers had evidently caught the word "horse" and understood it, for a murmur of "Das Pferd" rippled through the group, and the men began to look around, lifting the torches high and craning their necks.

One man gave an excited shout, pointing into the dark. A large white blur stood a little distance away.

"He's on a grave! He's standing still! He's found it!"

This caused a stir of sudden excitement; everyone pressed forward together, and Grey feared lest the horse should take alarm and run again.

No such danger; Karolus was absorbed in nibbling at the soggy remnants of

several wreaths, piled at the foot of an imposing tombstone. This stood guard over a small group of family graves—one very recent, as the wreaths and raw earth showed. As the torchlight fell upon the scene, Grey could easily read the name chiseled black into the stone.

BLOMBERG, it read.

CHAPTER 2

BUT WHAT, EXACTLY, DOES A SUCCUBUS DO ?

They found Schloss Lowenstein alight with candles and welcoming fires, despite the late hour of their return. They were far past the time for dinner, but there was food in abundance on the sideboard, and Grey and von Namtzen refreshed themselves thoroughly, interrupting their impromptu feast periodically to give particulars of the evening's adventures to the house's other inhabitants, who were agog with curiosity.

"No! Herr Blomberg's mother?" The Princess von Lowenstein pressed fingers to her mouth, eyes wide in delighted shock. "Old Agathe? I don't believe it!"

"Nor does Herr Blomberg," von Namtzen assured her, reaching for a leg of roast pheasant. "He was most . . . vehement?" He turned toward Grey, eyebrows raised, then turned back to the Princess, nodding with assurance. "Vehement."

He had been. Grey would have chosen "apoplectic" as the better description, but was reasonably sure that none of the Germans present would know the term, and he had no idea how to translate it. They were all speaking English, as a courtesy to the British officers present, who included a Captain of Horse named Billman, Colonel Sir Peter Hicks, and a Lieutenant Dundas, a young Scottish officer in charge of an ordnance survey party.

"The old woman was a saint, absolutely a saint!" protested the Dowager Princess

Lowenstein, crossing herself piously. "I do not believe it, I cannot!"

The younger Princess cast a brief glance at her mother-in-law, then away—meeting Grey's eyes. The Princess had bright blue eyes, all the brighter for candlelight, brandy—and mischief.

The Princess was a widow of a year's standing. Grey judged from the large portrait over the mantelpiece in the drawing room that the late Prince had been roughly thirty years older than his wife; she bore her loss bravely.

"Dear me," she said, contriving to look winsome, despite her anxiety. "As if the French were not enough! Now we are to be threatened with nightmare demons?"

"Oh, you will be quite safe, madam, I assure you," Sir Peter assured her.

"What-what? With so many gallant gentlemen in the house?"

The ancient Dowager glanced at Grey, and said something about gentlemen in highly accented German that Grey didn't quite catch, but the Princess flushed like a peony in bloom, and von Namtzen, within earshot, choked on a swallow of wine.

Captain Billman smote the Hanoverian helpfully on the back.

"Is there news of the French?" Grey asked, thinking that perhaps the conversation should be guided back to more earthly concerns before the party retired to bed.

"Look to be a few of the bastards milling round," Billman said casually, cutting his eyes at the women in a manner suggesting that the word "few" was a highly discreet euphemism. "Expect they'll be moving on, heading for the west within a day or so."

Or heading for Strausberg, to join with the French regiment reported there, Grey thought. He returned Billman's meaningful look. Gundwitz lay in the bottom of a

river valley—directly between the French position and Strausberg .

“So,” Billman said, changing the subject with a heavy jocularly, “your succubus got away, did she?”

Von Namtzen cleared his throat.

“I would not say that, particularly,” he said. “Herr Blomberg refused to allow the men to disturb the grave, of course, but I have men ordered to guard it.”

“That’ll be popular duty, I shouldn’t think,” said Sir Peter, with a glance at a nearby window, where even multiple thicknesses of silk and woolen draperies and heavy shutters failed to muffle the thrum of rain and the occasional distant boom of thunder.

“A good idea,” one of the German officers said, in heavily accented but very correct English. “We do not wish to have rumors fly about, that there is a succubus behaving badly in the vicinity of the soldiers.”

“But what, exactly, does a succubus do ?” the Princess inquired, looking expectantly from face to face.

There was a sudden massive clearing of throats and gulping of wine as all the men present tried to avoid her eye. A explosive snort from the Dowager indicated what she thought of this cowardly behavior.

“A succubus is a she-demon,” the old lady said, precisely. “It comes to men in dreams, and has congress with them, in order to extract from them their seed.”

The Princess’s eyes went perfectly round. She hadn’t known, Grey observed.

“Why?” she asked. “What does she do with it? Demons do not give birth, do they?”

Grey felt a laugh trying to force its way up under his breastbone, and hastily took another drink.

“Well, no,” said Stephan von Namtzen, somewhat flushed, but still self-possessed. “Not exactly. The succubus procures the . . . er . . . essence,”

he gave a slight bow of apology to the Dowager at this, “and then will mate with an incubus—this being a male demon, you see?”

The old lady looked grim, and placed a hand upon the religious medal she wore pinned to her gown.

Von Namtzen took a deep breath, seeing that everyone was hanging upon his words, and fixed his gaze upon the portrait of the late Prince.

“The incubus then will seek out a human woman by night, couple with her, and impregnate her with the stolen seed—thus producing demon-spawn.”

Lieutenant Dundas, who was very young and likely a Presbyterian, looked as though he were being strangled by his stock. The other men, all rather red in the face, attempted to look as though they were entirely familiar with the phenomenon under discussion and thought little of it. The Dowager looked thoughtfully at her daughter-in-law, then upward at the picture of her deceased son, eyebrows raised as though in silent conversation.

“Ooh!” Despite the late hour and the informality of the gathering, the Princess had a fan, which she spread now before her face in shock, big blue eyes wide above it. These eyes swung toward Grey, and blinked in pretty supplication.

“And do you really think, Lord John, that there is such a creature . . .” she shuddered, with an alluring quiver of the bosom, “. . . prowling near?”

Neither eyes nor bosom swayed him, and it was clear to him that the Princess found considerably more excitement than fear in the notion, but he smiled reassuringly, an Englishman secure in his rationality.

“No,” he said. “I don’t.”

As though in instant contradiction of this stout opinion, a blast of wind struck the Schloss, carrying with it a burst of hail that rattled off the shutters and

fell hissing down the chimney. The thunder of the hailstorm upon roof and walls and outbuildings was so great that for a moment it drowned all possibility of conversation.

The party stood as though paralyzed, listening to the roar of the elements.

Grey's eyes met Stephan's; the Hanoverian lifted his chin a little in defiance of the storm, and gave him a small, private smile. Grey smiled back, then glanced away—just in time to see a dark shape fall from the chimney and plunge into the flames with a piercing shriek.

The shriek was echoed at once by the women—and possibly by Lieutenant Dundas, though Grey could not quite swear to it.

Something was struggling in the fire, flapping and writhing, and the stink of scorched skin came sharp and acrid in the nose. Acting by sheer instinct, Grey seized a poker and swept the thing out of the fire and onto the hearth, where it skittered crazily, emitting sounds that pierced his eardrums.

Stephan lunged forward and stamped on the thing, putting an end to the unnerving display.

“A bat,” he said calmly, removing his boot. “Take it away.”

The footman to whom he addressed this command came hastily and, flinging a napkin over the blackened corpse, scooped it up and carried it out on a tray, this ceremonial disposal giving Grey a highly inappropriate vision of the bat making a second appearance at breakfast, roasted and garnished with stewed prunes.

A sudden silence had fallen upon the party. This was broken by the sudden chiming of the clock, which made everyone jump, then laugh nervously.

The party broke up, the men standing politely as the women withdrew, then pausing for a few moments' conversation as they finished their wine and brandy.

With no particular sense of surprise, Grey found Sir Peter at his elbow.

“A word with you, Major?” Sir Peter said quietly.

“Of course, sir.”

The group had fragmented into twos and threes; it was not difficult to draw aside a little, under the pretext of examining a small, exquisite statue of Eros that stood on one of the tables.

“You’ll be taking the body back to the Fifty-second in the morning, I expect?”

The English officers had all had a look at Private Bodger, declaring that he was none of theirs; by elimination, he must belong to Colonel Ruysdale’s Fifty-second Foot, presently encamped on the other side of Gundwitz.

Without waiting for Grey’s nod, Sir Peter went on, touching the statue abstractedly.

“The French are up to something; had a scout’s report this afternoon, great deal of movement among the troops. They’re preparing to move, but we don’t yet know where or when. I should feel happier if a few more of Ruysdale’s troops were to move to defend the bridge at Aschenwald, just in case.”

“I see,” Grey said cautiously. “And you wish me to carry a message to that effect to Colonel Ruysdale.”

Sir Peter made a slight grimace.

“I’ve sent one. I think it might be helpful, though, if you were to suggest that von Namtzen wished it, as well.”

Grey made a noncommittal noise. It was common knowledge that Sir Peter and Ruysdale were not on good terms. The Colonel might well be more inclined to oblige a German ally.

“I will mention it to Captain von Namtzen,” he said, “though I expect he will be

agreeable.” He would have taken his leave then, but Sir Peter hesitated, indicating that there was something further.

“Sir?” Grey said.

“I think . . .” Sir Peter said, glancing around and lowering his voice still further, “. . . that perhaps the Princess should be advised—cautiously; no need to give alarm—that there is some slight possibility . . . if the French were in fact to cross the valley . . .” He rested a hand thoughtfully upon the head of Eros and glanced at the other furnishings of the room, which included a number of rare and costly items. “She might wish to withdraw her family to a place of safety. Not amiss to suggest a few things be put safely away in the meantime. Shouldn’t like to see a thing like that decorating a French general’s desk, eh?”

“That” was the skull of an enormous bear—an ancient cave-bear, the Princess had informed the party earlier—that stood by itself upon a small, draped table. The skull was covered with gold, hammered flat and etched in primitive designs, with a row of semiprecious stones running up the length of the snout, then diverging to encircle the empty eye sockets. It was a striking object.

“Yes,” Grey said, “I quite . . . oh. You wish me to speak with the Princess?”

Sir Peter relaxed a little, having accomplished his goal.

“She seems quite taken by you, Grey,” he said, his original joviality returning.

“Advice might be better received from you, eh? Besides, you’re a liaison, aren’t you?”

“To be sure,” Grey said, less than pleased, but aware that he had received a direct order. “I shall attend to it as soon as I may, sir.” He took leave of the others remaining in the drawing room, and made his way to the staircase that led to the upper floors.

The Princess von Lowensteindid seem most taken with him; he wasn’t surprised

that Sir Peter had noticed her smiles and languishings. Fortunately, she seemed equally taken with Stephan von Namtzen, going so far as to have Hanoverian delicacies served regularly at dinner in his honor.

At the top of the stair, he hesitated. There were three corridors opening off the landing, and it always took a moment to be sure which of the stone-floored halls led to his own chamber. A flicker of movement to the left attracted his eye, and he turned that way, to see someone dodge out of sight behind a tall armoire that stood against the wall.

“Woistdas?” he asked sharply, and got a stifled gasp in reply.

Moving cautiously, he went and peered around the edge of the armoire, to find a small, dark-haired boy pressed against the wall, both hands clasped over his mouth and eyes round as saucers. The boy wore a nightshirt and cap, and had plainly escaped from his nursery. He recognized the child, though he had seen him only once or twice before; it was the Princess’s young son—what was the boy’s name? Heinrich? Reinhardt?

“Don’t be afraid,” he said gently to the boy, in his slow, careful German. “I am your mother’s friend. Where is your room?”

The boy didn’t reply, but his eyes flicked down the hallway and back. Grey saw no open doors, but held out a hand to the boy.

“It is very late,” he said. “Shall we find your bed?”

The boy shook his head so hard that the tassel of his nightcap slapped against the wall.

“I don’t want to go to bed. There is a bad woman there. Eine Hexe .”

“A witch?” Grey repeated, and felt an odd frisson run down his back, as though someone had touched his nape with a cold finger. “What did this witch look

like?"

The child stared back at him, uncomprehending.

"Like a witch," he said.

"Oh," said Grey, momentarily stymied. He rallied, though, and beckoned, curling his fingers at the boy. "Come, then; show me. I am a soldier, I am not afraid of a witch."

"You will kill her and cut out her heart and fry it over the fire?" the boy asked eagerly, peeling himself off the wall. He reached out to touch the hilt of Grey's dagger, still on his belt.

"Well, perhaps," Grey temporized. "Let us go find her first." He picked the boy up under the arms and swung him up; the child came willingly enough, curling his legs around Grey's waist and cuddling close to him for warmth.

The hallway was dark; only a rush-light sputtered in a sconce near the farther end, and the stones emanated a chill that made the child's own warmth more than welcome. Rain was still coming down hard; a small dribble of moisture had seeped in through the shutters at the end of the hall, and the flickering light shone on the puddle.

Thunder boomed in the distance, and the child threw his arms around Grey's neck with a gasp.

"It is all right." Grey patted the small back soothingly, though his own heart had leapt convulsively at the sound. No doubt the noise of the storm had wakened the boy.

"Where is your chamber?"

"Upstairs." The boy pointed vaguely toward the far end of the hallway; presumably there was a back stair somewhere near. The Schloss was immense and sprawling; Grey had learned no more of its geography than what was necessary to

reach his own quarters. He hoped that the boy knew the place better, so they were not obliged to wander the chilly hallways all night.

As he approached the end of the hall, the lightning flashed again, a vivid line of white that outlined the window—and showed him clearly that the window was open, the shutters unfastened. With the boom of thunder came a gust of wind, and one loose shutter flung back suddenly, admitting a freezing gust of rain.

“Oooh!” The boy clutched him tightly around the neck, nearly choking him.

“It is all right,” he said, as calmly as possible, shifting his burden in order to free one hand.

He leaned out to seize the shutter, trying at the same time to shelter the boy with his body. A soundless flash lit up the world in a burst of black and white, and he blinked, dazzled, a pinwheel of stark images whirling at the back of his eyes. Thunder rolled past, with a sound so like an oxcart full of stones that he glanced up involuntarily, half expecting to see one of the old German gods go past, driving gleefully through the clouds.

The image he saw was not of the storm-tossed sky, though, but of something glimpsed when the lightning flashed. He blinked hard, clearing his sight, and then looked down. It was there. A ladder, leaning against the wall of the house.

Well, then. Perhaps the child had seen someone strange in his room.

“Here,” he said to the boy, turning to set him down. “Stay out of the rain while I fasten the shutter.”

He turned back, and, leaning out into the storm, pushed the ladder off so that it fell away into the dark. Then he closed and fastened the shutters, and picked up the shivering boy again. The wind had blown out the rush-light, and he was obliged to feel his way into the turning of the hall.

“It’s very dark,” said the boy, with a tremor in his voice.

“Soldiers are not afraid of the dark,” he reassured the child, thinking of the graveyard.

“I’m not afraid!” The little boy’s cheek was pressed against his neck.

“Of course you are not. How are you called, young sir?” he asked, in hopes of distracting the boy.

“Siggy.”

“Siggy,” he repeated, feeling his way along the wall with one hand. “I am John. Johannes, in your tongue.”

“I know,” said the boy, surprising him. “The servant girls think you are good looking. Not so big as Landgrave Stephan, but prettier. Are you rich? The Landgrave is very rich.”

“I won’t starve,” Grey said, wondering how long the blasted hallway was, and whether he might discover the staircase by falling down it in the dark.

At least the boy seemed to have lost some of his fear; he cuddled close, rubbing his head under Grey’s chin. There was a distinct smell about him; nothing unpleasant—rather like the smell of a month-old litter of puppies, Grey thought; warmly animal.

Something occurred to him, then; something he should have thought to ask at once.

“Where is your nurse?” A boy of this age would surely not sleep alone.

“I don’t know. Maybe the witch ate her.”

This cheering suggestion coincided with a welcome flicker of light in the distance, and the sound of voices. Hastening toward these, Grey at last found the nursery stair, just as a wild-eyed woman in nightgown, cap, and shawl popped out, holding a pottery candlestick.

“Siegfried!” she cried. “Master Siggy, where have you been? What has—oh!” At this point, she realized that Grey was there, and reared back as though struck forcibly in the chest.

“Guten Abend, Madam,” he said, politely. “Is this your nurse, Siggy?”

“No,” said Siggy, scornful of such ignorance. “That’s just Hetty. Mama’s maid.”

“Siggy? Siegfried, is it you? Oh, my boy, my boy!” The light from above dimmed as a fluttering body hurtled down the stair, and the Princess von Lowenstein seized the boy from Grey’s arms, hugging her son and kissing him so passionately that his nightcap fell off.

More servants were coming downstairs, less precipitously. Two footmen and a woman who might be a parlor maid, all in varying degrees of undress, but equipped with candles or rush-lights. Evidently, Grey had had the good fortune to encounter a search party.

There was a good deal of confused conversation, as Grey’s attempt at explanation was interrupted by Siggy’s own rather disjointed account of his adventures, punctuated by exclamations of horror and surprise from the Princess and Hetty.

“Witch?” the Princess was saying, looking down at her son in alarm. “You saw a witch? Did you have an evil dream, child?”

“No. I just woke up and there was a witch in my room. Can I have some marzipan?”

“Perhaps it would be a good idea to search the house,” Grey managed to get in.

“It is possible that the . . . witch . . . is still inside.”

The Princess had very fine, pale skin, radiant in the candlelight, but at this, it went a sickly color, like toadstools. Grey glanced meaningfully at Siggy, and the Princess at once gave the child to Hetty, telling the maid to take him to his nursery.

“Tell me what is happening,” she said, gripping Grey’s arm, and he did, finishing the account with a question of his own.

“The child’s nurse? Where is she?”

“We don’t know. I went to the nursery to look at Siegfried before retiring—” The Princess’s hand fluttered to her bosom as she became aware that she was wearing a rather unbecoming woolen nightgown and cap, with a heavy shawl and thick, fuzzy stockings. “He wasn’t there; neither was the nurse. Jakob , Thomas—” She turned to the footmen, suddenly taking charge. “Search! The house first, then the grounds.”

A distant rumbling of thunder reminded everyone that it was still pouring with rain outside, but the footmen vanished with speed.

The sudden silence left in the wake of their departure gave Grey a slightly eerie feeling, as though the thick stone walls had moved subtly closer. A solitary candle burned, left behind on the stairs.

“Who would do this?” said the Princess, her voice suddenly small and frightened.

“Did they mean to take Siegfried? Why?”

It looked very much to Grey as though kidnapping had been the plan; no other possibility had entered his mind, until the Princess seized him by the arm again.

“Do you think—do you think it was . . . her?” she whispered, eyes dilated to pools of horror. “The succubus?”

“I think not,” Grey said, taking hold of her hands for reassurance. They were cold as ice—hardly surprising, in view of the temperature inside the Schloss . He smiled at her, squeezing her fingers gently. “A succubus would not require a ladder, surely?” He forebore to add that a boy of Siggys’ age was unlikely to have much that a succubus would want, if he had correctly understood the nature

of such a creature.

A little color came back into the Princess's face, as she saw the logic in this.

"No, that's true." The edge of her mouth twitched, in an attempt at a smile, though her eyes were still fearful.

"It might be advisable to set a guard near your son's room," Grey suggested.

"Though I expect the . . . person . . . has been frightened off by now."

She shuddered, whether from cold or at the thought of roving intruders, he couldn't tell. Still, she was clearly steadier at the thought of action, and that being so, he rather reluctantly took the opportunity to share with her Sir Peter Hicks's cautions, feeling that perhaps a solid enemy such as the French would be preferable to phantasms and shadowy threats.

"Ha, those frog-eaters," she said, proving his supposition by drawing herself up with a touch of scorn in her voice. "They have tried before, theSchloss to take. They have never done it; they will not do it now." She gestured briefly at the stone walls surrounding them, by way of justification in this opinion. "My husband's great-great-great-grandfather built theSchloss ; we have a well inside the house, a stable, food stores. This place was built to withstand siege."

"I am sure you are right," Grey said, smiling. "But you will perhaps take some care?" He let go her hands, willing her to draw the interview to a close.

Excitement over, he was very much aware that it had been a long day, and that he was freezing.

"I will," she promised him. She hesitated a moment, not quite sure how to take her leave gracefully, then stepped forward, rose onto her toes, and, with her hands on his shoulders, kissed him on the mouth.

"Good night, Lord John," she said softly, inEnglish. "Danke ." She turned and

hurried up the stairs, picking up her skirts as she went.

Grey stood for a startled moment looking after her, the disconcerting feel of her uncorseted breasts still imprinted on his chest, then shook his head and went to pick up the candlestick she had left on the stair for him.

Straightening up, he was overtaken by a massive yawn, the fatigues of the day coming down upon him like a thousandweight of grapeshot. He only hoped he could find his own chamber again, in this ancient labyrinth. Perhaps he should have asked the Princess for direction.

He made his way back down the hallway, his candle flame seeming puny and insignificant in the oppressive darkness cast by the great stone blocks of Schloss Lowenstein. It was only when the light gleamed on the puddle on the floor that the thought suddenly occurred to him: Someone had to have opened the shutters—from the inside.

Grey made his way back as far as the head of the main stair, only to find Stephan von Namtzen coming up it. The Hanoverian was a little flushed with brandy, but still clearheaded, and listened to Grey's account of events with consternation.

"Dreckskerle!" he said, and spat on the floor to emphasize his opinion of kidnappers. "The servants are searching, you say—but you think they will find nothing?"

"Perhaps they will find the nurse," Grey said. "But if the kidnapper has an ally inside the house—and he must . . . or she, I suppose," he added. "The boy did say he saw a witch."

"Ja, I see." Von Namtzen looked grim. One big hand fisted at his side, but then relaxed. "I will perhaps go and speak to the Princess. My men, I will have them

come to guard the house. If there is a criminal within, he will not get out.”

“I’m sure the Princess will be grateful.” Grey felt all at once terribly tired.

“I must take Bodger—the body—back to his regiment in the morning. Oh—in that regard . . .” He explained Sir Peter’s wishes, to which von Namtzen agreed with a flip of the hand.

“Have you any messages for me to carry, to the troops at the bridge?” Grey asked. “Since I will be going in that direction, anyway.” One English regiment lay to the south of the town, the other—Bodger’s—to the north, between the town and the river. A small group of the Prussian artillery under Stephan’s command was stationed a few miles beyond, guarding the bridge at Aschenwald .

Von Namtzen frowned, thinking, then nodded.

“Ja, you are right. It is best they hear officially of the—” He looked suddenly uneasy, and Grey was slightly amused to see that Stephan did not want to speak the word “succubus.”

“Yes, better to avoid rumors,” he agreed, saving Stephan’s awkwardness.

“Speaking of that—do you suppose Herr Blomberg will let the villagers exhume his mother?”

Stephan’s broad-boned face broke into a smile.

“No,” he said. “I think he would make them drive an iron rod through his own heart, first. Better, though,” he added, the humor fading from his face, “if someone finds who plays these tricks, and a stop to it makes. Quickly.”

Stephan was tired, too, Grey saw; his English grammar was slipping. They stood together for a moment, silent, listening to the distant hammer of the rain, both feeling still the chill touch of the graveyard in their bones.

Von Namtzen turned to him suddenly, and put a hand on his shoulder, squeezing.

“You will take care, John,” he said, and before Grey could speak or move, Stephan pulled him close and kissed his mouth. Then he smiled, squeezed Grey’s shoulder once more, and, with quiet “Gute Nacht .” went up the stairs toward his own room.

Grey shut the door of his chamber behind him and leaned against it, in the manner of a man pursued. Tom Byrd, curled up asleep on the hearth rug, sat up and blinked at him.

“Me lord?”

“Who else?” Grey asked, made jocular from the fatigues and excitements of the evening. “Did you expect a visit from the succubus?”

Tom’s face lost all its sleepiness at that, and he glanced uneasily at the window, closed and tightly shuttered against the dangers of the night.

“You oughtn’t jest that way, me lord,” he said reproachfully. “It’s an Englishman what’s dead now.”

“You are right, Tom; I beg pardon of Private Bodger.” Grey found some justice in the rebuke, but was too much overtaken by events to be stung by it. “Still, we do not know the cause of his death. Surely there is no proof as yet that it was occasioned by any sort of supernatural interference. Have you eaten?”

“Yes, me lord. Cook had gone to bed, but she got up and fetched us out some bread and dripping, and some ale. Wanting to know all about what I found in the churchyard,” he added practically.

Grey smiled to himself; the faint emphasis on “I” in this statement indicated to him that Tom’s protests on behalf of the late Private Bodger sprang as much from a sense of proprietariness as from a sense of propriety.

Grey sat down, to let Tom pull off his boots and still-damp stockings. The room

he had been given was small but warm and bright, the shadows from the well-tended fire flickering over striped damask wallpaper. After the wet cold of the churchyard and the bleak chill of the Schloss's stone corridors, the heat upon his skin was a grateful feeling—much enhanced by the discovery of a pitcher of hot water for washing.

“Shall I come with you, me lord? In the morning, I mean.” Tom undid the binding of Grey's hair and began to comb it, dipping the comb occasionally in a cologne of bay leaves and chamomile, meant to discourage lice.

“No, I think not. I shall ride over and speak to Colonel Ruysdale first; one of the servants can follow me with the body.” Grey closed his eyes, beginning to feel drowsy, though small jolts of excitement still pulsed through his thighs and abdomen. “If you would, Tom, I should like you to talk with the servants; find out what they are saying about things.” God knew, they would have plenty to talk about.

Clean, brushed, warmed, and cozily ensconced in nightshirt, cap and banyan, Grey dismissed Tom, the valet's arms piled high with filthy uniform bits.

He shut the door behind the boy and hesitated, staring into the polished surface of the wood as though to look through it and see who might be standing on the other side. Only the blur of his own face met his gaze, though, and only the creak of Tom's footsteps was audible, receding down the corridor.

Thoughtfully, he touched his lips with a finger. Then he sighed, and bolted the door.

Stephan had kissed him before—kissed innumerable people, for that matter, the man was an inveterate embrasseur. But surely this had been somewhat more than the fraternal embrace of a fellow soldier or particular friend. He could still

feel the grip of Stephan's hand, curled around his leg. Or was he deluded by fatigue and distraction, imagining more to it than there was?

And if he were right?

He shook his head, took the warming pan from his sheets, and crawled between them, reflecting that, of all the men in Gundwitz that night, he at least was safe from the attentions of any roving succubae.

CHAPTER 3

A REMEDY FOR SLEEPLESSNESS

Regimental headquarters for the Fifty-second were in Bonz, a small hamlet that stood some ten miles from Gundwitz. Grey found Colonel Ruysdale in the central room of the largest inn, in urgent conference with several other officers, and indisposed to take time to deal with an enlisted body.

"Grey? Oh, yes, know your brother. You found what? Where? Yes, all right. See, um . . . Sergeant-Major Sapp. Yes, that's it. Sapp will know who . . ." The Colonel waved a vague hand, indicating that Grey would doubtless find whatever assistance he required elsewhere.

"Yes, sir," Grey said, settling his boot heels into the sawdust. "I shall do so directly. Am I to understand, though, that there are developments of which our allies should be informed?"

Ruysdale stared at him, eyes cold and upper lip foremost.

"Who told you that, sir?"

As though he needed telling. Troops were being mustered outside the village, drummers beating the call to arms and corporals shouting through the streets, men pouring out from their quarters like an anthill stirred with a stick.

"I am a liaison officer, sir, seconded to Captain von Namtzen's Hanoverian foot," Grey replied, evading the question. "They are at present quartered in

Gundwitz; will you require their support?"

Ruysdale looked grossly offended at the notion, but a captain wearing an artillery cockade coughed tactfully.

"Colonel, shall I give Major Grey such particulars of the situation as may seem useful? You have important matters to deal with . . ." He nodded around at the assembled officers, who seemed attentive, but hardly on the brink of action.

The Colonel snorted briefly and made a gesture somewhere between gracious dismissal and the waving away of some noxious insect, and Grey bowed, murmuring,

"Your servant, sir."

Outside, the clouds of last night's storm were making a hasty exodus, scudding away on a fresh, cold wind. The artillery captain clapped a hand to his hat, and jerked his head toward a pot-house down the street.

"A bit of warmth, Major?"

Gathering that the village was in no danger of imminent invasion, Grey nodded and accompanied his new companion into a dark, smoky womb, smelling of pig's feet and fermented cabbage.

"Benjamin Hiltern," the Captain said, putting back his cloak and holding up two fingers to the barman. "You'll take a drink, Major?"

"John Grey. I thank you. I collect we shall have time to drink it, before we are quite overrun?"

Hiltern laughed, and sat down across from Grey, rubbing a knuckle under a cold-reddened nose.

"We should have time for our gracious host—" He nodded at the wizened creature fumbling with a jug, "—to hunt a boar, roast it, and serve it up with an apple in its mouth, if you should be so inclined."

“I am obliged, Captain,” Grey said, with a glance at the barman, who upon closer inspection appeared to have only one leg, the other being supported by a stout peg of battered aspect. “Alas, I have breakfasted but recently.”

“Too bad. I haven’t. Bratkartoffeln mit Rührei,” Hiltern said to the barman, who nodded and disappeared into some still more squalid den to the rear of the house. “Potatoes, fried with eggs and ham,” he explained, taking out a kerchief and tucking it into the neck of his shirt. “Delicious.”

“Quite,” Grey said politely. “One would hope that your troops are fed as well, after the effort I saw being expended.”

“Oh, that.” Hiltern’s cherubic countenance lost a little of its cheerfulness, but not much. “Poor sods. At least it’s stopped raining.”

In answer to Grey’s raised brows, he explained.

“Punishment. There was a game of bowls yesterday, between a party of men from Colonel Bampton-Howard’s lot and our lads—local form of skittles. Ruysdale had a heavy wager on with Bampton-Howard, see?”

“And your lot lost. Yes, I see. So your lads are—”

“Ten-mile run to the river and back, in full kit. Keep them fit and out of trouble, at least,” Hiltern said, half closing his eyes and lifting his nose at the scent of frying potatoes that had begun to waft through the air.

“I see. One assumes that the French have moved, then? Our last intelligence reported them as being a few miles north of the river.”

“Yes, gave us a bit of excitement for a day or two; thought they might come this way. They seem to have sheered off, though—gone round to the west.”

“Why?” Grey felt a prickle of unease go down his spine. There was a bridge at Aschenwald, a logical crossing point—but there was another several miles north, at Gruneberg. Aschenwald was defended by a company of Prussian artillery; a

detachment of grenadiers, under Colonel Bampton -Howard, presumably held the other crossing.

“There’s a mass of Frenchies beyond the river,” Hiltern replied. “We think they have it in mind to join up with that lot.”

That was interesting. It was also information that should have been shared with the Hanoverian and Prussian commanders by official dispatch—not acquired accidentally by the random visit of a liaison officer. Sir Peter Hicks was scrupulous in maintaining communications with the allies; Ruysdale evidently saw no such need.

“Oh!” Hiltern said, divining his thought. “I’m sure we would have let you know, only for things here being in a bit of confusion. And truly, it didn’t seem urgent; scouts just said the French were shining their gear, biffing up the supplies, that sort of thing. After all, they’ve got to go somewhere before the snow comes down.”

He raised one dark brow, smiling in apology—an apology that Grey accepted with no more than a second’s hesitation. If Ruysdale was going to be erratic about dispatches, it would be as well for Grey to keep himself informed by other means—and Hiltern was obviously well placed to know what was going on.

They chatted casually until the host came out with Hiltern’s breakfast, but Grey learned no more of interest—save that Hiltern was remarkably uninterested in the death of Private Bodger. He was also vague about the “confusion” to which he had referred, dismissing it with a wave of the hand as “bit of a muddle in the commissary—damn bore.”

The sound of hooves and wheels, moving slowly, came from the street outside, and Grey heard a loud voice with a distinctly Hanoverian accent, requesting

direction "Zum Engländerlager."

"What is that?" Hiltem asked, turning on his stool.

"I expect that will be Private Bodger coming home," Grey replied, rising. "I'm obliged to you, sir. Is Sergeant-Major Sapp still in camp, do you know?"

"Mmm. . . no." Hiltem spoke thickly, through a mouthful of potatoes and eggs.

"Gone to the river."

That was inconvenient; Grey had no desire to hang about all day, waiting for Sapp's return in order to hand over the corpse and responsibility for it.

Another idea occurred to him, though.

"And the regimental surgeon?"

"Dead. Flux." Hiltem spooned in more egg, concentrating. "Mmp. Try Keegan. He's the surgeon's assistant."

With most of the men emptying out of camp, it took some time to locate the surgeon's tent. Once there, Grey had the body deposited on a bench, and at once sent the wagon back to the Schloss. He was taking no chances on being left in custody of Private Bodger.

Keegan proved to be a scrappy Welshman, equipped with rimless spectacles and an incongruous mop of reddish ringlets. Blinking through the spectacles, he bent close to the corpse and poked at it with a smudgy exploratory finger.

"No blood."

"No."

"Fever?"

"Probably not. I saw the man several hours before his death, and he seemed in reasonable health then."

"Hmmm." Keegan bent and peered keenly up Bodger's nostrils, as though suspecting

the answer to the private's untimely death might be lurking there.

Grey frowned at the fellow's grubby knuckles and the thin crust of blood that rimmed his cuff. Nothing out of the way for a surgeon, but the dirt bothered him.

Keegan tried to thumb up one of the eyelids, but it resisted him. Bodger had stiffened during the night, and while the hands and arms had gone limp again, the face, body, and legs were all hard as wood. Keegan sighed and began tugging off the corpse's stockings. These were greatly the worse for wear, the soles stained with mud; the left one had a hole worn through, and Bodger's great toe poked out like the head of an inquisitive worm.

Keegan rubbed a hand on the skirt of his already grubby coat, leaving further streaks, then rubbed it under his nose, sniffing loudly. Grey had an urge to step away from the man. Then he realized, with a small sense of startlement mingled with annoyance, that he was thinking of the Woman again. Fraser's wife. Fraser had spoken of her very little—but that reticence only added to the significance of what he did say.

One late night, in the Governor's quarters at Ardsmuir Prison, they had sat longer than usual over their chess game—a hard-fought draw, in which Grey took more pleasure than he might have taken in victory over a lesser opponent. They usually drank sherry, but not that night; he had a special claret, a present from his mother, and had insisted that Fraser must help him to finish it, as the wine would not keep, once opened.

It was a strong wine, and between the headiness of it and the stimulation of the game, even Fraser had lost a little of his formidable reserve.

Past midnight, Grey's orderly had come to take away the dishes from their

repast, and, stumbling sleepily on the threshold in his leaving, had sprawled full length, cutting himself badly on a shard of glass. Fraser had leapt up like a cat, snatched the boy up, and pressed a fold of his shirt to the wound to stop the bleeding. But then, when Grey would have sent for a surgeon, had stopped him, saying tersely that Grey could do so if he wished to kill the lad, but if not, had best allow Fraser to tend him.

This he had done with skill and gentleness, washing first his hands, and then the wound, with wine, then demanding needle and silk thread—which he had astonished Grey by dipping into the wine as well, and passing the needle through the flame of a candle.

“My wife would do it so,” he’d said, frowning slightly in concentration. “There are the wee beasties, called germs, d’ye see, and if they—” He set his teeth momentarily into his lip as he made the first stitch, then went on.

“If they should be getting into a wound, it will suppurate. So ye must wash well before ye tend the wound, and put flame or alcohol to your instruments, to kill the germs.” He smiled briefly at the orderly, who was white-faced and wobbling on his stool. “Never let a surgeonwi’ dirty hands touch ye, she said. Better to bleed to death quickly than die slow of the pus, aye?”

Grey was as skeptical of the existence of germs as of succubae, but ever afterward had glanced automatically at the hands of any medical man—and it did seem to him that perhaps the more cleanly of the breed tended to lose fewer patients, though he had made no real study of the matter.

In the present instance, though, Mr. Keegan offered no hazard to the late Private Bodger, and despite his distaste Grey made no protest as the surgeon undressed the corpse, making small interested “Tut!” noises in response to the postmortem phenomena thus revealed.

Grey was already aware that the private had died in a state of arousal. This state appeared to be permanent, even though the limbs had begun to relax from their rigor, and was the occasion of a surprised "Tut!" from Mr. Keegan.

"Well, he died happy, at least," Keegan said, blinking. "Sweet God Almighty."

"Is this a . . . normal manifestation, do you think?" Grey inquired. He had rather expected PrivateBodger's condition to abate postmortem. If anything, it seemed particularly pronounced, viewed by daylight. Though of course that might be merely an artifact of the color, which was now a virulent dark purple, in stark contrast to the pallid flesh of the body.

Keegan prodded the condition cautiously with a forefinger.

"Stiff as wood," he said, unnecessarily. "Normal? Don't know. Mind, what chaps I see here have mostly died of fever or flux, and men what are ill aren't mostly of a mind to . . . hmmm." He relapsed into a thoughtful contemplation of the body.

"What did the woman say?" he asked, shaking himself out of this reverie after a moment or two.

"Who, the woman he was with? Gone. Not that one might blame her." Always assuming that it had been a woman, he added to himself. Though given Private Bodger's earlier encounter with the gypsy, one would assume . . .

"Can you say what caused his death?" Grey inquired, seeing that Keegan had begun to inspect the body as a whole, though his fascinated gaze kept returning to . . . color notwithstanding, it really was remarkable.

The assistant surgeon shook his ringlets, absorbed in wrestling off the corpse's shirt.

"No wound that I can see. Blow to the head, perhaps?" He bent close, squinting

at the corpse's head and face, poking here and there in an exploratory fashion.

A group of men in uniform came toward them at the trot, hastily doing up straps and buttons, hiking packs and muskets into place, and cursing as they went. Grey removed his hat and placed it strategically abaft the corpse, not wishing to excite public remark—but no one bothered to spare a glance at the tableau by the surgeon's tent; one dead man was much like another.

Grey reclaimed his hat and watched them go, grumbling like a miniature thunderstorm on the move. Most of the troops were already massed on the parade ground. He could see them in the distance, moving in a slow, disorderly mill that would snap into clean formation at the Sergeant-Major's shout.

"I know Colonel Ruysdale by reputation," Grey said, after a thoughtful pause, "though not personally. I have heard him described as 'a bit of a Gawd-'elp-us,' but I have not heard that he is altogether an ass."

Keegan smiled, keeping his eyes on his work.

"Shouldn't think he is," he agreed. "Not altogether."

Grey kept an inviting silence, to which invitation the surgeon acquiesced within moments.

"He means to wear them out, see. Bring them back so tired they fall asleep in their suppers."

"Oh, yes?"

"They been a-staying up all night, you see? Nobody wanting to fall asleep, lest the thing—asucky -bus, is it?—should come round in their dreams. Mind, it's good for the tavern owners, but not so good for discipline, what with men falling asleep on sentry-go, or in the midst of drill . . ."

Keegan glanced up from his inspections, observing Grey with interest.

"Not sleeping so well yourself, Major?" He tapped a dirty finger beneath his

eye, indicating the presence of dark rings, and chuckled.

“I kept rather late hours last night, yes,” Grey replied equably. “Owing to the discovery of Private Bodger.”

“Hmmm. Yes, I see.” Keegan said, straightening up. “Seems as though the sucky-bus had her fill of him, then.”

“So you do know about the rumors of a succubus?” Grey asked, ignoring the attempt at badinage.

“Of course I do.” Keegan looked surprised. “Everybody knows. Aren’t I just telling you?”

Keegan did not know how the rumor had reached the encampment, but it had spread like wildfire, reaching every man in camp within twenty-four hours. Original scoffing had become skeptical attention, and then reluctant belief, as more stories began to circulate of the dreams and torments suffered by men in the town—and had become outright panic, with the news of the Prussian soldier’s death.

“I don’t suppose you saw that body?” Grey asked, interested.

The Welshman shook his head.

“The word is that the poor bugger was drained of blood—but who’s to know the truth of it? Perhaps it was an apoplexy; I’ve seen ’em taken so, sometimes—the blood comes bursting from the nose, so as to relieve the pressure on the brain. Messy enough to look at.”

“You seem a rational man, sir,” Grey said, in compliment.

Keegan gave a small, huffing sort of laugh, dismissing it, and straightened up, brushing his palms once more against his coat skirts.

“Deal with soldiers for as long as I have, Major, and you get used to wild

stories, that's all I can say. Men in camp, 'specially. Not enough to keep them busy, and a good tale will spread like butter on hot toast. And when it comes to dreams—!" He threw up his hands.

Grey nodded, acknowledging the truth of this. Soldiers put great store in dreams.

"So you can tell me nothing regarding the cause of PrivateBodger's death?"

Keegan shook his head, scratching at a row of flea bites on his neck as he did so.

"Don't see a thing, sir, I'm sorry to say. Other than the . . . um . . .

obvious," he nodded delicately toward the corpse'smidregion , "and that's not generally fatal. You might ask the fellow's friends, though. Just in case."

This cryptic allusion made Grey glance up in question, and Keegan coughed.

"I did say the men didn't sleep, sir? Not wanting to give anysucky -bus an invitation, so to speak. Well, some went a bit further than that, and took matters—so to speak—into their own hands."

A few bold souls, Keegan said, had reasoned that if what the succubus desired was the male essence, safety lay in removing this temptation—"so to speak, sir."

While most of those choosing this expedient had presumably chosen to take their precautions in privacy, the men lived in very close quarters. It was in fact complaints from more than one citizen of gross mass indecency by the soldiers quartered on his premises that had provoked GeneralRuysdale's edict.

"Only thinking, sir, as a wet graveyard is maybe not the place I'd choose for romance, was the opportunity to come my way. But I could see, maybe, a group of men thinking they'd face down thesucky -bus on her own ground, perhaps? And if Private . . . Bodger, you said was his name, sir? . . . was to have keeled over in the midst of such proceedings . . . well, I expect his comrades would have

buggered off smartly, not hung about to answer questions.”

“You have a very interesting turn of mind, Mr. Keegan,” Grey said. “Highly rational. I don’t suppose it was you who suggested this particular . . . precaution?”

“Who, me?” Keegan tried—and failed—to exhibit outrage. “The idea, Major!”

“Quite,” Grey said, and took his leave.

In the distance, the troops were departing the parade ground in orderly fashion, each rank setting off in turn, to the clank and rattle of canteens and muskets and the staccato cries of corporals and sergeants. He stopped for a moment to watch them, enjoying the warmth of the autumn sun on his back.

After the fury of the night’s storm, the day had dawned clear and calm, and promised to be mild. Very muddy underfoot, though, he noted, seeing the churned earth of the parade ground, and the spray of clods flying off the feet of the runners, splattering their breeches. It would be heavy going, and the devil of a sweat to clean up afterward. Ruysdale might not have intended this exercise principally as punishment, but that’s what it would be.

Artilleryman that he was, Grey automatically evaluated the quality of the terrain for the passage of caissons. Not a chance. The ground was soft as sodden cheese. Even the mortars would bog down in nothing flat.

He turned, eyeing the distant hills where the French were said to be. If they had cannon, chances were that they were going nowhere for the moment.

The situation still left him with a lingering sense of unease, loath though he was to admit it. Yes, the French likely were intending to move toward the north. No, there was no apparent reason for them to cross the valley; Gundwitz had no strategic importance, nor was it of sufficient size to be worth a detour to

loot. Yes, Ruysdale's troops were between the French and the town. But he looked at the deserted parade ground, and the troops vanishing in the distance, and felt a tickle between the shoulder blades, as though someone stood behind him with a loaded pistol.

"I should feel a little happier if an additional detachment could be sent to guard the bridge." Hicks's words echoed in memory. So Sir Peter felt that itch, as well. It was possible, Grey reflected, that Ruysdale was an ass.

CHAPTER 4

THE GUN-CREW

It was past midday by the time he reached the river. From a distance, it was a tranquil landscape under a high, pale sun, the river bordered by a thick growth of trees in autumn leaf, their ancient golds and bloody reds a-shimmer, in contrast to the black-and-dun patchwork of fallow fields and meadows gone to seed.

A little closer, though, and the river itself dispelled this impression of pastoral charm. It was a broad, deep stream, turbulent and fast moving, much swollen by the recent rains. Even at a distance, he could see the tumbling forms of uprooted trees and bushes, and the occasional carcass of a small animal, drowned in the current.

The Prussian artillery were placed upon a small rise of ground, concealed in a copse. Only one ten-pounder, he saw, with a sense of unease, and a small mortar—though there were sufficient stores of shot and powder, and these were commendably well kept, with a Prussian sense of order, tidily sheltered under canvas against the rain.

The men greeted him with great cordiality; any diversion from the boredom of bridge guarding was welcome—the more welcome if it came bearing beer, which Grey

did, having thoughtfully procured two large ale-skins before leaving camp.

“You will with us eat, Major,” said the Hanoverian Lieutenant in charge, accepting both beer and dispatches, and waving a gracious hand toward a convenient boulder.

It was a long time since breakfast, and Grey accepted the invitation with pleasure. He took off his coat and spread it over the boulder, rolled up his sleeves, and joined companionably in the hard biscuit, cheese, and beer, accepting with gratitude a few bites of chewy, spicy sausage as well.

Lieutenant Dietrich, a middle-aged gentleman with a luxuriant beard and eyebrows to match, opened the dispatches and read them while Grey practiced his German with the gun-crew. He kept a careful eye upon the Lieutenant as he chatted, though, curious to see what the artilleryman would make of von Namtzen’s dispatch.

The Lieutenant’s eyebrows were an admirable indication of his interior condition; they remained level for the first moments of reading, then rose to an apex of astonishment, where they remained suspended for no little time, returning to their original position with small flutters of dismay as the Lieutenant decided how much of this information it was wise to impart to his men.

The Lieutenant folded the paper, shooting Grey a sharp interrogative glance.

Grey gave a slight nod; yes, he knew what the dispatch said.

The Lieutenant glanced around at the men, then back over his shoulder, as though judging the distance across the valley to the British camp and the town beyond.

Then he looked back at Grey, thoughtfully chewing his mustache, and shook his head slightly. He would not mention the matter of a succubus.

On the whole, Grey thought that wise, and inclined his head an inch in agreement. There were only ten men present; if any of them had already known of the rumors, all would know. And while the Lieutenant seemed at ease with his command, the fact remained that these were Prussians, and not his own men. He could not be sure of their response.

The Lieutenant folded away his papers and came to join the conversation.

However, Grey observed with interest that the substance of the dispatch seemed to weigh upon the Lieutenant's mind, in such a way that the conversation turned—with no perceptible nudge in that direction, but with the inexorable swing of a compass needle—to manifestations of the supernatural.

It being a fine day, with golden leaves drifting gently down around them, the gurgle of the river nearby, and plenty of beer to hand, the varied tales of ghosts, bleeding nuns, and spectral battles in the sky were no more than the stuff of entertainment. In the cold shadows of the night, it would be different—though the stories would still be told. More than cannonshot, bayonets, or disease, boredom was a soldier's greatest enemy.

At one point, though, an artilleryman told the story of a fine house in his town, where the cries of a ghostly child echoed in the rooms at night, to the consternation of the householders. In time, they traced the sound to one particular wall, chipped away the plaster, and discovered a bricked-up chimney, in which lay the remains of a young boy, next to the dagger that had cut his throat.

Several of the soldiers made the sign of the horns at this, but Grey saw distinct expressions of unease on the faces of two of the men. These two exchanged glances, then looked hurriedly away.

“You have heard such a story before, perhaps?” Grey asked, addressing the

younger of the two directly. He smiled, doing his best to look harmlessly engaging.

The boy—he could be no more than fifteen—hesitated, but such was the press of interest from those around him that he could not resist.

“Not a story,” he said. “I—we—” He nodded at his fellow. “—last night, in the storm. Samson and I heard a child crying, near the river. We went to look, with a lantern, but there was nothing there. Still, we heard it. It went on and on, though we walked up and down, calling and searching, until we were wet through, and nearly frozen.”

“Oh, is that what you were doing?” a fellow in his twenties interjected, grinning. “And here we thought you and Samson were just buggering each other under the bridge.”

Blood surged up into the boy’s face with a suddenness that made his eyes bulge, and he launched himself at the older man, knocking him off his seat and rolling with him into the leaves in a ball of fists and elbows.

Grey sprang to his feet and kicked them apart, seizing the boy by the scruff of the neck and jerking him up. The Lieutenant was shouting at them angrily in idiomatic German, which Grey ignored. He shook the boy slightly, to bring him to his senses, and said, very quietly, “Laugh. It was a joke.”

He stared hard into the boy’s eyes, willing him to come to his senses. The thin shoulders under his hands vibrated with the need to strike out, to hit something—and the brown eyes were glassy with anguish and confusion.

Grey shook him harder, then released him, and under the guise of slapping dead leaves from his uniform, leaned closer. “If you act like this, they will know,” he said, speaking in a rapid whisper. “For God’s sake, laugh!”

Samson, experienced enough to know what to do in such circumstances, was doing it—elbowing away joking comrades, replying to crude jests with cruder ones. The young boy glanced at him, a flicker of awareness coming back into his face. Grey let him go, and turned back to the group, saying loudly, “If I were going to bugger someone, I would wait for good weather. A man must be desperate to swive anything in such rain and thunder!”

“It’s been a long time, Major,” said one of the soldiers, laughing. He made a crude thrusting gesture with his hips. “Even a sheep in a snowstorm would look good now!”

“Haha. Go fuck yourself, Wulfie. The sheep wouldn’t have you.” The boy was still flushed and damp-eyed, but back in control of himself. He rubbed a hand across his mouth and spat, forcing a grin as the others laughed.

“You could fuck yourself, Wulfie—if your dick is as long as you say it is.”

Samson leered at Wulf, who stuck out an amazingly long tongue in reply, wagging it in derision.

“Don’t you wish you knew!”

The discussion was interrupted at this point by two soldiers who came puffing up the rise, wet to the waist and dragging with them a large dead pig, fished out of the river. This addition to supper was greeted with cries of approbation, and half the men fell at once to the work of butchery, the others returning in desultory fashion to their conversation.

The vigor had gone out of it, though, and Grey was about to take his leave, when one of the men said something, laughing, about gypsy women.

“What did you say? I mean—washabt Ihr das gesagt? He groped for his German.

“Gypsies? You have seen them recently?”

“Oh, ja, Major,” said the soldier, obligingly. “This morning. They came across

the bridge, six wagons with mules. They go back and forth. We've seen them before."

With a little effort, Grey kept his voice calm.

"Indeed?" He turned to the Lieutenant. "Does it not seem possible that they may have dealings with the French?"

"Of course." The Lieutenant looked mildly surprised, then grinned. "What are they going to tell the French? That we're here? I think they know that, Major." He gestured toward a gap in the trees. Through it, Grey could see the English soldiers of Ruysdale's regiment, perhaps a mile away, their ranks piling up on the bank of the river like driftwood as they flung down their packs and waded into the shallows to drink, hot and mud-caked from their run.

It was true: The presence of the English and Hanoverian regiments could be a surprise to no one; anyone on the cliffs with a spyglass could likely count the spots on Colonel Ruysdale's dog. As for information regarding their movements . . . well, since neither Ruysdale nor Hicks had any idea where they were going or when, there wasn't any great danger of that intelligence being revealed to the enemy.

He smiled, and took gracious leave of the Lieutenant, though privately resolving to speak to Stephan von Namtzen. Perhaps the gypsies were harmless—but they should be looked into. If nothing else, the gypsies were in a position to tell anyone who cared to ask them how few men were guarding that bridge. And somehow, he thought that Ruysdale was not of a mind to consider Sir Peter's request for reinforcement, though Grey had delivered it.

He waved casually to the artillerymen, who took little notice, elbow-deep in blood and pig guts. The boy was by himself, chopping green wood for the spit.

Leaving the artillery camp, he rode up to the head of the bridge and paused, reining Karolus in as he looked across the river. The land was flat for a little way, but then broke into rolling hills that rose to a steep promontory. Above, on the cliffs, the French presumably still lurked. He took a small spyglass from his pocket and scanned theclifftops , slowly. Nothing moved on the heights: no horses, no men, no swaying banners—and yet a faint gray haze drifted up there, a cloud in an otherwise cloudless sky. The smoke of campfires; many of them. Yes, the French were still there.

He scanned the hills below, looking carefully—but if the gypsies were there as well, no rising plume of smoke betrayed their presence.

He should find the gypsy camp and question its inhabitants himself—but it was growing late, and he had no stomach for that now. He reined about and turned the horse's head back toward the distant town, not glancing at the copse that hid the cannon and its crew.

The boy had best learn—and quickly—to hide his nature, or he would become in short orderbumboy to any man who cared to use him. And many would.Wulf had been correct: After months in the field, soldiers were not particular, and the boy was much more appealing than a sheep, with those soft red lips and tender skin.

Karolus tossed his head, and he slowed, uneasy. Grey's hands were trembling on the reins, gripped far too tightly. He forced them to relax, stilled the trembling, and spoke calmly to the horse, nudging him back to speed.

He had been attacked once, in camp somewhere in Scotland, in the days after Culloden. Someone had come upon him in the dark, and taken him from behind with an arm across his throat. He had thought he was dead, but his assailant had something else in mind. The man had never spoken, and was brutally swift about

his business, leaving him moments later, curled in the dirt behind a wagon, speechless with shock and pain.

He had never known who it was: officer, soldier, or some anonymous intruder.

Never known whether the man had discerned something in his own appearance or behavior that led to the attack, or had only taken him because he was there.

He had known the danger of telling anyone about it. He washed himself, stood straight and walked firmly, spoke normally and looked men in the eye. No one had suspected the bruised and driven flesh beneath his uniform, or the hollowness beneath his breastbone. And if his attacker sat at meals and broke bread with him, he had not known it. From that day, he had carried a dagger at all times, and no one had ever touched him again, against his will.

The sun was sinking behind him, and the shadow of horse and rider stretched out far before him, flying, and faceless in their flight.

CHAPTER 5

DARKDREAMS

Once more he was late for dinner. This time, though, a tray was brought for him, and he sat in the drawing room, taking his supper while the rest of the company chatted.

The Princess saw to his needs and sat with him for a time, flatteringly attentive. He was worn out from a day of riding, though, and his answers to her questions were brief. Soon enough, she drifted away and left him to a peaceful engagement with some cold venison and a tart of mushrooms and onions.

He had nearly finished when he felt a large, warm hand on his shoulder.

“So, you have seen the gun-crew at the bridge? They are in good order?” von Namtzen asked.

“Yes, very good,” Grey replied. No point—not yet—in mentioning the young soldier to von Namtzen. “I told them more men will come, from Ruysdale’s regiment. I hope they will.”

“The bridge?” The Dowager, catching the word, turned from her conversation, frowning. “You have no need to worry, Landgrave. The bridge is safe.”

“I am sure it will be safe, madam,” Stephan said, clicking his heels gallantly as he bowed to the old lady. “You may be assured, Major Grey and I will protect you.”

The old lady looked faintly put out at the notion.

“The bridge is safe,” she repeated, touching the religious medal on the bodice of her gown, and glancing pugnaciously from man to man. “No enemy has crossed the bridge at Aschenwald in three hundred years. No enemy will ever cross it!”

Stephan glanced at Grey, and cleared his throat slightly. Grey cleared his own throat and made a gracious compliment upon the food.

When the Dowager had moved away, Stephan shook his head behind her back, and exchanged a brief smile with Grey.

“You know about that bridge?”

“No, is there something odd about it?”

“Only a story.” Von Namtzen shrugged, with a tolerant scorn for the superstition of others. “They say that there is a guardian; a spirit of some kind that defends the bridge.”

“Indeed,” Grey said, with an uneasy memory of the stories told by the gun-crew stationed near the bridge. Were any of them local men, he wondered, who would know the story?

“Mein Gott,” Stephan said, shaking his massive head as though assailed by gnats.

“These stories! How can sane men believe such things?”

“I collect you do not mean that particular story?” Grey said. “The succubus, perhaps?”

“Don’t speak to me of that thing,” von Namtzen said gloomily. “My men look like scarecrows and jump at a bird’s shadow. Every one of them is scared to lay his head upon a pillow, for fear that he will turn and look into the night-hag’s face.”

“Your chaps aren’t the only ones.” Sir Peter had come to pour himself another drink. He lifted the glass and took a deep swallow, shuddering slightly.

Billman, behind him, nodded in glum confirmation.

“Bloody sleepwalkers, the lot.”

“Ah,” said Grey thoughtfully. “If I might make a suggestion . . . not my own, you understand. A notion mentioned by Ruysdale’s surgeon . . .”

He explained Mr. Keegan’s remedy, keeping his voice discreetly low. His listeners were less discreet in their response.

“What, Ruysdale’s chaps are all boxing the Jesuit and begetting cockroaches?”

Grey thought Sir Peter would expire from suffocated laughter. Just as well Lieutenant Dundas wasn’t present, he thought.

“Perhaps not all of them,” he said. “Evidently enough, though, to be of concern. I take it you have not experienced a similar phenomenon among your troops . . . yet?”

Billman caught the delicate pause and whooped loudly.

“Boxing the Jesuit?” Stephan nudged Grey with an elbow, and raised thick blond brows in puzzlement. “Cockroaches? What does this mean, please?”

“Ahhh. . .” Having no notion of the German equivalent of this expression, Grey resorted to a briefly graphic gesture with one hand, looking over his shoulder

to be sure that none of the women was watching.

“Oh!” Von Namtzen looked mildly startled, but then grinned widely. “I see, yes, very good!” He nudged Grey again, more familiarly, and dropped his voice a little. “Perhaps wise to take some such precaution personally, do you think?”

The women and the German officers, heretofore intent on a card game, were looking toward the Englishmen in puzzlement. One man called a question to von Namtzen, and Grey was fortunately saved from reply.

Something occurred to him, though, and he grasped von Namtzen by the arm, as the latter was about to go and join the others at a hand of bravo.

“A moment, Stephan. I had meant to ask—that man of yours who died—Koenig? Did you see the body yourself?”

Von Namtzen was still smiling, but at this, his expression grew more somber, and he shook his head.

“No, I did not see him. They said, though, that his throat was most terribly torn—as though a wild animal had been at him. And yet he was not outside; he was found in his quarters.” He shook his head again, and left to join the card game.

Grey finished his meal amid cordial conversation with Sir Peter and Billman, though keeping an inconspicuous eye upon the progress of the card game.

Stephan was in dress uniform tonight. A smaller man would have been overwhelmed by it; German taste in military decoration was grossly excessive, to an English eye. With his big frame and leonine blond head though, the Landgrave von Erdberg was merely . . . eye catching.

He appeared to have caught the eye not only of the Princess Louisa, but also of three young women, friends of the Princess. These surrounded him like a moony triplet, caught in his orbit. Now he reached into the breast of his coat and withdrew some small object, causing them to cluster around to look at it.

Grey turned to answer some question of Billman's, but then turned back, trying not to look too obviously.

He had been trying to suppress the feeling Stephan roused in him, but in the end, such things were never controllable—they rose up. Sometimes like the bursting of a mortar shell, sometimes like the inexorable green spike of a crocus pushing through snow and ice—but they rose up.

Was he in love with Stephan? There was no question of that. He liked and respected the Hanoverian, but there was no madness in it, no yearning. Did he want Stephan? A soft warmth in his loins, as though his blood had begun somehow to simmer over a low flame, suggested that he did.

The ancient bear's skull still sat in its place of honor, below the old Prince's portrait. He moved slowly to examine it, keeping half an eye on Stephan.

"Surely you have not eaten enough, John!" A delicate hand on his elbow turned him, and he looked down into the Princess's face, smiling up at him with pretty coquetry. "A strong man, out all day—let me call the servants to bring you something special."

"I assure you, Your Highness . . ." But she would have none of it, and, tapping him playfully with her fan, she scudded away like a gilded cloud, to have some special dessert prepared for him.

Feeling obscurely like a fatted calf being readied for the slaughter, Grey sought refuge in male company, coming to rest beside von Namtzen, who was folding up whatever he had been showing to the women, who had all gone to peer over the card players' shoulders and make bets.

"What is that?" Grey asked, nodding at the object.

"Oh—" Von Namtzen looked a little disconcerted at the question, but with only a

moment's hesitation, handed it to Grey. It was a small leather case, hinged, with a gold closure. "My children."

It was a miniature, done by an excellent hand. The heads of two children, close together, one boy, one girl, both blond. The boy, clearly a little older, was perhaps three or four.

Grey felt momentarily as though he had received an actual blow to the pit of the stomach; his mouth opened, but he was incapable of speech. Or at least he thought he was. To his surprise, he heard his own voice, sounding calm, politely admiring.

"They are very handsome indeed. I am sure they are a consolation to your wife, in your absence."

Von Namtzen grimaced slightly, and gave a brief shrug.

"Their mother is dead. She died in childbirth when Elise was born." A huge forefinger touched the tiny face, very gently. "My mother looks after them."

Grey made the proper sounds of condolence, but had ceased to hear himself, for the confusion of thought and speculation that filled his mind.

So much so, in fact, that when the Princess's special dessert—an enormous concoction of preserved raspberries, brandy, sponge cake, and cream—arrived, he ate it all, despite the fact that raspberries made him itch.

He continued to think, long after the ladies had left. He joined the card game, bet extensively, and played wildly—winning, with Luck's usual perversity, though he paid no attention to his cards.

Had he been entirely wrong? It was possible. All of Stephan's gestures toward him had been within the bounds of normalcy—and yet . . .

And yet it was by no means unknown for men such as himself to marry and have

children. Certainly men such as von Namtzen, with a title and estates to bequeath, would wish to have heirs. That thought steadied him, and though he scratched occasionally at chest or neck, he paid more attention to his game—and finally began to lose.

The card game broke up an hour later. Grey loitered a bit, in the hopes that Stephan might seek him out, but the Hanoverian was detained in argument with KaptainSteffens, and at last Grey went upstairs, still scratching.

The halls were well lit tonight, and he found his own corridor without difficulty. He hoped Tom was still awake; perhaps the young valet could fetch him something for the itching. Some ointment, perhaps, or—he heard the rustle of fabric behind him, and turned to find the Princess approaching him.

She was once again in nightdress—but not the homely woolen garment she had worn the night before. This time, she wore a flowing thing of diaphanous lawn, which clung to her bosom and rather clearly revealed her nipples through the thin fabric. He thought she must be very cold, despite the lavishly embroidered robe thrown over the nightgown.

She had no cap, and her hair had been brushed out, but not yet plaited for the night: it flowed becomingly in golden waves below her shoulders. Grey began to feel somewhat cold, too, in spite of the brandy.

“My Lord,” she said. “John,” she added, and smiled. “I have something for you.”

She was holding something in one hand, he saw; a small box of some sort.

“Your Highness,” he said, repressing the urge to take a step backward. She was wearing a very strong scent, redolent of tuberose—a scent he particularly disliked.

“My name is Louisa,” she said, taking another step toward him. “Will you not

call me by my name? Here, in private?"

"Of course. If you wish it—Louisa." Good God, what had brought this on? He had sufficient experience to see what she was about—he was a handsome man, of good family, and with money; it had happened often enough—but not with royalty, who tended to be accustomed to taking what they wanted.

He took her outstretched hand, ostensibly for the purpose of kissing it; in reality, to keep her at a safe distance. What did she want? And why?

"This is—to thank you," she said as he raised his head from herberinged knuckles. She thrust the box into his other hand. "And to protect you."

"I assure you, madam, no thanks are necessary. I did nothing." Christ, was that it? Did she think she must bed him, in token of thanks—or rather, had she convinced herself that she must, because she wanted to? She did want to; he could see her excitement, in the slightly widened blue eyes, the flushed cheeks, the rapid pulse in her throat. He squeezed her fingers gently and released them, then tried to hand back the box.

"Really, madam—Louisa—I cannot accept this; surely it is a treasure of your family." It certainly looked valuable; small as it was, it was remarkably heavy—made either of gilded lead or of solid gold—and sported a number of crudely cut cabochon stones, which he feared were precious.

"Oh, it is," she assured him. "It has been in my husband's family for hundreds of years."

"Oh, well, then certainly—"

"No, you must keep it," she said vehemently. "It will protect you from the creature."

"Creature. You mean the—"

"DerNachtmahr,"shesaid, lowering her voice and looking involuntarily over one

shoulder, as though fearing that some vile thing hovered in the air nearby.

Nachtmahr. "Nightmare," it meant. Despite himself, a brief shiver tightened Grey's shoulders. The halls were better lighted, but still harbored drafts that made the candles flicker and the shadows flow like moving water down the walls. He glanced down at the box. There were letters etched into the lid, in Latin, but of so ancient a sort that it would take close examination to work out what they said.

"It is a reliquary," she said, moving closer, as though to point out the inscription. "Of Saint Orgevald."

"Ah? Er . . . yes. Most interesting." He thought this mildly gruesome. Of all the objectionable Popish practices, this habit of chopping up saints and scattering their remnants to the far ends of the earth was possibly the most reprehensible. But why should the Princess have such an item? The von Lowensteins were Lutheran. Of course, it was very old—no doubt she regarded it as no more than a family talisman.

She was very close, her perfume cloying in his nostrils. How was he to get rid of the woman? The door to his room was only a foot or two away; he had a strong urge to open it, leap in, and slam it shut, but that wouldn't do.

"You will protect me, protect my son," she murmured, looking trustfully up at him from beneath golden lashes. "So I will protect you, dear John."

She flung her arms about his neck, and once more glued her lips to his in a passionate kiss. Sheer courtesy required him to return the embrace, though his mind was racing, looking feverishly for some escape. Where the devil were the servants? Why did no one interrupt them?

Then someone did interrupt them. There was a gruff cough near at hand, and Grey

broke the embrace with relief—a short-lived emotion, as he looked up to discover the Landgrave von Erdberg standing a few feet away, glowering under heavy brows.

“Your pardon, Your Highness,” Stephan said, in tones of ice. “I wished to speak to Major Grey; I did not know anyone was here.”

The Princess was flushed, but quite collected. She smoothed her gown down across her body, drawing herself up in such a way that her fine bust was strongly emphasized.

“Oh,” she said, very cool. “It’s you, Erdberg. Do not worry, I was just taking my leave of the Major. You may have him now.” A small, smug smile twitched at the corner of her mouth. Quite deliberately, she laid a hand along Grey’s heated cheek, and let her fingers trail along his skin as she turned away. Then she strolled—curse the woman, she strolled away, switching the tail of her robe.

There was a profound silence in the hallway.

Grey broke it, finally.

“You wished to speak with me, Captain?”

Von Namtzen looked him over coldly, as though deciding whether to step on him.

“No,” he said at last. “It will wait.” He turned on his heel and strode away, making a good deal more noise in his departure than had the Princess.

Grey pressed a hand to his forehead, until he could trust his head not to explode, then shook it, and lunged for the door to his room before anything else should happen.

Tom was sitting on a stool by the fire, mending a pair of breeches that had suffered injury to the seams while Grey was demonstrating saber lunges to one of the German officers. He looked up at once when Grey came in, but if he had heard any of the conversation in the hall, he made no reference to it.

“What’s that, me lord?” he asked instead, seeing the box in Grey’s hand.

“What? Oh, that.” Grey put it down, with a faint feeling of distaste. “A relic.

Of SaintOrgevald , whoever he might be.”

“Oh, I know him!”

“You do?” Grey raised one brow.

“Yes, me lord. There’s a little chapel to him, down the garden. Ilse —she’s one of the kitchen maids—was showing me. He’s right famous hereabouts.”

“Indeed.” Grey began to undress, tossing his coat across the chair and starting on his waistcoat buttons. His fingers were impatient, slipping on the small

buttons. “Famous for what?”

“Stopping them killing the children. Will I help you, me lord?”

“What?” Grey stopped, staring at the young valet, then shook his head and resumed twitching buttons. “No, continue. Killing what children?”

Tom’s hair was standing up on end, as it tended to do whenever he was interested in a subject, owing to his habit of running one hand through it.

“Well, d’ye see, me lord, it used to be the custom, when they’d build something important, they’d buy a child from the gypsies—or just take one, Is’pose —and wall it up in the foundation. ’Specially for a bridge. It keeps anybody wicked from crossing over, see?”

Grey resumed his unbuttoning, more slowly. The hair prickled uneasily on his nape.

“The child—the murdered child—would cry out, I suppose?”

Tom looked surprised at his acumen.

“Yes, me lord. However did you know that?”

“Never mind. So SaintOrgevald put a stop to this practice, did he? Good for

him.” He glanced, more kindly, at the small gold box. “There’s a chapel, you say—is it in use?”

“No, me lord. It’s full of bits of stored rubbish. Or, rather—’t isn’t in use for what you might call devotions. Folk do go there.” The boy flushed a bit, and frowned intently at his work. Grey deduced that Ilse might have shown him another use for a deserted chapel, but chose not to pursue the matter.

“I see. Was Ilse able to tell you anything else of interest?”

“Depends upon what you call ‘interesting,’ me lord.” Tom’s eyes were still fixed upon his needle, but Grey could tell from the way in which he caught his upper lip between his teeth that he was in possession of a juicy bit of information.

“At this point, my chief interest is in my bed,” Grey said, finally extricating himself from the waistcoat, “but tell me anyway.”

“Reckon you know the nursemaid’s still gone?”

“I do.”

“Did you know her name was Koenig, and that she was wife to the Hun soldier what the succubus got?”

Grey had just about broken Tom of calling the Germans “Huns,” at least in their hearing, but chose to overlook this lapse.

“I did not.” Grey unfastened his neckcloth, slowly. “Was this known to all the servants?” More importantly, did Stephan know?

“Oh, yes, me lord.” Tom had laid down his needle, and now looked up, eager with his news. “See, the soldier, he used to do work here, at the Schloss.”

“When? Was he a local man, then?” It was quite usual for soldiers to augment their pay by doing work for the local citizenry in their off hours, but Stephan’s men had been in situ for less than a month. But if the nursery maid was the man’s wife—

“Yes, me lord. Born here, the both of them. He joined the local regiment some years a-gone, and came here to work—”

“What work did he do?” Grey asked, unsure whether this had any bearing on Koenig’s demise, but wanting a moment to encompass the information.

“Builder,” Tom replied promptly. “Part of the upper floors got the wood-worm, and had to be replaced.”

“Hmm. You seem remarkably well informed. Just how long did you spend in the chapel with young Ilse?”

Tom gave him a look of limpid innocence, much more inculpatory than an open leer.

“Me lord?”

“Never mind. Go on. Was the man working here at the time he was killed?”

“No, me lord. He left with the regiment two years back. He did come round a week or so ago, Ilse said, only to visit his friends among the servants, but he didn’t work here.”

Grey had now got down to his drawers, which he removed with a sigh of relief.

“Christ, what sort of perverse country is it where they put starch in a man’s smallclothes? Can you not deal with the laundress, Tom?”

“Sorry, me lord.” Tom scrambled to retrieve the discarded drawers. “I didn’t know the word for ‘starch.’ I thought I did, but whatever I said just made ’em laugh.”

“Well, don’t make Ilse laugh too much. Leaving the maidservants with child is an abuse of hospitality.”

“Oh, no, me lord,” Tom assured him earnestly. “We was too busy talking to, er . . .”

“To be sure you were,” Grey said equably. “Did she tell you anything else of interest?”

“Mebbe.” Tom had the nightshirt already aired and hanging by the fire to warm; he held it up for Grey to draw over his head, the wool flannel soft and grateful as it slid over his skin. “Mind, it’s only gossip.”

“Mmm?”

“One of the older footmen, who used to work with Koenig—after Koenig came to visit, he wastalkin’ with one of the other servants, and he said in Ilse’s hearing as how little Siegfried was growing up to be the spit of him—of Koenig, I mean, not the footman. But then he saw her listening and shut up smart.”

Grey stopped in the act of reaching for his banyan, and stared.

“Indeed,” he said. Tom nodded, looking modestly pleased with the effect of his findings.

“That’s the Princess’s old husband, isn’t it, over the mantelpiece in the drawing room? Ilse showed me the picture. Looks a proper old bugger, don’t he?”

“Yes,” said Grey, smiling slightly. “And?”

“He ain’t had—hadn’t, I mean—any children more than Siegfried, though he was married twice before. And Master Siegfried was born six months to the day after the old fellow died. That kind of thing always causes talk, don’t it?”

“I should say so, yes.” Grey thrust his feet into the proffered slippers. “Thank you, Tom. You’ve done more than well.”

Tom shrugged modestly, though his round face beamed as though illuminated from within.

“Will I fetch you tea, me lord? Or a nice syllabub?”

“Thank you, no. Find your bed, Tom, you’ve earned your rest.”

“Very good, me lord.” Tom bowed; his manners were improving markedly, under the

example of the Schloss's servants. He picked up the clothes Grey had left on the chair, to take away for brushing, but then stopped to examine the little reliquary, which Grey had left on the table.

"That's a handsome thing, me lord. A relic, did you say? Isn't that a bit of somebody?"

"It is." Grey started to tell Tom to take the thing away with him, but stopped.

It was undoubtedly valuable; best to leave it here. "Probably a finger or a toe, judging from the size."

Tom bent, peering at the faded lettering.

"What does it say, me lord? Can you read it?"

"Probably." Grey took the box, and brought it close to the candle. Held thus at an angle, the worn lettering sprang into legibility. So did the drawing etched into the top, which Grey had to that point assumed to be merely decorative lines. The words confirmed it.

"Isn't that a? . . ." Tom said, goggling at it.

"Yes, it is." Grey gingerly set the box down.

They regarded it in silence for a moment.

"Ah . . . where did you get it, me lord?" Tom asked, finally.

"The Princess gave it me. As protection from the succubus."

"Oh." The young valet shifted his weight to one foot, and glanced sidelong at him. "Ah . . . d'ye think it will work?"

Grey cleared his throat.

"I assure you, Tom, if the phallus of Saint Orgevald does not protect me, nothing will."

Left alone, Grey sank into the chair by the fire, closed his eyes, and tried to compose himself sufficiently to think. The conversation with Tom had at least allowed him a little distance from which to contemplate matters with the Princess and Stephan—save that they didn't bear contemplation.

He felt mildly nauseated, and sat up to pour a glass of plum brandy from the decanter on the table. That helped, settling both his stomach and his mind.

He sat slowly sipping it, gradually bringing his mental faculties to bear on the less personal aspects of the situation.

Tom's discoveries cast a new and most interesting light on matters. If Grey had ever believed in the existence of a succubus—and he was sufficiently honest to admit that there had been moments, both in the graveyard and in the dark-flickering halls of the Schloss—he believed no longer.

The attempted kidnapping was plainly the work of some human agency, and the revelation of the relationship between the two Koenigs—the vanished nursemaid and her dead husband—just as plainly indicated that the death of Private Koenig was part of the same affair, no matter what hocus-pocus had been contrived around it.

Grey's father had died when he was twelve, but had succeeded in instilling in his sons his own admiration for the philosophy of reason. In addition to the concept of Occam's razor, his father had also introduced him to the useful doctrine of *Cui bono*?

The plainly obvious answer there was the Princess Louisa. Granting for the present that the gossip was true, and that Koenig had fathered little Siegfried . . . the last thing the woman could want was for Koenig to return and hang about where awkward resemblances could be noted.

He had no idea of the German law regarding paternity. In England, a child born

in wedlock was legally the offspring of the husband, even when everyone and the dog's mother knew that the wife had been openly unfaithful. By such means, several gentlemen of his acquaintance had children, even though he was quite sure that the men had never even thought of sharing their wives' beds. Had Stephan perhaps—

He caught that thought by the scruff of the neck and shoved it aside. Besides, if the miniaturist had been faithful, Stephan's son was the spitting image of his father. Though painters naturally would produce what image they thought most desired by the patron, despite the reality—

He picked up the glass and drank from it until he felt breathless and his ears buzzed.

"Koenig," he said firmly, aloud. Whether the gossip was true or not—and having kissed the Princess, he rather thought it was; no shrinking violet, she!—and whether or not Koenig's reappearance might threaten Siggy's legitimacy, the man's presence must certainly be unwelcome.

Unwelcome enough to have arranged his death?

Why, when he would be gone again soon? The troops were likely to move within the week—surely within the month. Had something happened that made the removal of Private Koenig urgent? Perhaps Koenig himself had been in ignorance of Siegfried's parentage—and upon discovering the boy's resemblance to himself on his visit to the castle, determined to extort money or favor from the Princess?

And bringing the matter full circle . . . had the entire notion of the succubus been introduced merely to disguise Koenig's death? If so, how? The rumor had seized the imagination of both troops and townspeople to a marked extent—and Koenig's death had caused it to reach the proportions of a panic—but how had

that rumor been started?

He dismissed that question for the moment, as there was no rational way of dealing with it. As for the death, though . . .

He could without much difficulty envision the Princess Louisa conspiring in the death of Koenig; he had noticed before that women were quite without mercy where their offspring were concerned. Still . . . the Princess had presumably not entered a soldier's quarters and done a man to death with her own lily-white hands.

Who had done it? Someone with great ties of loyalty to the Princess, presumably. Though, upon second thought, it need not have been anyone from the Schloss . . . Gundwitz was not the teeming boil that London was, but the town was still of sufficient size to sustain a reasonable number of criminals; one of these could likely have been induced to perform the actual murder—if it was a murder, he reminded himself. He must not lose sight of the null hypothesis, in his eagerness to reach a conclusion.

And further . . . even if the Princess had in some way contrived both the rumor of the succubus and the death of Private Koenig—who was the witch in Siggy's room? Had someone truly tried to abduct the child? Private Koenig was already dead; clearly he could have had nothing to do with it.

He ran a hand through his hair, rubbing his scalp slowly to assist thought.

Loyalties. Who was most loyal to the Princess? Her butler? Stephan?

He grimaced, but examined the thought carefully. No. There were no circumstances conceivable under which Stephan would have conspired in the murder of one of his own men. Grey might be in doubt of many things concerning the Landgrave von Erdberg, but not his honor.

This led back to the Princess's behavior toward himself. Did she act from

attraction? Grey was modest about his own endowments, but also honest enough to admit that he possessed some, and that his person was reasonably attractive to women.

He thought it more likely, if the Princess had indeed conspired in Koenig's removal, that her actions toward himself were intended as distraction. Though there was yet another explanation.

One of the minor corollaries to Occam's razor that he had himself derived suggested that quite often, the observed result of an action really was the intended end of that action. The end result of that encounter in the hallway was that Stephan von Namtzen had discovered him in embrace with the Princess, and been noticeably annoyed by said discovery.

Had Louisa's motive been the very simple one of making von Namtzen jealous?

And if Stephan were jealous . . . of whom?

The room had grown intolerably stuffy, and he rose, restless, and went to the window, unlatching the shutters. The moon was full, a great, fecund yellow orb that hung low above the darkened fields, and cast its light over the slated roofs of Gundwitz and the paler sea of canvas tents that lay beyond.

Did Ruysdale's troops sleep soundly tonight, exhausted from their healthful exercise? He felt as though he would profit from such exercise himself. He braced himself in the window frame and pushed, feeling the muscles pop in his arms, envisioning escape into that freshening night, running naked and silent as a wolf, soft earth cool, yielding to his feet.

Cold air rushed past his body, raising the coarse hairs on his skin, but his core felt molten. Between the heat of fire and brandy, the nightshirt's original grateful warmth had become oppressive; sweat bloomed upon his body, and the

woolen cloth hung limp upon him.

Suddenly impatient, he stripped it off and stood in the open window, fierce and restless, the cold air caressing his nakedness.

There was a whirl and rustle in the ivy nearby, and then something—several somethings—passed in absolute silence so close and so swiftly by his face that he had not even time to start backward, though his heart leapt to his throat, strangling his involuntary cry.

Bats. The creatures had disappeared in an instant, long before his startled mind had collected itself sufficiently to put a name to them.

He leaned out, searching, but the bats had disappeared at once into the dark, swift about their hunting. It was no wonder that legends of succubae abounded, in a place so bat-haunted. The behavior of the creatures indeed seemed supernatural.

The bounds of the small chamber seemed at once intolerably confining. He could imagine himself some demon of the air, taking wing to haunt the dreams of a man, seize upon a sleeping body, and ride it—could he fly as far as England? he wondered. Was the night long enough?

The trees at the edge of the garden tossed uneasily, stirred by the wind. The night itself seemed tormented by an autumn restlessness, the sense of things moving, changing, fermenting.

His blood was still hot, having now reached a sort of full, rolling boil, but there was no outlet for it. He did not know whether Stephan's anger was on his own behalf—or Louisa's. In neither case, though, could he make any open demonstration of feeling toward von Namtzen, now; it was too dangerous. He was unsure of the German attitude toward sodomites, but felt it unlikely to be more forgiving than the English stance. Whether stolid Protestant morality, or a

wilder Catholic mysticism—he cast a brief look at the reliquary—neither was likely to have sympathy with his own predilections.

The mere contemplation of revelation, and the loss of its possibility, though, had shown him something important.

Stephan von Namtzen both attracted and aroused him, but it was not because of his own undoubted physical qualities. It was, rather, the degree to which those qualities reminded Grey of James Fraser.

Von Namtzen was nearly the same height as Fraser, a powerful man with broad shoulders, long legs, and an instantly commanding presence. However, Stephan was heavier, more crudely constructed, and less graceful than the Scot. And while Stephan warmed Grey's blood, the fact remained that the German did not burn his heart like living flame.

He lay down finally upon his bed, and put out the candle. Lay watching the play of firelight on the walls, seeing not the flicker of wood-flame, but the play of sun upon red hair, the sheen of sweat on a pale bronzed body . . .

A brief and brutal dose of Mr. Keegan's remedy left him drained, if not yet peaceful. He lay staring upward into the shadows of the carved wooden ceiling, able at least to think once more.

The only conclusion of which he was sure was that he needed very much to talk to someone who had seen Koenig's body.

CHAPTER 6

HOCUS-POCUS

Finding Private Koenig's last place of residence was simple. Thoroughly accustomed to having soldiers quartered upon them, Prussians sensibly built their houses with a separate chamber intended for the purpose. Indeed, the

populace viewed such quartering not as an imposition, but as a windfall, since the soldiers not only paid for board and lodging, and would often do chores such as fetching wood and water—but were also better protection against thieves than a large watchdog might be, without the expense.

Stephan's records were of course impeccable; he could lay hands on any one of his men at a moment's notice. And while he received Grey with extreme coldness, he granted the request without question, directing Grey to a house toward the western side of the town.

In fact, von Namtzen hesitated for a moment, clearly wondering whether duty obliged him to accompany Grey upon his errand, but Lance-Corporal Helwig appeared with a new difficulty—he averaged three per day—and Grey was left to carry out the errand on his own.

The house where Koenig had lodged was nothing out of the ordinary, so far as Grey could see. The owner of the house was rather remarkable, though, being a dwarf.

“Oh, the poor man! So much blood you have before not seen!”

HerrHuckel stood perhaps as high as Grey's waist—a novel sensation, to look down so far to an adult conversant. HerrHuckel was nonetheless intelligent and coherent, which was also novel in Grey's experience; most witnesses to violence tended to lose what wits they had and either to forget all details, or to imagine impossible ones.

HerrHuckel, though, showed him willingly to the chamber where the death had occurred, and explained what he had himself seen.

“It was late, you see, sir, and my wife and I had gone to our beds. The soldiers were out—or at least we supposed so.” The soldiers had just received their pay, and most were busy losing it in taverns or brothels. TheHuckels had heard no

noises from the soldiers' room, and thus assumed that all four of the soldiers quartered with them were absent on such business.

Somewhere in the small hours, though, the good-folk had been awakened by terrible yells coming from the chamber. These were produced not by Private Koenig, but by one of his companions, who had returned in a state of advanced intoxication and stumbled into the blood-soaked shambles.

"He lay here, sir. Just so?" HerrHuckel waved his hands to indicate the position the body had occupied at the far side of the cozy room. There was nothing there now, save irregular dark blotches that stained the wooden floor.

"Not even lye would get it out," said FrauHuckel , who had come to the door of the room to watch. "And we had to burn the bedding."

Rather to Grey's surprise, she was not only of normal size, but quite pretty, with bright, soft hair peeking out from under her cap. She frowned at him in accusation.

"None of the soldiers will stay here, now. They thinktheNachtmahr will get them, too!" Clearly, this was Grey's fault. He bowed apologetically.

"I regret that, madam," he said. "Tell me, did you see the body?"

"No," she said promptly, "but I saw the night-hag."

"Indeed," Grey said, surprised. "Er . . . what did it—she—it look like?" He hoped he was not going to receive some form ofSiggy's logical but unhelpful description, "Likea night-hag."

"Now,Margarethe ," said HerrHuckel , putting a warning hand up to his wife's arm. "It might not have been—"

"Yes, it was!" She transferred the frown to her husband, but did not shake off his hand, instead putting her own over it before returning her attention to

Grey.

“It was an old woman, sir, with her white hair in braids. Her shawl slipped off in the wind, and I saw. There are two old women who live nearby, this is true—but one walks only with a stick, and the other does not walk at all. This . . . thing, she moved very quickly, hunched a little, but light on her feet.”

HerrHuckel was looking more and more uneasy as this description progressed, and opened his mouth to interrupt, but was not given the chance.

“I am sure it was oldAgathe !” FrauHuckel said, her voice dropping to a portentous whisper. HerrHuckel shut his eyes with a grimace.

“OldAgathe ?” Grey asked, incredulous. “Do you mean Frau Blomberg—the Buergermeister’s mother?”

FrauHuckel nodded, face fixed in grave certainty.

“Something must be done,” she declared. “Everyone is afraid at night—either to go out, or to stay in. Men whose wives will not watch over them as they sleep are falling asleep as they work, as they eat . . .”

Grey thought briefly of mentioning Mr. Keegan’s patent preventative, but dismissed the notion, instead turning to HerrHuckel to inquire for a close description of the state of the body.

“I am told that the throat was pierced, as with an animal’s teeth,” he said, at which HerrHuckel made a quick sign against evil and nodded, going a little pale. “Was the throat torn quite open—as though the man were attacked by a wolf? Or—” But HerrHuckel was already shaking his head.

“No, no! Only two marks—two holes. Like a snake’s fangs.” He poked two fingers into his own neck in illustration. “But so much blood!” He shuddered, glancing away from the marks on the floorboards.

Grey had once seen a man bitten by a snake, when he was quite young—but there

had been no blood, that he recalled. Of course, the man had been bitten in the leg.

“Large holes, then?” Grey persisted, not liking to press the man to recall vividly unpleasant details, but determined to obtain as much information as possible.

With some effort, he established that the tooth marks had been sizable—perhaps a bit more than a quarter inch or so in diameter—and located on the front of Koenig’s throat, about halfway up. He made Huckel show him, repeatedly, after ascertaining that the body had shown no other wound, when undressed for cleansing and burial.

He glanced at the walls of the room, which had been freshly whitewashed.

Nonetheless, there was a large dark blotch showing faintly, down near the floor—probably where Koenig had rolled against the wall in his death throes.

He had hoped that a description of Koenig’s body would enable him to discover some connection between the two deaths—but the only similarity between the deaths of Koenig and Bodger appeared to be that both men were indeed dead, and both dead under impossible circumstances.

He thanked the Huckels and prepared to take his leave, only then realizing that Frau Huckel had resumed her train of thought and was speaking to him quite earnestly.

“ . . . call a witch to cast the runes,” she said.

“I beg your pardon, madam?”

She drew in a breath of deep exasperation, but refrained from open rebuke.

“Herr Blomberg,” she repeated, giving Grey a hard look. “He will call a witch to cast the runes. Then we will discover the truth of everything!”

“He will do what?” Sir Peter squinted at Grey in disbelief. “Witches?”

“Only one, I believe, sir,” Grey assured Sir Peter. According to Frau Huckel, matters had been escalating in Gundwitz. The rumor that Herr Blomberg’s dead mother was custodian to the succubus was rampant in the town, and public opinion was in danger of overwhelming the little Buergermeister.

Herr Blomberg, however, was a stubborn man, and most devoted to his mother’s memory. He refused entirely to allow her coffin to be dug up and her body desecrated.

The only solution, which Herr Blomberg had contrived out of desperation, seemed to be to discover the true identity and hiding place of the succubus. To this end, the Buergermeister had summoned a witch, who would cast runes—

“What are those?” Sir Peter asked, puzzled.

“I am not entirely sure, sir,” Grey admitted. “Some object for divination, I suppose.”

“Really?” Sir Peter rubbed his knuckles dubiously beneath a long, thin nose.

“Sounds very fishy, what? This witch could say anything, couldn’t she?”

“I suppose Herr Blomberg expects that if he is paying for the . . . er . . . ceremony, the lady is perhaps more likely to say something favorable to his situation,” Grey suggested.

“Hmmm. Still don’t like it,” Sir Peter said. “Don’t like it at all. Could be trouble, Grey, surely you see that?”

“I do not believe you can stop him, sir.”

“Perhaps not, perhaps not.” Sir Peter ruminated fiercely, brow crinkled under his wig. “Ah! Well, how’s this, then—you go round and fix it up, Grey. Tell Herr Blomberg he can have his hocus-pocus, but he must do it here, at the Schloss .

That way we can keep a lid on it, what, see there's no untoward excitement?"

"Yes, sir," Grey said, manfully suppressing a sigh, and went off to execute his orders.

By the time he reached his room to change for dinner, Grey felt dirty, irritable, and thoroughly out of sorts. It had taken most of the afternoon to track down Herr Blomberg and convince him to hold his . . . Christ, what was it? His rune-casting? . . . at the Schloss . Then he had run across the pest Helwig, and before he was able to escape had been embroiled in an enormous controversy with a gang of mule drovers who claimed not to have been paid by the army. This in turn had entailed a visit to two army camps, an inspection of thirty-four mules, trying interviews with both Sir Peter's paymaster and von Namtzen's—and involved a further cold interview with Stephan, who had behaved as though Grey was personally responsible for the entire affair, then turned his back, dismissing Grey in mid-sentence, as though unable to bear the sight of him. He flung off his coat, sent Tom to fetch hot water, and irritably tugged off his stock, wishing he could hit someone.

A knock sounded on the door, and he froze, irritation vanishing upon the moment. What to do? Pretend he wasn't in, was the obvious course, in case it was Louisa, in her sheer lawn shift or something worse. But if it were Stephan, come either to apologize or to demand further explanation?

The knock sounded again. It was a good, solid knock. Not what one would expect of a female—particularly not of a female intent on dalliance. Surely the Princess would be more inclined to a discreet scratching?

The knock came again, peremptory, demanding. Taking an enormous breath and

trying to still the thumping of his heart, Grey jerked the door open.

“I wish to speak to you,” said the Dowager, and sailed into the room, not waiting for invitation.

“Oh,” said Grey, having lost all grasp of German on the spot. He closed the door and turned to the old lady, instinctively rebuttoning his shirt.

She ignored his mute gesture toward the chair, but stood in front of the fire, fixing him with a steely gaze. She was completely dressed, he saw, with a faint sense of relief. He really could not have borne the sight of the Dowager en déshabille.

“I have come to ask you,” she said without preamble, “if you have intentions to marry Louisa.”

“I have not,” he said, his German returning with miraculous promptitude. “Nein .”

One sketchy gray brow twitched upward.

“Ja? That is not what she thinks.”

He rubbed a hand over his face, groping for some diplomatic reply—and found it, in the feel of the stubble on his own jaw.

“I admire Princess Louisa greatly,” he said. “There are few women who are her equal—” And thank God for that, he added to himself. “—but I regret that I am not free to undertake any obligation. I have . . . an understanding. In England.” His understanding with James Fraser was that if he were ever to lay a hand on the man or speak his heart, Fraser would break his neck instantly. It was, however, certainly an understanding, and clear as Irish crystal.

The Dowager looked at him with a narrow gaze of such penetrance that he wanted to take several steps backward. He stood his ground, though, returning the look with one of patient sincerity.

“Hmph!” she said at last. “Well, then. That is good.” Without another word, she

turned on her heel. Before she could close the door behind her, he reached out and grasped her arm.

She swung around to him, surprised and outraged at his presumption. He ignored this, though, absorbed in what he had seen as she turned.

“Pardon, Your Highness,” he said. He touched the medal pinned to the bodice of her gown. He had seen it a hundred times, and assumed it always to contain the image of some saint—which, he supposed, it did, but certainly not in the traditional manner.

“Saint Orgevald?” he inquired. The image was crudely embossed, and could easily be taken for something else—if one hadn’t seen the larger version on the lid of the reliquary.

“Certainly.” The old lady fixed him with a glittering eye, shook her head, and went out, closing the door firmly behind her.

For the first time, it occurred to Grey that whoever Orgevald had been, it was entirely possible that he had not originally been a saint. Pondering this, he went to bed, scratching absentmindedly at a cluster of fleabites obtained from the mules.

CHAPTER 7

AMBUSH

The next day dawned cold and windy. Grey saw pheasants huddling under the cover of shrubs as he rode, crows hugging the ground in the stubbled fields, and slate roofs thick with shuffling doves, feathered bodies packed together in the quest for heat. Despite their reputed brainlessness, he had to think that the birds were more sensible than he.

Birds had no duty—but it wasn’t quite duty that propelled him on this ragged,

chilly morning. It was in part simple curiosity, in part official suspicion. He wished to find the gypsies; in particular, he wished to find one gypsy: the woman who had quarreled with Private Bodger, soon before his death.

If he were quite honest—and he felt that he could afford to be, so long as it was within the privacy of his own mind—he had another motive for the journey. It would be entirely natural for him to pause at the bridge for a cordial word with the artillerymen, and perhaps see for himself how the boy with the red lips was faring.

While all these motives were undoubtedly sound, though, the real reason for his expedition was simply that it would remove him from the Schloss. He did not feel safe in a house containing the Princess Louisa, let alone her mother-in-law.

Neither could he go to his usual office in the town, for fear of encountering Stephan.

The whole situation struck him as farcical in the extreme; still, he could not keep himself from thinking about it—about Stephan.

Had he been deluding himself about Stephan's attraction to him? He was as vain as any man, he supposed, and yet he could swear . . . his thoughts went around and around in the same weary circle. And yet, each time he thought to dismiss them entirely, he felt again the overwhelming sense of warmth and casual possession with which Stephan had kissed him. He had not imagined it. And yet .

. .

Embrangled in this tedious but inescapable coil, he reached the bridge by midmorning, only to find that the young soldier was not in camp.

“Franz? Gone foraging, maybe,” said the Hanoverian Lieutenant, with a shrug. “Or got homesick and run. They do that, the young ones.”

“Got scared,” one of the other men suggested, overhearing.

“Scared of what?” Grey asked sharply, wondering whether, despite everything, word of the succubus had reached the bridge.

“Scared of his shadow, that one,” said the man he recalled as Samson, making a face. “He keeps talking about the child, he hears a crying child at night.”

“Thought you heard it, too, eh?” said the Hanoverian, not sounding entirely friendly. “The night it rained so hard?”

“Me? I didn’t hear anything then but Franz’s squealing.” There was a rumble of laughter at that, the sound of which made Grey’s heart drop to his boots. Too late, he thought. “At the lightning,” Samson added blandly, catching his glance.

“He’s run for home,” the Lieutenant declared. “Let him go; no use here for a coward.”

There was a small sense of disquiet in the man’s manner that belied his confidence, Grey thought—and yet there was nothing to be done about it. He had no direct authority over these men, could not order a search to be undertaken.

As he crossed the bridge, though, he could not help but glance over. The water had subsided only a little; the flood still tumbled past, choked with torn leaves and half-seen sodden objects. He did not want to stop, to be caught looking, and yet looked as carefully as he could, half expecting to see little Franz’s delicate body broken on the rocks, or the blind eyes of a drowned face trapped beneath the water.

He saw nothing but the usual flood debris, though, and with a slight sense of relief he continued on toward the hills.

He knew nothing save the direction the gypsy wagons had been going when last observed. It was long odds that he would find them, but he searched doggedly, pausing at intervals to scan the countryside with his spyglass, or to look for

rising plumes of smoke.

These last occurred sporadically, but proved invariably to be peasant huts or charcoal burners. The peasants either disappeared promptly when they saw his red coat, or stared and crossed themselves, but none of them admitted to having heard of the gypsies, let alone seen them.

The sun was coming down the sky, and he realized that he must turn back soon or be caught in open country by night. He had a tinderbox and a bottle of ale in his saddlebag, but no food, and the prospect of being marooned in this fashion was unwelcome, particularly with the French forces only a few miles to the west. If the British army had scouts, so did the frogs, and he was lightly armed, with no more than a pair of pistols, a rather dented cavalry saber, and his dagger to hand.

Not wishing to risk Karolus on the boggy ground, he was riding another of his horses, a thickset bay who went by the rather unflattering name of Hognose, but who had excellent manners and a steady foot. Steady enough that Grey could ignore the ground, trying to focus his attention, strained from prolonged tension, into a last look around. The foliage of the hills around him faded into patchwork, shifting constantly in the roiling wind. Again and again, he thought he saw things—human figures, animals moving, the briefly seen corner of a wagon—only to have them prove illusory when he ventured toward them.

The wind whined incessantly in his ears, adding spectral voices to the illusions that plagued him. He rubbed a hand over his face, gone numb from the cold, imagining momentarily that he heard the wails of Franz's ghostly child. He shook his head to dispel the impression—but it persisted.

He drew Hognose to a stop, turning his head from side to side, listening intently. He was sure he heard it—but what was it? No words were distinguishable

above the moaning of the wind, but there was a sound, he was sure of it.

At the same time, it seemed to come from nowhere in particular; try as he might, he could not locate it. The horse heard it, too, though—he saw the bay's ears prick and turn nervously.

“Where?” he said softly, laying the rein on the horse's neck. “Where is it? Can you find it?”

The horse apparently had little interest in finding the noise, but some in getting away from it; Hognose backed, shuffling on the sandy ground, kicking up sheaves of wet yellow leaves. Grey drew him up sharply, swung down, and wrapped the reins around a bare-branched sapling.

With the horse's revulsion as guide, he saw what he had overlooked: the churned earth of a badger's sett, half hidden by the sprawling roots of a large elm.

Once focused on this, he could pinpoint the noise as coming from it. And damned if he'd ever heard a badger carry on like that!

Pistol drawn and primed, he edged toward the bank of earth, keeping a wary eye on the nearby trees.

It was certainly crying, but not a child; a sort of muffled whimpering, interspersed with the kind of catch in the breath that injured men often made.

“Wer ist da?” he demanded, halting just short of the opening to the sett, pistol raised. “You are injured?”

There was a gulp of surprise, followed at once by scrabbling sounds.

“Major? Major Grey? It is you?”

“Franz?” he said, flabbergasted.

“Ja, Major! Help me, help me, please!”

Uncocking the pistol and thrusting it back in his belt, he knelt and peered into

the hole. Badgersets are normally deep, running straight down for six feet or more before turning, twisting sideways into the badger's den. This one was no exception; the grimy, tear-streaked face of the young Prussian soldier stared up at him, his head a good foot below the rim of the narrow hole.

The boy had broken his leg in falling, and it was no easy matter to lift him straight up. Grey managed it at last by improvising a sling of his own shirt and the boy's, tied to a rope anchored to Hognose's saddle.

At last he had the boy laid on the ground, covered with his coat and taking small sips from the bottle of ale.

"Major—" Franz coughed and spluttered, trying to rise on one elbow.

"Hush, don't try to talk." Grey patted his arm soothingly, wondering how best to get him back to the bridge. "Everything will be—"

"But Major—the redcoats! Die Englander!"

"What? What are you talking about?"

"Dead Englishmen! It was the little boy, I heard him, and I dug, and—" The boy's story was spilling out in a torrent of Prussian, and it took no little time for Grey to slow him down sufficiently to disentangle the threads of what he was saying.

He had, Grey understood him to say, repeatedly heard the crying near the bridge, but his fellows either didn't hear or wouldn't admit to it, instead teasing him mercilessly about it. At last he determined to go by himself and see if he could find a source for the sound—perhaps wind moaning through a hole, as his friend Samson had suggested.

"But it wasn't." Franz was still pale, but small patches of hectic color glowed in the translucent skin of his cheeks. He had poked about the base of the bridge, discovering eventually a small crack in the rocks at the foot of a

pillar on the far side of the river. Thinking that this might indeed be the source of the crying, he had inserted his bayonet and pried at the rock—which had promptly come away, leaving him face to face with a cavity inside the pillar, containing a small, round, very white skull.

“More bones, too, I think. I didn’t stop to look.” The boy swallowed. He had simply run, too panicked to think. When he stopped at last, completely out of breath and with legs like jelly, he had sat down to rest and think what to do.

“They couldn’t beat me more than once for being gone,” he said, with the ghost of a smile. “So I thought I would be gone a little longer.”

This decision was enhanced by the discovery of a grove of walnut trees, and

Franz had made his way up into the hills, gathering both nuts and wild blackberries—his lips were still stained purple with the juice, Grey saw.

He had been interrupted in this peaceful pursuit by the sound of gunfire.

Throwing himself flat on the ground, he had then crept a little forward, until he could see over the edge of a little rocky escarpment. Below, in a hollow, he saw a small group of English soldiers, engaged in mortal combat with Austrians.

“Austrians? You are sure?” Grey asked, astonished.

“I know what Austrians look like,” the boy assured him, a little tartly. Knowing what Austrians were capable of, too, he had promptly backed up, risen to his feet, and run as fast as he could in the opposite direction—only to fall into the badger’s sett in his haste.

“You were lucky the badger wasn’t at home,” Grey remarked, teeth beginning to chatter. He had reclaimed the remnants of his shirt, but this was insufficient shelter against dropping temperature and probing wind. “But you said dead Englishmen.”

“I think they were all dead,” the boy said. “I didn’t go see.”

Grey, however, must. Leaving the boy covered with his coat and a mound of dead leaves, he untied the horse and turned his head in the direction Franz had indicated.

Proceeding with care and caution in case of lurking Austrians, it was nearly sunset before he found the hollow.

It was Dundas and his survey party; he recognized the uniforms at once. Cursing under his breath, he flung himself off his horse and scrabbled hurriedly from one body to the next, hoping against hope as he pressed shaking fingers against flaccid cheeks and cooling breasts.

Two were still alive: Dundas and a Corporal. The Corporal was badly wounded and unconscious; Dundas had taken a gun butt to the head and a bayonet through the chest, but the wound had fortunately sealed itself. The Lieutenant was disabled and in pain, but not yet on the verge of death.

“Hundreds of the buggers,” he croaked breathlessly, gripping Grey’s arm. “Saw . . . whole battalion . . . guns. Going to . . . the French. Fanshawe —followed them. Spying. Heard. Fuckingsucc —succ—” He coughed hard, spraying a little blood with the saliva, but it seemed to ease his breath temporarily.

“It was a plan. Got whores—agents. Slept with men, gave them o-opium. Dreams. Panic, aye?” He was half sitting up, straining to make words, make Grey understand.

Grey understood, only too well. He had been given opium once, by a doctor, and remembered vividly the weirdly erotic dreams that had ensued. Do the same to men who had likely never heard of opium, let alone experienced it—and at the same time, start rumors of ademoness who preyed upon men in their dreams?

Particularly with a flesh-and-blood avatar, who could leave such marks as would

convince a man he had been so victimized?

Only too effective, and one of the cleverest notions he had ever come across for demoralizing an enemy before attack. It was that alone that gave him some hope, as he comforted Dundas, piling him with coats taken from the dead, dragging the Corporal to lie near the Lieutenant for the sake of shared warmth, digging through a discarded rucksack for water to give him.

If the combined forces of French and Austrians were huge, there would be no need for such subtleties—the enemy would simply roll over the English and their German allies. But if the numbers were closer to equal—and it was still necessary to funnel them across that narrow bridge—then yes, it was desirable to face an enemy who had not slept for several nights, whose men were tired and jumpy, whose officers were not paying attention to possible threat, being too occupied with the difficulties close at hand.

He could see it clearly: Ruysdale was busy watching the French, who were sitting happily on the cliffs, moving just enough to keep attention diverted from the Austrian advance. The Austrians would come down on the bridge—likely at night—and then the French on their heels.

Dundas was shivering, eyes closed, teeth set hard in his lower lip against the pain of the movement.

“Christopher, can you hear me? Christopher!” Grey shook him, as gently as possible. “Where’s Fanshawe?” He didn’t know the members of Dundas’s party; if Fanshawe had been taken captive, or—but Dundas was shaking his head, gesturing feebly toward one of the corpses, lying with his head smashed open.

“Go on,” Dundas whispered. His face was gray, and not only from the waning light. “Warn Sir Peter.” He put a trembling arm about the unconscious Corporal,

and nodded to Grey. “We’ll . . . wait.”

CHAPTER 8

THE WITCH

Grey had been staring with great absorption at his valet’s face for some moments, before he realized even what he was looking at, let alone why.

“Uh?” he said.

“Isaid,” Tom repeated, with some emphasis, “you best drink this, me lord, or you’re going to fall flat on your face, and that won’t do, will it?”

“It won’t? Oh. No. Of course not.” He took the cup, adding a belated, “Thank you, Tom. What is it?”

“I told you twice, I’m not going to try and say the name of it again. Ilse says it’ll keep you on your feet, though.” He leaned forward and sniffed approvingly at the liquid, which appeared to be brown and foamy, indicating the presence in it of eggs, Grey thought.

He followed Tom’s lead and sniffed, too, recoiling only slightly at the eye-watering reek. Hartshorn, perhaps? It had quite a lot of brandy, no matter what else was in it. And he did need to stay on his feet. With no more than a precautionary clenching of his belly muscles, he put back his head and drained it.

He had been awake for nearly forty-eight hours, and the world around him had a tendency to pass in and out of focus, like the scene in a spyglass. He had also a proclivity to go intermittently deaf, not hearing what was said to him—and Tom was correct, that wouldn’t do.

He had taken time, the night before, to fetch Franz, put him on the horse—with a certain amount of squealing, it must be admitted, as Franz had never been on a horse before—and take him to the spot where Dundas lay, feeling that they would

be better together. He had pressed his dagger into Franz's hands, and left him guarding the Corporal and the Lieutenant, who was by then, passing in and out of consciousness.

Grey had then donned his coat and come back to raise the alarm, riding a flagging horse at the gallop over pitch-black ground, by the light of a sinking moon. He'd fallen twice, when Hognose stumbled, jarring bones and jellifying kidneys, but luckily escaped injury both times.

He had alerted the artillery crew at the bridge, ridden on to Ruysdale's encampment, roused everyone, seen the Colonel despite all attempts to prevent him waking the man, gathered a rescue party, and ridden back to retrieve Dundas and the others, arriving in the hollow near dawn to find the Corporal dead and Dundas nearly so, with his head in Franz's lap.

Captain Hilten had of course sent someone with word to Sir Peter at the Schloss, but it was necessary for Grey to report personally to Sir Peter and von Namtzen, when he returned at midday with the rescue party. After which, officers and men had flapped out of the place like a swarm of bats, the whole military apparatus moving like the armature of some great engine, creaking, groaning, but coming to life with amazing speed.

Which left Grey alone in the Schloss at sunset, blank in mind and body, with nothing further to do. There was no need for liaison; couriers were flitting to and from all the regiments, carrying orders. He had no duty to perform; no one to command, no one to serve.

He would ride out in the morning with Sir Peter Hicks, part of Sir Peter's personal guard. But there was no need for him now; everyone was about his own business; Grey was forgotten.

He felt odd; not unwell, but as though objects and people near him were not quite real, not entirely firm to the touch. He should sleep, he knew—but could not, not with the whole world in flux around him, and a sense of urgency that hummed on his skin, yet was unable to penetrate to the core of his mind.

Tom was talking to him; he made an effort to attend.

“Witch,” he repeated, awareness struggling to make itself known. “Witch. You mean Herr Blomberg still intends to hold his—ceremony?”

“Yes, me lord.” Tom was sponging Grey’s coat, frowning as he tried to remove a pitch stain from the skirt. “Ilsesays he won’t rest until he’s cleared his mother’s name, and damned if the Austrians will stop him.”

Awareness burst through Grey’s fog like a pricked soap bubble.

“Christ! He doesn’t know!”

“About what, me lord?” Tom turned to look at him curiously, sponging cloth and vinegar in hand.

“The succubus. I must tell him—explain.” Even as he said it, though, he realized how little force such an explanation would have upon Herr Blomberg’s real problem. Sir Peter and Colonel Ruysdale might accept the truth—the townspeople would be much less likely to accept having been fooled—and by Austrians! Grey knew enough about gossip and rumor to realize that no amount of explanation from him would be enough. Still less if that explanation were to be filtered through Herr Blomberg, whose bias in the matter was clear.

Even Tom was frowning doubtfully at him as he rapidly explained the matter. Superstition and sensation are always so much more appealing than truth and rationality. The words echoed as though spoken in his ear, with the same humorously rueful intonation with which his father had spoken them, many years before.

He rubbed a hand vigorously over his face, feeling himself come back to life.

Perhaps he had one more task to complete, in his role as liaison.

“This witch, Tom—the woman who is to cast the runes—whatever in God’s name that might involve. Do you know where she is?”

“Oh, yes, me lord.” Tom had put down his cloth now, interested. “She’s here—in theSchloss , I mean. Locked up in the larder.”

“Locked up in the larder? Why?”

“Well, it has a good lock on the door, me lord, to keep the servants from—oh, you mean why’s she locked up at all?Ilse says she didn’t want to come; dug in her heels entire, and wouldn’t hear of it. But Herr Blomberg wouldn’t hear of hernot, and had her dragged up here, and locked up ’til this evening. He’s fetching up the Town Council, and the Magistrate, and all the bigwigs he can lay hands on,Ilse says.”

“Take me to her.”

Tom’s mouth dropped open. He closed it with a snap and looked Grey up and down.

“Notlikethat . You’re not even shaved!”

“Precisely like this,” Grey assured him, tucking in the tails of his shirt.

“Now.”

The game larder was locked, but, as Grey had surmised,Ilse knew where the key was kept and was not proof against Tom’s charm. The room itself was in an alcove behind the kitchens, and it was a simple matter to reach it without detection.

“You need not come farther, Tom,” Grey said, low-voiced. “Give me the keys; if anyone finds me here, I’ll say I took them.”

Tom, who had taken the precaution of arming himself with a toasting fork, merely

clutched the keys tighter in his other hand, and shook his head.

The door swung open silently on leather hinges. Someone had given the captive woman a candle; it lit the small space and cast fantastic shadows on the walls, from the hanging bodies of swans and pheasants, ducks and geese.

The drink had restored a sense of energy to Grey's mind and body, but without quite removing the sense of unreality that had pervaded his consciousness. It was therefore with no real surprise that he saw the woman who turned toward him, and recognized the gypsy prostitute who had quarreled with Private Bodger a few hours before the soldier's death.

She obviously recognized him, too, though she said nothing. Her eyes passed over him with cool scorn, and she turned away, evidently engrossed in some silent communion with a severed hog's head that sat upon a china plate.

"Madam," he said softly, as though his voice might rouse the dead fowl to sudden flight. "I would speak with you."

She ignored him, and folded her hands elaborately. The light winked gold from the rings in her ears and the rings on her fingers—and Grey saw that one was a crude circlet, with the emblem of Saint Orgevald's protection.

He was overcome with a sudden sense of premonition, though he did not believe in premonition. He felt things in motion around him, things that he did not understand and could not control, things settling of themselves into an ordained and appointed position, like the revolving spheres of his father's sorcery—and he wished to protest this state of affairs, but could not.

"Me lord." Tom's hissed whisper shook him out of this momentary disorientation, and he glanced at the boy, eyebrows raised. Tom was staring at the woman, who was still turned away, but whose face was visible in profile.

"Hanna," he said, nodding at the gypsy. "She looks like Hanna, Siggy's

nursemaid. You know, me lord, the one what disappeared?”

The woman had swung round abruptly at mention of Hanna’s name, and stood glaring at them both.

Grey felt the muscles of his back loosen, very slightly, as though some force had picked him up and held him by the scruff of the neck. As though he, too, were one of the objects being moved, placed in the spot ordained for him.

“I have a proposition for you, madam,” he said calmly, and pulled a cask of salted fish out from beneath a shelf. He sat on it, and, reaching behind him, pulled the door closed.

“I do not wish to hear anything you say, Schweinehund,” she said, very coldly.

“As for you, piglet . . .” Her eyes darkened with no very pleasant light as she looked at Tom.

“You have failed,” Grey went on, ignoring this digression. “And you are in considerable danger. The Austrian plan is known; you can hear the soldiers preparing for battle, can’t you?” It was true; the sounds of drums and distant shouting, the shuffle of many marching feet, were audible even here, though muffled by the stone walls of the Schloss .

He smiled pleasantly at her, and his fingers touched the silver gorget that he had seized before leaving his room. It hung about his neck, over his half-buttoned shirt, the sign of an officer on duty.

“I offer you your life, and your freedom. In return . . .” He paused. She said nothing, but one straight black brow rose, slowly.

“I want a bit of justice,” he said. “I want to know how Private Bodger died. Bodger,” he repeated, seeing her look of incomprehension, and realizing that she had likely never known his name. “The English soldier who said you had cheated

him.”

She sniffed contemptuously, but a crease of angry amusement lined the edge of her mouth.

“Him. God killed him. Or the Devil, take your choice. Or, no—” The crease deepened, and she thrust out the hand with the ring on it, nearly in his face.

“I think it was my saint. Do you believe in saints, Pig-soldier?”

“No,” he said calmly. “What happened?”

“He saw me, coming out of a tavern, and he followed me. I didn’t know he was there; he caught me in an alley, but I pulled away and ran into the churchyard.

I thought he wouldn’t follow me there, but he did.”

Bodger had been both angry and aroused, insisting that he would take the satisfaction she had earlier denied him. She had kicked and struggled, but he was stronger than she.

“And then—” She shrugged. “Poof. He stops what he is doing, and makes a sound.”

“What sort of sound?”

“How should I know? Men make all kinds of sounds. Farting, groaning, belching . . . pff .” She bunched her fingers and flicked them sharply, disposing of men and all their doings with the gesture.

At any rate, Bodger had then dropped heavily to his knees, and still clinging to her dress, had fallen over. The gypsy had rapidly pried loose his fingers and run, thanking the intercession of Saint Orgevald .

“Hmmm.” A sudden weakness of the heart? An apoplexy? Keegan had said such a thing was possible—and there was no evidence to belie the gypsy’s statement.

“Not like Private Koenig, then,” Grey said, watching carefully.

Her head jerked up and she stared hard at him, lips tight.

“Me lord,” said Tom softly behind him. “Hanna’s name is Koenig.”

“It is not!” the gypsy snapped. “It is Mulengro, as is mine!”

“First things first, if you please, madam,” Grey said, repressing the urge to stand up as she leaned glowering over him. “Where is Hanna? And what is she to you? Sister, cousin, daughter? . . .”

“Sister,” she said, biting the word off like a thread. Her lips were tight as a seam, but Grey touched his forehead once again.

“Life,” he said. “And freedom.” He regarded her steadily, watching indecision play upon her features like the wavering shadows on the walls. She had no way of knowing how powerless he was; he could neither condemn nor release her—nor would anyone else, all being caught up in the oncoming maelstrom of war.

In the end, he had his way, as he had known he would, and sat listening to her in a state that was neither trance nor dream; just a tranquil acceptance as the pieces fell before him, one upon one.

She was one of the women recruited by the Austrians to spread the rumors of the succubus—and had much enjoyed the spreading, judging from the way she licked her lower lip while telling of it. Her sister Hanna had been married to the soldier Koenig, but had rejected him, he being a faithless hound, like all men.

Bearing in mind the gossip regarding Siegfried’s paternity, Grey nodded thoughtfully, motioning to her with one hand to go on.

She did. Koenig had gone away with the army, but then had come back, and had had the audacity to visit the Schloss, trying to rekindle the flame with Hanna.

Afraid that he might succeed in seducing her sister again—“She is weak, Hanna,” she said with a shrug, “she will trust men!”—she had gone to visit Koenig at night, planning to drug him with wine laced with opium, as she had done with the others.

“Only this time, a fatal dose, I suppose.” Grey had propped his elbow upon his crossed knee, hand under his chin. The tiredness had come back; it hovered near at hand, but was not yet clouding his mental processes.

“I meant it so, yes.” She uttered a short laugh. “But he knew the taste of opium. He threw it at me, and grabbed me by the throat.”

Whereupon she had drawn the dagger she always carried at her belt and stabbed at him—striking upward into his open mouth, and piercing his brain.

“You never saw so much blood in all your life,” the gypsy assured Grey, unconsciously echoing HerrHuckel .

“Oh, I rather think I have,” Grey said politely. His hand went to his own waist—but of course, he had left his dagger with Franz. “But pray go on. The marks, as of an animal’s fangs?”

“A nail,” she said, and shrugged.

“So, was it him—Koenig, I mean—was it him tried to snatch littleSiggy ?” Tom, deeply absorbed in the revelations, could not keep himself from blurting out the question. He coughed and tried to fade back into the woodwork, but Grey indicated that this was a question which he himself found of some interest.

“You did not tell me where your sister is. But I assume that it was you the boy saw in hischamber?”“What did she look like?” he hadasked.“Like a witch,”the child replied. Did she? She did not look like Grey’s conception of a witch—but what was that, save the fabrication of a limited imagination?

She was tall for a woman, dark, and her face mingled an odd sexuality with a strongly forbidding aspect—a combination that many men would find intriguing. Grey thought it was not something that would have struckSiggy , but something else about her evidently had.

She nodded. She was fingering her ring, he saw, and watching him with

calculation, as though deciding whether to tell him a lie.

“I have seen the Dowager Princess’s medal,” he said politely. “Is she an Austrian, by birth? I assume that you and your sister are.”

The woman stared at him and said something in her own tongue, which sounded highly uncomplimentary.

“And you think I am a witch!” she said, evidently translating the thought.

“No, I don’t,” Grey said. “But others do, and that is what brings us here. If you please, madam, let us conclude our business. I expect someone will shortly come for you.” The Schloss was at dinner; Tom had earlier brought Grey a tray, which he had been too tired to eat. No doubt the rune-casting would be the after-dinner entertainment, and he must make his desires clear before that.

“Well, then.” The gypsy regarded him, her awe at his perspicacity fading back into the usual derision. “It was your fault.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“It was Princess Gertrude—the Dowager, so you call her. She saw Louisa—that slut—” She spat casually on the floor, almost without pausing, and went on.

“—making sheep’s eyes at you, and was afraid she meant to marry you. Louisa thought she would marry you and go to England, to be safe and rich. But if she did, she would take with her her son.”

“And the Dowager did not wish to be parted from her grandson,” Grey said slowly.

Whether the gossip was true or not, the old woman loved the boy.

The gypsy nodded. “So she arranged that we would take the boy—my sister and me.

He would be safe with us, and after a time, when the Austrians had killed you all or driven you away, we would bring him back.”

Hanna had gone down the ladder first, meaning to comfort Siggie if he woke in the

rain. But Siggy had wakened before that, and bollixed the scheme by running away. Hanna had no choice but to flee when Grey had tipped the ladder over, leaving her sister to hide in the Schloss and make her way out at daybreak, with the help of the Dowager.

“She is with our family,” the gypsy said, with another shrug. “Safe.”

“The ring,” Grey said, nodding at the gypsy’s circlet. “Do you serve the Dowager? Is that what it means?”

So much confessed, the gypsy evidently felt now at ease. Casually, she pushed a platter of dead doves aside and sat down upon the shelf, feet dangling.

“We are Rom,” she said, drawing herself up proudly. “The Rom serve no one. But we have known the Trauchtenbergs—the Dowager’s family—for generations, and there is tradition between us. It was her great-great-grandfather who bought the child who guards the bridge—and that child was the younger brother of my own four-times-great-grandfather. The ring was given to my ancestor then, as a sign of the bargain.”

Grey heard Tom grunt slightly with confusion, but took no heed. The words struck him as forcibly as a blow, and he could not speak for a moment. The thing was too shocking. He took a deep breath, fighting the vision of Franz’s words—the small, round, white skull, looking out at him from the hollow in the bridge.

Sounds of banging and clashing dishes from the scullery nearby brought him to himself, though, and he realized that time was growing short.

“Very well,” he said, as briskly as he could. “I want one last bit of justice, and our bargain is made. Agathe Blomberg.”

“Old Agathe?” The gypsy laughed, and, despite her missing tooth, he could see how attractive she could be. “How funny! How could they suppose such an old fish might be a demon of desire? A hag, yes, but a night-hag?” She went off into

peals of laughter, and Grey jumped to his feet, seizing her by the shoulder to silence her.

“Be quiet,” he said, “someone will come.”

She stopped, then, though she still snorted with amusement.

“So, then?”

“So, then,” he said firmly. “When you do your hocus-pocus—whatever it is they’ve brought you here to do—I wish you particularly to exonerate Agathe Blomberg. I don’t care what you say or how you do it—I leave that to your own devices, which I expect are considerable.”

She looked at him for a moment, looked down at his hand upon her shoulder, and shrugged it off.

“That’s all, is it?” she asked sarcastically.

“That’s all. Then you may go.”

“Oh, I may go? How kind.” She stood smiling at him, but not in a kindly way. It occurred to him quite suddenly that she had required no assurances from him; had not asked for so much as his word as a gentleman—though he supposed she would not have valued that, in any case.

She did not care, he realized, with a small shock. She had not told him anything for the sake of saving herself—she simply wasn’t afraid. Did she think the Dowager would protect her, for the sake either of their ancient bond, or because of what she knew about the failed kidnapping?

Perhaps. Perhaps she had confidence in something else. And if she had, he chose not to consider what that might be. He rose from the cask of fish and pushed it back under the shelves.

“Agathe Blomberg was a woman, too,” he said.

She rose, too, and stood looking at him, rubbing her ring with apparent thought.

“So she was. Well, perhaps I will do it, then. Why should men dig up her coffin and drag her poor old carcass through the streets?”

He could feel Tom behind him, vibrating with eagerness to be gone; the racket of the dinner-clearing was much louder.

“For you, though—”

He glanced at her, startled by the tone in her voice, which held something different. Neither mockery nor venom, nor any other emotion that he knew.

Her eyes were huge, gleaming in the candlelight, but so dark that they seemed void pools, her face without expression.

“Let me tell you this. You will never satisfy a woman,” she said softly. “Never. Any woman who shares your bed will leave after no more than a single night, cursing you.”

Grey rubbed a knuckle against his stubbled chin, and nodded.

“Very likely, madam,” he said. “Good night.”

EPILOGUE

AMONG THE TRUMPETS

The order of battle was set. The autumn sun had barely risen, and the troops would march within the hour to meet their destiny at the bridge of Aschenwald.

Grey was in the stable block, checking Karolus's tack, tightening the girth, adjusting the bridle, marking second by second the time until he should depart, as though each second marked an irretrievable and most precious drop of his life.

Outside the stables, all was confusion, as people ran hither and thither, gathering belongings, searching for children, calling for wives and parents,

strewing away objects gathered only moments before, heedless in their distraction. His heart beat fast in his chest, and intermittent small thrills coursed up the backs of his legs and curled between them, tightening his scrotum.

The drums were beating in the distance, ordering the troops. The thrum of them beat in his blood, in his bone. Soon, soon, soon. His chest was tight; it was difficult to draw full breath.

He did not hear the footsteps approaching through the straw of the stables.

Keyed up as he was, though, he felt the disturbance of air nearby, that intimation of intrusion that now and then had saved his life, and whirled, hand on his dagger.

It was Stephan von Namtzen, gaudy in full uniform, his great plumed helmet underneath one arm—but with a face sober by contrast to his clothing.

“It is nearly time,” the Hanoverian said quietly. “I would speak with you—if you will hear me.”

Grey slowly let his hand fall away from the dagger, and took the full breath he had been longing for.

“You know that I will.”

Von Namtzen inclined his head in acknowledgment, but did not speak at once, seeming to need to gather his words—although they were speaking German now.

“I will marry Louisa,” he said, finally, formally. “If I live until Christmas.

My children—” He hesitated, free hand flat upon the breast of his coat. “It will be good they should have a mother once more. And—”

“You need not give reasons,” Grey interrupted. He smiled at the big German, with open affection. Caution was no longer necessary. “If you wish this, then I wish

you well.”

Von Namtzen’s face lightened a bit. He ducked his head a little, and took a breath.

“Danke. Isay, I will marry, if I am alive. If I am not . . .” His hand still rested on his breast, above the miniature of his children.

“If I live, and you do not, then I will go to your home,” Grey said. “I will tell your son what I have known of you—as a warrior, and as a man. Is this your desire?”

The Hanoverian’s graveness did not alter, but a deep warmth softened his gray eyes.

“It is. You have known me, perhaps, better than anyone.”

He stood still, looking at Grey, and all at once, the relentless marking of fleeting time stopped. Confusion and danger still hastened without, and drums beat loud, but inside the stables, there was a great peace.

Stephan’s hand left his breast, and reached out. Grey took it, and felt love flow between them. He thought that heart and body must be entirely melted—if only for that moment.

Then they parted, each drawing back, each seeing the flash of desolation in the other’s face, both smiling ruefully to see it.

Stephan was turning to go, when Grey remembered.

“Wait!” he called, and turned to fumble in his saddlebag. He found what he was looking for, and thrust it into the German’s hands.

“What is this?” Stephan turned the small, heavy box over, looking puzzled.

“A charm,” Grey said, smiling. “A blessing. My blessing—and Saint Orgevald’s . . . May it protect you.”

“But—” Von Namtzen frowned with doubt, and tried to give the reliquary back, but

Grey would not accept it.

“Believe me,” he said in English, “it will do you more good than me.”

Stephan looked at him for a moment longer, then nodded and, tucking the little box away in his pocket, turned and left. Grey turned back to Karolus, who was growing restive, tossing his head and snorting softly through his nose.

The horse stamped, hard, and the vibration of it ran through the long bones of Grey’s legs. “Hast thou given the horse strength?” he quoted softly, hand stroking the braided mane that ran smooth and serpentlike down the great ridge of the stallion’s neck. “Hast thou clothed his neck with thunder? Hepaweth in the valley, andrejoiceth in his strength: hegoeth on to meet the armed men. He mockethat fear, and is not affrighted; neitherturneth he back from the sword.”

He leaned close and pressed his forehead against the horse’s shoulder. Huge muscles bulged beneath the skin, warm and eager, and the clean musky scent of the horse’s excitement filled him. He straightened then, and slapped the taut, twitching hide.

“Hesaith among the trumpets, Ha, ha; and hesmelleth the battle afar off, the thunder of the captains, and the shouting.”

Grey heard the drums again, and his palms began to sweat.

Historical note: In October of 1757, the forces of Frederick the Great and his allies moved swiftly, crossing the country to defeat the gathering French and Austrian army at Rossbach, in Saxony. The town of Gundwitz was left undisturbed; the bridge at Aschenwald never crossed by an enemy.