

# Chapter 1

The black-eyed man was standing against the wall, not doing anything special. Still, he dominated the room. He was, of course, built along slender lines like most of his kind, his chiselled face a little too symmetrical and handsome, but it was not immediately apparent what he was. He just was rather too good looking, a ladies' man, or so he seemed.

"András," he addressed the man who had spoken up, saw him flinch at his dark voice, "you have dabbled in something that you cannot understand. If you had asked me before you had intervened, I would have strongly advised you against any such steps. You cannot begin to fathom what this thing - in the wrong hands - might be able to set free. You should never have meddled."

His chamber at the Nymphenburger Hotel in Munich was crowded. Two of the men were sitting on the bed. Two others were seated on the two little padded chairs. These four regarded him uneasily. After some moments of silence, one of them, a greying man of about fifty years of age, restarted the conversation.

"But don't you see, Count Arpad? The advantages by far outweighed the risks. All we had to do was to delay that British agent by intercepting the last message he should have got. Then we tried to get the scroll. We should still try to get it."

The man at the wall leaned forward. His jet-black hair fell forward with the movement and exposed one of his slightly pointy ears. The four mortals stared at it like rabbits might stare at a snake. None of them moved, as if any kind of movement might betray their uneasiness. They were rigid in their attempt to appear relaxed.

Count Arpad smiled with closed lips. They just could not get used to it. They had found the idea of having one of the Fey part of their society wonderful, expecting from him far more magical support than he was able - or indeed willing - to give them.

Politics were an interesting game. He was a patriot, currently. His aim was a free Hungarian Kingdom, free from the Habsburg grip. All this very Catholic Christian empire policy was not to his liking. The Church held such sway in that country. Strongly influenced by the Spanish court through family relations, everything seemed far too stuffy and stiff. Also, there were factions of the Church that hunted his kind as a sort of pious rite. The sooner Hungary got rid of the Habsburg monarchy the better.

They were united in that aim, these four gentlemen and he. And so great was the love of their country that they curbed their fear and distrust of him. Only, they were never at ease.

They probably thought that he did not notice. But he was most perceptive. All of his kind were. He could smell their feelings to an exactness that, had he told them, would have scared them anew.

So he did not tell them. He just put his hair back with his slender hand, covering the treacherous ears. He could make the men forget, of course, but he could tell one of them was wearing a protective amulet, he could sense it, could almost feel its emanations on his fingertips. He controlled them well enough, however, to have the truth about what he was fade from their minds in between meetings. They were only human, after all.

He appeared to be human, too. He dressed well, elegantly and *à la mode* to blend in perfectly into a society that felt so much more at ease when his kind could be ignored or seen as nothing but a myth. For most people he was no more than a superstition in any case, a figment of gothic literature. There were so very few of his kind. Indeed, most humans never met any of *Na Daoine-maithe* at all, be they benign or averse to humankind. His species was so rare that humans, who were such masters of repression, managed very well to ignore them widely. And this, precisely, made it so easy for him to blend in.

Of course, there were differences. His lifespan was one. His intuitive knowledge of arcane things was another. Patriot or not, he was different.

The human looked sullen. All of them did. Then another one spoke up, his voice edgy and a little aggressive. Arpad had to watch that. Aggression from his own companions could not be tolerated in the long run. Too dangerous. Fear made humans unaccountable.

"Count Arpad. I agree that there might be a danger involved, but please grant us the courage we have. For the freedom of our country we would do anything. That manuscript would have given us a weapon that would have cleared our country of the Austrian suppression in no time whatsoever. They could never have resisted."

"Resisted what?" Count Arpad asked pointedly, moving forward a step and recognising the well-hidden impulse of his companions to move backwards in their seats. "Whatever makes you think, gentlemen, that the powers you so ignorantly might have called up would have stopped at our borders? Let me assure you, they would not!"

The men looked a little insulted.

"We would not have used it," one of them said. "We might have used it to threaten. I am sure the Austrians would have listened to reason."

"Reason?" Arpad asked marvelling again at the human propensity to call the use of exaggerated force reason. "Reason? You call that reason? Wielding a weapon you know nothing about - that you cannot use without destroying yourself? Where is the reason in that, pray? Gentlemen," he looked at them feeling them squirm under his black gaze, "I am surely not squeamish about any of the measures I take when I have to, you may be assured I am not," they seemed to shrink into their seats a little, "but what you have tried to do is beyond any reason at all. It is utter madness. It had the capacity to destroy us all."

He stood in the middle of the room now, smelling their rising fear. Deliberately he stepped back from them, allowing them to recover a little from his presence. He did not want them to be afraid. There was no use in it, nothing to be gained from it. If he had a choice, he would have preferred them to trust him. He liked it when mortals trusted him.

"You had better tell me precisely what happened," he then said, trying to sound reassuring.

The four looked at one another. A third man started to speak after a while.

"Well, we entered Mr Müller's room last night. We were armed. We threatened the man to hand over the manuscript. He was actually holding it in his hand at the time. He refused, started to make signs in the air. It was then we realised that he was a Master of the Arcane. Székely here punched him in the jaw before he could do something dreadful to us."

Székely grinned as if waiting to be applauded, but his good mood broke under Count Arpad's dark scrutiny.

"Anyway, the man collapsed and fell to the ground. We realised he had been standing in a kind of circle that was drawn on the ground. And then everything happened so quickly."

He stopped, looking worried, like a boy that had been called in to recite his transgressions. It was obvious he did not like himself in this role.

"Go ahead," urged Arpad. He felt very old in comparison, although he looked younger than most of them. Of course, he was many times the age of even the oldest man present. But they did not know that.

"He fell outside the circle hitting his head on the table, the manuscript went flying. There was a kind of oozing shadow suddenly, the most dreadful thing I've ever seen." The man paused and seemed to hunt for words and explanations for something outside his concept of understanding. Where mortals lacked words their comprehension came to a sudden halt. "It made a grab for it but the scroll flew away, toward the door, where it hovered and spun around becoming more and more transparent. It looked as if that man, Müller, was moving it out of the shadow's reach." Again he paused, trying to make things clear if only to himself. "He was still alive then."

"I guessed so," Count Arpad commented dryly.

"So then it turned toward him. The shadow I mean."

The man stopped again, looked about himself nervously. He was perspiring. Count Arpad resisted the temptation to give the man's mind just a little encouragement. He could make them talk if he wished to. And dance. And sing. He just tried not to use these measures with them. They were nervous enough without him bending their minds. Although, of course, they might never notice. He eased his mind a little. Just a little.

"I don't really know what came first. Everything seemed to happen at once. The door opened and there was another figure of a man suddenly also stretching his hands out toward the manuscript. It started to gleam. I could not recognise him at all; he seemed to be enveloped in some kind of light."

"Magical light," added another of the conspirators, sounding a little infantile. Count Arpad waved him to silence and he shut up like a clam.

"The shadow shot up, trying to wriggle around the manuscript. Then the scroll just winked out."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning it just vanished. The door closed with a bang. The shadow was nowhere to be seen. And we were standing in the room with a dead Mr Müller."

"At which point, I gather, you all rapidly left the scene of crime."

The four patriots looked uncomfortable.

"Well," said Count Arpad after a time. "I certainly do not know what to make of it. The only thing apparent is that there seems to be more than one faction after the manuscript. We do not know who the two opponents were who were fighting for it. We do not know where it is now. We do not know who else might be interested in it."

The four looked guilty and uncomfortable – and also a little resentful. The man who confronted them seemed to be too young to hold such a position of authority over them.

"But, at least we can assume that it is, at the moment, unreachable for the powers that would be."

"You think so?" asked Mr András hopefully. "How do you know?"

"Because, Mr András if that were not so, the world as we know it would in all probability already have come to an end." Arpad smiled politely with a touch of cynicism. "Gentleman, I congratulate you on your patriotic fervour but you have gone quite too far."

The youngest of the men jumped up, confronting the Count somewhat breathlessly. A rebel, breaking the fragile order of rank that had installed itself. His courage was commendable, Arpad thought if misdirected.

"I don't know about you, Count," he exclaimed with ire, "but I am ready to do anything for the freedom of my country! Anything!"

The Count gave him a dark look and folded his long-nailed hands neatly in front of him.

"You might give your life for your country. Your love, your future, your dreams, your health, your strength, your faith. But never 'anything'. Never ever." He smiled coldly. "But then who am I to talk morals to you? 'Good Christian men, rejoice!'"

They withered under his cynical gaze. He caught some hatred in their feelings. He had to be careful. If he went too far, one of them would eventually turn against him. Humans perceived the strange and unknown as a natural enemy. He did not want to be forced to eliminate his own group of freedom fighters.

"What do we do now?" finally one of them asked.

"Nothing," replied the Count. "Absolutely nothing. You must leave as quickly as you can. It will not do to interest the local authorities in your, in our dealings. Bavaria is far too closely connected with Austria. I shall stay."

He did not tell them more. Someone had put a magical ban on the building prohibiting anything magical or Fey to leave.

This blockade might be uncomfortable but at least seemed to mean one vital thing: the manuscript very probably was still within reach in the hotel.

He also had quite another reason to stay on, and his comrades need not know that either.

## Chapter 4

Lieutenant Udolf von Görenczy of the Königlich Bayerisches 3. Chevaulegers-Regiment 'Herzog Karl-Theodor' and Lieutenant Askov von Orven of the Königlich Bayerisches 1. Jägerbataillon 'König' were running along the hotel corridor outside room 312 when the screaming started. They heard two shrill women's voices muffled slightly by the padded hotel door. They skidded to a halt.

"Good Lord," said von Orven and lifted his hand to knock at the door while his less patient compatriot simply twisted the door knob, threw the door open and ran in.

"Wait!" Lieutenant von Orven called after him, wanting to add 'you can't just run in there, it's a lady's salon. You might incommode or even frighten the ladies.' But he had no time to finish the thought, let alone the admonition of his friend. Lieutenant von Görenczy had already vanished into the room, his dark hair flying. He had not even closed his collar or buttoned up his impressive uniform coat.

It was no way to burst into a ladies' room uninvited. No way at all.

Therefore it did not astonish von Orven in the least when the screams did not cease but rather reached a yet higher pitch. He knocked perfunctorily at the already open door, quickly checked his immaculate appearance and then entered the room as well.

He stepped into a scene of chaos. Udolf von Görenczy was standing in the middle of the room, looking somewhat baffled, a prim and well-dressed lady of some forty-five years stood at one side of the room, her mouth wide open for a scream that obviously needed no interruption for breathing, a stunningly beautiful maid-servant, also screaming at what was quite obviously the very top of her voice was currently flinging herself toward the Chevauleger, while a third female figure lay motionlessly on the floor, sprawled in a way that indicated deep unconsciousness.

Lieutenant von Orven was slightly at a loss.

"Good evening," he said in a well-bred way. It was probably not the cleverest thing to say but it could not hurt. "Please excuse our unmannered and indeed unannounced entry into your private rooms but we heard you scream and since we were both pursuing a..." he paused slightly to find an unsuspecting phrase "ah... phenomenon, we thought maybe you had seen..."

"It came through that wall," gasped the middle-aged lady now, and von Orven registered that she spoke German with a British accent. "And it flew through the room. And it vanished there." She pointed to the wall behind her. And then, realising that she was standing quite close with her back to it, she started forward looking about her frantically.

By now the maid-servant had reached Udolf and thrown herself into his arms for protection. He gave her all the protection he could muster up at the moment and promptly forgot the world around him. His left arm went around her slim waist and his right hand to her unbelievably lovely face where he wiped away one glistening tear of shock.

Lieutenant von Orven sighed. Chevaulegers were hopeless.

Von Orven bowed toward the British lady and carefully moved toward her.

"You must think us very ill-mannered to burst in on you in that inexcusable fashion, Madam," he said, changing to the English language and smiling shyly, "but indeed we only came to help. I hope you will excuse this unorthodox introduction, but lacking another option, I would like to introduce myself to you." He bowed. "I am Lieutenant Asko von Orven and my friend here is Lieutenant Udolf von Görenczy. If you will allow me to inspect the next room, I shall be glad to make sure that it is safe for you."

He started forward at her nod, realising that he was about to enter her bedroom. He blushed slightly and opened the door. He pulled the cord for the gas light. The narrow bedroom lay before him, a white night-gown and cap spread out carefully on the bed, a pair of slippers set underneath it. He ignored these tokens of privacy assiduously. The window was closed. The walls showed no signs of strange phenomena whatsoever. Whatever had come through - if it had - had vanished into nothing.

He stepped out of the bedroom.

"If you would have me check your wardrobe for any signs of unusual activity, Madam, I will gladly do so. However, I do believe you are quite safe. Whatever it was that passed through the hotel in this rather unpardonable manner seems to be gone entirely."

The lady who had not returned the courtesy of an, albeit irregular, introduction nodded gratefully to him and then started forward toward the other lady who was still lying motionless on the floor. Von Orven also approached the lifeless form. He could make out brown curls and a slight and small figure that lay crumpled on the carpet like a rag doll face-down. A muslin dress in sky-blue adorned with embroidered flowers suggested a rather younger lady than the one who now bowed down to her. The skirt had slipped somewhat with her fall and exposed two shapely ankles and calves and a lot of white lace from some unmentionable undergarments which Asko von Orven tried desperately not to see.

"Madam if you will allow me to assist, I would gladly lift your friend up so you could make her more comfortable on the sofa."

He could see that this proposition did not meet the wholehearted approval of the British lady who now knelt beside the unconscious shape.

"Corrisande, my dear. Wake up. You are quite safe. Corrisande, please!"

She tried to turn the young lady in blue around but did not succeed, the limp weight of the girl proving too much for her. So she confined herself to pulling down the skirts over her charge's feet. Then she addressed the officer.

"Sir, I thank you for your kind assistance. Indeed I would be greatly in your debt if you could help me to lift my niece up. She seems to be in a very deep faint. It has me quite worried."

Lieutenant von Orven bent down to the slight form and gently turned her over. He then beheld the sweetest little face that he had seen in a long time. The lady looked still very young, seventeen or eighteen at the most, and her deathly pallor enhanced the general air of fragility that she emanated.

A shadow fell across her. Von Görenczy was leaning over, inspecting her as well while still holding the maid closely in one arm. Her head lay on his shoulder.

"Out cold," he said in what von Orven felt to be a particularly heartless manner. "This fainting fit is real enough. Believe me, Asko, I have seen too many fake ones not to know the difference. It'll take her ages to come round."

Asko looked daggers at his friend, wishing, as he often had, that the Chevauleger would finally begin to profit from the gentleman's education he must at some stage of his life have had bestowed on him and which - to Asko's prim mind - had left no traces whatsoever.

The middle-aged lady gave von Görenczy a withering look and then ignored him. As for her, the slovenly dressed officer was not in the room. She did, however, address her maid.

"Marie-Jeanette, please get me my vin'grette. And you will please inspect Miss Jarrencourt's bedroom. And please check both our wardrobes. Now."

Marie-Jeanette gave her a saucy look that Asko felt was nearly enough to send her packing, and then disentangled herself from von Görenczy who suddenly seemed to have more arms than were strictly necessary.

Very carefully Asko slipped one arm under the fainted girl's shoulders and another underneath her limbs. Then he lifted her up. He was quite

amazed at the little weight he was carrying; it was as if he was lifting a small bird. She smelt of wild flowers.

Her head fell backward when he lifted her, and he supported it in the crook of his arm. He put her down on the sofa and packed a cushion underneath her head. Her lips were slightly open and all of a sudden he had to restrain himself not to kiss them gently, like the prince who woke Sleeping Beauty.

That would not do, of course. He stood back from the sofa feeling a little sorry for the renewed distance.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," said the Lady. "I had better tell you who I am. Oh dear me, all this is so very irregular. I am Mrs Parslow. We have come to Munich for a holiday and to meet some relatives. I am in charge of my young niece. You have proved to be most kind, Sir."

Lieutenant von Orven understood this to be a dismissal and bowed.

"I was glad to be of assistance, Mrs Parslow. I am at your service entirely. Please do not refrain from calling for our help if help is needed." He took out his card from an engraved silver card box and held it out to her. "We have the two rooms next to yours and will be close enough to come to your aid quickly, should it be necessary. We will be glad to assist you any time. However, before we leave you, please understand that we must know more about what precisely you have seen. Maybe it will help us to apprehend whatever or whoever was behind the occurrence that frightened you."

At this point Lieutenant von Görenczy again entered the discussion.

"You must understand," he said ignoring the warning glances from his friend, "that we believe the spectre to be in some way related to last night's murder."

Mrs Parslow stood up and paled visibly.

"Murder?" she gasped. "What kind of hotel is this? Are we all going to be to be murdered in our beds? I must say, I cannot understand why the Maître d'Hôtel did not warn us. We would not have put up in this ... this... den had we known that we would be in danger."

"Well, he was hardly likely to tell you that, was he," said the Chevauleger, "they've kept it a secret. You know what hotels are like, Madam. Always scotch the scandal, whatever happens."

Von Orven considered the feasibility of heartily kicking his friend without Mrs Parslow noticing but decided that it was not possible. He would have to postpone the kick. But kick him he would. Very definitely.

Marie-Jeanette brought the vin'grette and then went to the door which was still standing open. However when she came to it, she gave a gasp and shrank back, nearly stumbling over a chair.

In the door frame there stood a very tall and broad-shouldered gentleman, his short, dark curls unruly and lacking a recognisable à la mode style, and his apparel obviously expensive - but thrown together in a slightly careless fashion as if he did not mind very much about his appearance. His sun-tanned, weathered skin indicated a frequent traveller. His bony face was strict and alert; his dark and straight eyebrows gave it a severe look. His rather hard mouth was pulled into a sardonic half-smile. In his hand he held a pistol. However, the most arresting feature about him were his eyes, for they were of an amber colour, like a wolf's or a lion's, far too pale to be

called hazel and too yellow to be called green. They looked weirdly bright in the swarthy face and sparkled with intensity.

Mrs Parslow opened her mouth to scream but no sound passed her lips. She just stood there with bulging eyes, her hand stretched out toward the vin'grette, utterly motionless. The murderer had just found them. She was sure of it.