

Chapter 1

Die Entführung (The Abduction)

Vienna, December 5, 1791

The black coach took off like a racehorse out of the gate, rattling and clattering over the cobblestoned streets of Vienna as though a company of dragoons were in hot pursuit. A small man wrapped in several layers of charcoal-colored blankets lay insensible on the floor; the only parts of him showing were his sock-clad feet and a disheveled mop of dirty blond hair. Two men, seated above him, braced themselves against the sides of the coach as it lurched along, staring down wearily at the figure at their feet.

They had carefully carried him down the stairs of the unremarkable apartment building at No. 970 Rauhensteingasse and out into the courtyard. A thick, cold fog hung over the city, and there was a fine drizzle falling; the temperature was barely above freezing. In the dark, thick weather, moving figures seemed more like ghosts or ghouls in the shifting texture of night, effecting a sinister, supernatural aura, but the men neither cared nor noticed; they had important work to do, and were glad for nature's cloak to conceal their furtive activity.

They had hurried along nervously – a tall, moustachioed man of military bearing, who could have been, to the casual observer, a Prussian grenadier; and a middle-aged man of medium height, well-fed and by his huffing and puffing clearly unused to physical labor, carrying the blanket-wrapped man along as silently as they could, through several passages between buildings to where the coach was waiting idly in the street. The big man was at the man's head, carrying him under the arms; the shorter man had his feet. As they came around the last corner, the short man's hands slipped off the feet – one sock came off – and the unconscious man's foot fell against a street cobble. The limp man only grunted. "Baron, I will take him" the big man said, and threw the blanket-wrapped body over his shoulder as easily as if it were a sack of grain, and hurried toward the waiting coach. In the dim light, the man called "Baron" heard

the horses stamping impatiently and saw their hot breath shoot out in steamy bursts as they snorted with displeasure.

As soon as they had placed the bundle in the coach, the driver roused the horses with urgent authority and the coach whisked away, vanishing into the enveloping murk. The interior of the coach was damp and bone-chilling cold. The carriage lurched along the winding, twisting, medieval cobbled streets, heading toward the outskirts of the city. Both men wore heavy capes that concealed the brace of pistols that each man carried beneath. Additionally, the tall man wore a long cavalryman's saber. They did not speak for the nearly half-hour it took for them to get beyond the city limits.

The man on the floor shuddered occasionally, and tried to vomit, but nothing came up. He was clearly very ill. The shorter man, whose name was actually Baron Gottfried Van Swieten, looked down, and shook his head slightly. If one had been in the coach at that moment, looking closely and carefully at the Baron's face, one would have noticed a moist eye, and from that the beginnings of a tear; but the Baron held his emotions in check, even though the darkness inside the coach afforded him all the privacy needed to hide them. Just looking at the sick man rolled up in his woolen cocoon gave Van Swieten a chill, and in an automatic response, he pulled his heavy cape even more tightly around his shoulders, and leaned to one side, as though to rest and somehow find a more comfortable position. He looked tired and drawn, but he smiled, and even chuckled, slightly. At last he spoke to the man on the floor, even though he was sure that his words would be neither heard nor comprehended by him whom he addressed.

"My dear Wolfgang, you are not well. But do try to survive this trip, or all our efforts will have been for naught. If you die, the Emperor's wishes will be fulfilled, but at no credit to his own exertions."

The man called Wolfgang made no reply, nor did he stir, other than to involuntarily follow the jerky movement of the coach. In a little while the Baron's head also began to roll with the lumpy motion. He snored.

In fog, sights and sounds are magnified, as are scents and odors. Although he could see little out the coach window, the tall man remained alert and awake, as his many years in the military had taught him, and he noted with some satisfaction that he could tell, with some certainty, their approximate location and measure their progress through the pungent smells of wood, water, road, fen, sewer, and farm that the fog bore in different areas. Dampness always brings out the smells in things, he thought to himself; now there is the rich smell of cow manure. Ugh. A while ago I could smell the Danube, and moments later we were on the bridge. No matter how many camps, no matter how many battles, you never get used to the smell of shite, he thought to himself. Perhaps that's so that you won't eat it. Human is worse by far than farm animals, though. For stench, though, rotting battlefield corpses are the worst, he mused. Cloying smell, gets in your clothes like it's greasy, won't go away. It's a smell you never, ever forget; cow-shite is sweet by comparison. I could have been a farmer, if I had not been so busy getting men planted instead of crops, ha, ha! In the darkness he smiled amused at his own joke, and looked out at the swirling gray; it was beginning to lighten. Dawn will come soon, he noted. We are well on our way; getting out of the city was most of the risk, most of the battle.

By an hour past sunrise, the fog had burned off on the high ground and lay white like mystical lakes in the valleys. They were well on their way over rough, hilly country roads, far outside of Vienna, heading due North. They stopped in a little village so that the coachman could care for the horses, giving them a rest and some water. Van Swieten had slept some, but not well, and he felt groggy and weary, his eyes puffy.

"How fares our charge, Oskar?" Van Swieten asked the tall man, in subdued manner.

"He is not doing well, Gottfried" the man replied. His impressive moustache – normally curled at the ends and waxed in the Prussian military style – drooped limply, the fog and damp having taken the stiffness out of the ends and dissolved the wax preparation.

“He needs nourishment, if he will take it” Van Swieten said. “Get me a little water. I have medicine for him that was sent to me by Doctor Stoll.” The Baron dug into his coat pocket and brought forth a small suede pouch that contained two vials of powder. Then they lifted the man up off the coach floor, tilted his head up, and roused him to consciousness. He was groggy and still very feverish. “Gottfried” the man spoke, slowly, in recognition. “Where are we?”

“Never you mind, now, Wolfgang. You must sip this medicine. It will make you better. It will help relieve your pain.”

Slowly, fitfully, drop-by-drop, the man swallowed the half-cup of water with the powder dissolved in it. “It has an evil taste” he commented, “but no worse than any other medicine I have ever tasted.” He then lay back down. “Who is that big tree of a fellow, Gottfried? He looks like a soldier” Wolfgang asked groggily. “He must be all of six feet if he’s an inch!”

“You mustn’t talk” Van Swieten replied. “His name is Oskar and he is my helper. He carried you. He used to serve Prince Berentzen as a mercenary soldier. He will protect you. Now please rest. I will get some coffee for you and something to eat later if you can keep it down.”

“What is that bolus, Baron?” asked Oskar, referring to the medicine.

“It is a most interesting formula. It is a combination of some very rare and unusual drugs and decoctions supplied to me by the late Jakub Stoll, a chemist and physician in Vienna” the Baron answered. “Part of it comes from the bark of a certain type of willow tree. It is supposed to help reduce his fever. Another component is supposed to settle his stomach. Then there is some other component, discovered by a monk in Schwabia, which comes from mold; bread mold or something of that nature. It is very bitter in taste, and even a tiny, tiny amount can be had only by great exertions, and at great cost. Yet all of it is worth it, if we can preserve his life. Pity, though, that there is no more of it other than what I was able to get from his effects. When he died some months ago, Stoll took the secret to these formulas with him. He was a gifted man, but quirky and queer in his ways. It does mankind little good if the beneficial knowledge

of a man's life's work is buried with him. Is that not so, Oskar?" asked the Baron, rolling his eyes in the direction of the prostrate Wolfgang.

"Indeed, you are right, Gottfried. But I cannot imagine anything taken from mould that could possibly make a man well. Isn't mould corruption? By God, Baron, I have seen a lot of mouldy men, or the mouldy remains of what were once men, and let me tell you, the mouldier they became, the less likely I judged them to be getting closer to hopping back up and swinging a saber at old Oskar! Ha, ha! But then you may have something there. Mould against mould might be like evil against evil; one cancels the other out. I suppose we shall see. At this stage, in his condition, one might as well try anything."

The coach began its journey once more. Van Swieten had brought rolls and fruit-filled confections from a bakery, plus coffee in the Baron's silver pot, which they shared liberally with the weary coachman. As they bounded over the country roads, they ate and tried not to spill the coffee on themselves. In a little while the Baron called up to the coachman, whose name was Karl, to keep his eyes open for an inn, or perhaps a farm with an out-house; or all else failing, a dense grove of trees. The roads were rough, and badly rutted, and the constant bumping, jouncing, and rattling of the coach had affected their bladders and, what's more, the coffee had spoken to their bowels.

"There is no use waiting" he said, in an aside, to Oskar. "Why sit in discomfort when we have such a long journey ahead? Time for relief."

"What about our charge?" Oskar asked.

"He may soil himself" the Baron commented, philosophically, "But there is little we can do other than to wake him and try to help him. Here, have more coffee. We have another two hundred miles to go, easily; we shall be three or more days on this road."