PHILIPPA GREGORY

ORDER OF DARKNESS

DARK TRACKS

VOLUME IV

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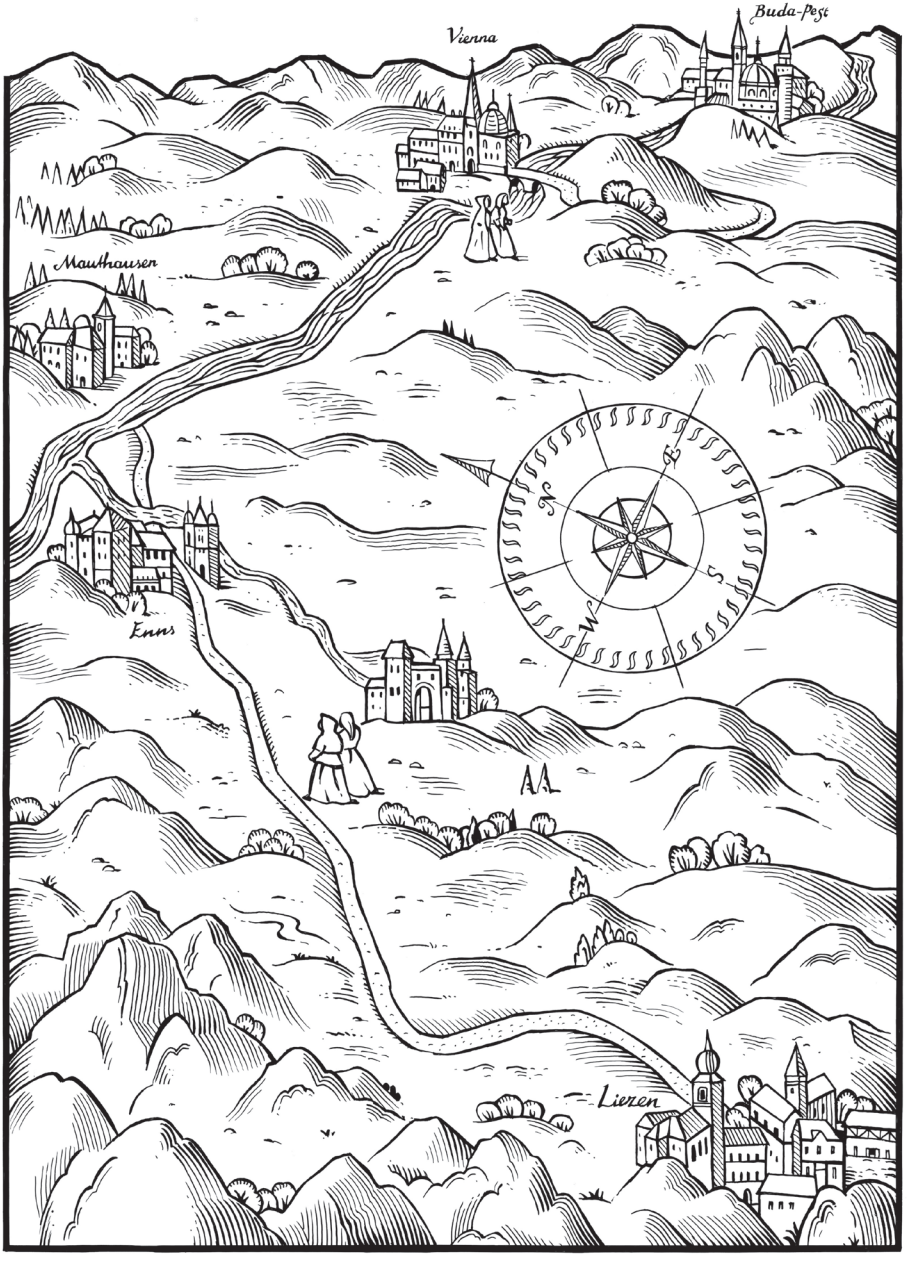
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NEAR LINZ, AUSTRIA, MARCH 1461

There was an angry bellow from inside the woodcutter's hovel; the woman, struggling up from the stream with a heavy bucket of icy water in each hand, raised her head and shouted back. Something in her tone enraged him – he was always on the brink of fury – and, as she put down one of the slopping pails in the muddy patch before the tumbledown building, the rough wooden door banged open and the woodcutter surged out, his dirty shirt half open, his thick trousers flapping. He grabbed her free arm to hold her steady and slapped her hard, across the face. She reeled back from the blow, but gritted her jaw against the pain, and stood, head bowed, like a beaten ox.

He brought his head close to hers and shouted, his spittle spraying into her impassive face. He let her go, and impulsively kicked over both pails into the mud; she would have to go to the stream again, and haul more water. He laughed, as if the thought of her pointless labour was the

only funny thing in this bitterly hard world. But then his laughter died as he looked at her.

She was not pressing her slapped cheek with the cold palm of her hand, nor bowing her head in sobs. She was not shrinking from him, nor picking up the rolling, empty buckets. She had spread out her hands wide; she was snapping her fingers as if to a drumbeat that only she could hear.

'What are you doing?' he demanded. 'Woman? Fool? What d'you think you're doing?'

Her eyes were closed as if she could sense nothing but a smooth wooden floor and clean limewashed walls and candlelight, and the fresh smell of a swept barn ready for a midsummer dance. Her head was tipped, as if listening to the rattle of a tambourine and the tempting, irresistible saw of a fiddler. As he watched, quite bemused, she lifted the hem of her ragged dress, spread it wide, and started to dance, as pretty as a girl.

'I'll dance you!' He started towards her, but she did not shrink from him. She took three steps to the left and did a little jump, then three steps to the right. She turned round as if she were being spun by an attentive partner. Ignoring the icy mud on her bare feet, she started the part of the dance where the women circle the room, as if she was being watched by admirers, her head held high, her eyes blind to the leafless branches of the trees and the cold sky above them.

He laid heavy hands on her shoulders and felt her jig beneath his grip as if he were about to dance with her. He tried to drag her into their hut, but she only danced towards the open door, bowed to the dirty interior, and

danced back out again. He drew back his fist to thump her into unconsciousness, but something in her smiling, bland face made him hesitate: suddenly powerless, his hand fell to his side.

'You've gone mad,' he said wonderingly. 'A madwoman you've always been, but now you've lost your wits, and you'll be the ruin of us all.'

LIEZEN, AUSTRIA, APRIL 1461

A robed and hooded traveller turned his weary horse into the stable yard of a good inn in the town of Liezen, threw the reins to a lad who came running to his piercing whistle, and eased himself down from the saddle with a sigh.

'Is there a Luca Vero staying here?' he asked the boy, tossing him a coin. 'And his clerk?'

'Why, who wants him?' came a disembodied voice from inside the darkness of a stable, and then a tall, square-faced, smiling young man of about twenty looked over the half-door of the stable. Behind him, his horse came and rested its nose on his shoulder as if they would both like to know who was looking for Luca Vero.

'I am sent from his lord to bring him a message,' the man said briefly. 'I suppose you are Freize, Luca's manservant?'

Freize bowed his head, slightly surprised that his name was known. 'That's me. And this is my horse, Rufino.'

The horse seemed to incline his head also, and regard the traveller with a matching polite curiosity.

'And you are?' Freize asked.

'I am Brother Jerome,' the stranger said. He turned to the stable lad. 'See that my saddlebag is taken indoors and get me the best room available. I sleep alone.'

'There are rooms available,' Freize volunteered. 'Enough space for a man to take a room just for himself, if he can afford it, if someone else is paying for him. And a very good common table. They eat well here. I have discovered the pleasure of dumplings. Do you know them? Take two and you need little more for hours, several hours; take three and you will need a nap. I doubt anyone can eat four. And you should try the stewed chicken. They have a way with stewed chicken that you would ride from Rome to taste.'

The man smiled slightly. 'I am not here for the chicken,' he said. 'Or the dumplings.'

'But you have ridden from Rome?' Freize confirmed.

The stranger smiled, acknowledging that Freize had guessed his journey.

'Well, you've ridden a long way to look down your nose at a treat,' Freize said, not at all abashed. 'I'm assuming that you are being paid to come all this way, that you are the messenger that we were told would come here?'

'Yes. I've come to meet Luca Vero, your master. I am honoured to be a member of his Order.'

'Tasked with the same sort of work?' Freize gently pulled his horse's ear in farewell, and then let himself out of the stable, bolting the door carefully shut behind him. 'Are you another Inquirer? Sworn to ride around in uncomfortable places, finding evidence for the end of the world, signs

of the end of days, to sit in judgement, when required, on poor fools who have frightened themselves to death already, and report back to Milord?'

The stranger nodded at this jaundiced description of his work. 'I am a member of the Order of Darkness tasked to examine these terrible times,' he said. 'Since the fall of Constantinople, the Devil is here, daily walking the world. Everywhere I go, I find more horrors. Everywhere I go, I record them for Milord, and he reports to the Holy Father himself. There is no doubt that there are more and more events and they are growing stranger all the time.'

'My very point!' Freize exclaimed, delighted to at last find someone who agreed with him. 'I cannot tell you what happened to me in Venice! Alchemists and wealth, and the destruction of all gold so that we could not buy Luca's father out of slavery; the strangest of people; troubled weather; even odd animals. On this very journey we have been followed – I swear we have been followed – by some sort of a Being. A little thing, you never catch it in plain sight, but it is there – out of the corner of my eye – moving from the bridles when I go to tack up, slipping away behind the feed buckets. Never fed, never sleeping and not a thing of this world, for sure. So what is it, this little thing? And so I say to my friend and lord: why don't we go back home and watch events unfold from there? Since there are so many unnatural people in this world, since strange things are happening all the time, why do we need to go seeking them out? Let them come to us! Lord knows there are enough bad and unknown events occurring in this dangerous world without us having to look for trouble!'