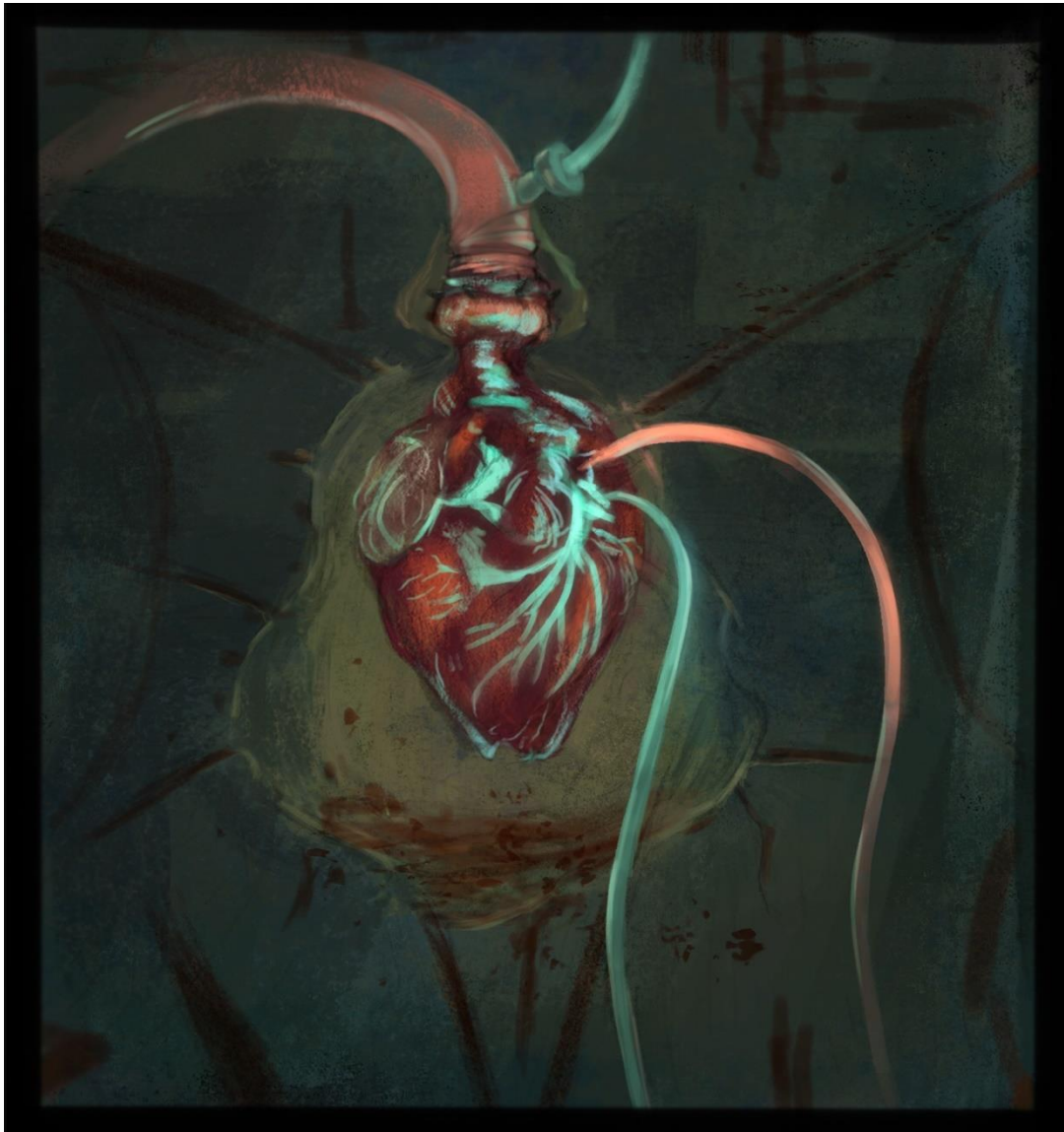


# **FIVE HEARTS**

*A Gabriel Knight short story*

*by Jane Jensen*



## FIVE HEARTS

The woman was cursed. That's what she claimed, anyway, when she arrived at the door of Schloss Ritter.

Gabriel had initially thought the pounding was in his head. But no. It was literal pounding. Downstairs.

The fact that he was wearing flannel PJ bottoms, was unshaved, and smelled like a brewery that had been stomped on with sweaty feet did not deter the stranger from pushing past him the moment he opened the door. She was a pretty-ish brunette, 30's, in a camel wool coat. Her eyes were wild, face pale, and her story tumbled from her lips. Dogs and trains and dressers and—

“Wait.” Gabriel held up his hands. “Please. I haven't had coffee. I need a minute.”

“But I'm cursed!”

“Does the curse extend to those around you? Is there a chance, say greater than ten percent, that I'd find my coffee poisoned if I went and made myself a cup?”

The woman blinked in confusion. “No.”

“Then I'm getting coffee. Want some?”

“No thank you.”

Gabriel stumbled to the kitchen, his feet chilled on Schloss Ritter's stone floor. Yes, yes, yes. Fine. He'd drunk too much the night before. It always started so innocently. A cold beer with dinner. The local Weissbier was one of life's true pleasures. And if he had to live in Germany, he deserved to enjoy the beer. Then one glass turned into several as the long, boring

evening alone wore on. The next thing he knew it was morning, and he had a hangover.

He had to stop it. But the prospect seemed dim with so little to occupy him but regrets and questions. *So many questions.*

He washed his face and hands with cold water from the tap and poured himself a mug full of coffee the shade of a black hole. He took a few big gulps and decided he was as ready as he'd ever be.

He returned to the foyer with the mug. The woman in the camel coat was still there.

"This way," he rasped.

He led the way into the main hall where there were still a few couches and chairs and tables, artifacts left over from generations of Ritters. It was the cheaper stuff Uncle Wolfgang hadn't been able to sell, apparently.

Gabriel sat in his favorite wing-back chair and let the woman fend for herself. She perched on the edge of the stiff, horsehair couch. Gabriel's phone was charging on the end table, and he turned on the recorder.

"OK, shoot. I got the cursed part. But why come to me? What do you want me to do?"

*A question for the ages*, Gabriel thought. Maybe she could tell him. That would be nice.

"I was told you're a psychic medium."

"Nope. Definitely not a psychic medium." Gabriel sipped his coffee.

Her brow furrowed. "You can't help me? I was told you solve problems like this. Like my... my curse." Her eyes welled up with tears. "Oh God, I'm doomed!"

Arg. Not tears. No, no. It was far too early in the morning for tears.

"I do solve problems," he said hastily. "Not sure about yours. Tell me about it. But stop crying first, for the love of God."

Her sniffles faded. “You’ll really listen?”

He waved his mug. “Go for it.”

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes for a moment, then began. “Okay. I know this sounds crazy, but it’s all true. I’m an ex-pat, like you. You are American, aren’t you, Mr. Knight?”

“Guilty as charged.”

“I thought so. My name is Angela Frayer. My husband was transferred to Salzburg for his job last year. I decided to take a sabbatical and come along. Back home I am—was—a nurse.” She wiped her eyes with a tissue she had clutched in her palm.

“Anyway, his birthday was coming up. He loves antiques, really old things, things with a story. I found an antique store in a back alley in Salzburg. It was one of those places that’s like an old treasure box, you know? Doesn’t look like much on the outside, but inside it just goes on and on.”

“Right. And you found a gift for your husband?” Gabriel prompted. The only thing worse than shopping was talking about shopping.

“Yes. But there were so many things. Bizarre things like a bloody scarf belonging to Marie Antoinette. Death masks. Dark things. Along with the usual teacups and tables.”

“Mmm.” At least he had coffee. He drank some and held the mug close to his chin where the smell could revive him.

She took a deep breath as if gathering her courage. “I bought a knife there. It was very unusual. It was long and thin with a curved tip and an elaborate silver handle. Here. I have a picture.”

She dug out her phone and tap-tapped. After a moment, she got up and held her phone

out to Gabriel, forcing him to put down the mug momentarily. He studied the picture. The knife had a vaguely Arabic style to it. It looked ceremonial but deadly, like something that would be used for ritual sacrifice. Above the sturdy grip was a silver plate with strange symbols. There was a Q-shaped circle with a serpent's head where the flange should be and another symbol like a cross but with three lines instead of one horizontal beam. Something about them recalled to mind the Voodoo symbols he'd seen in New Orleans. But that didn't seem to match with the style or era of the knife.

Too bad Grace wasn't around to do that kind of research anymore.

Or to do anything else.

The thought stirred noxious feelings inside him that others might call guilt or even self-loathing, but that he thought of as his inner troll. Like a really obnoxious internet troll. Only it lived in his brain.

Weissbier was effective at drowning it out.

He handed back the phone. "Go on. You bought the knife and then what? You think it's cursed?"

"No, not the knife." She took a deep breath. "I need to tell this in the right order."

He sighed and picked up his mug.

"The knife came with a story. That's what drew me to it. It was a single sheet of paper folded up in a thick envelope. It was called *The Story of The Ichlan Dagger*. Its origins were unknown but a historian who examined it thought it was likely 10th century, from Persia. It was said to have a long history of murder including a patricide committed by an Austrian duke's son in 1911. I thought the whole thing was made up. You know, to make the knife more alluring to buyers. But now, I think it was probably all true."

She shook her head regretfully, eyes distant.

“Don’t stop now. Tell me the rest,” Gabriel prompted.

“I took the knife back to our flat and wrapped it. James’ birthday wasn’t for another week, so I hid it in the closet. The day after I bought it, while James was out at work, someone came to the door. It was a man, a funny little man. He was very civil at first. Charming, in fact. He said he’d put a hold on the dagger and the shopkeeper had sold it by mistake. He offered to give me twice what I’d paid for it. It was all very amiable.”

She shuddered. “At first, anyway. But I politely declined. I really thought James would love it, and I didn’t want to have to go out and shop for something else. We were expecting guests, James’ sister, Edith, and her husband were supposed to arrive the next day from New Jersey, and I had to set up the guest room and get everything ready. I didn’t have time to go out again. Also, I... I don’t know. There was something about the man. Have you ever heard the term *crocodile smile*? That’s how he struck me. And I thought it was strange and a bit rude that he’d come to my home. Like, how did he find out where I lived? I told him the knife was not for sale.”

“I went to close the door, but he put out a hand and stopped it. I was surprised he was so strong. He said, *sell me the knife or, I promise you, you will regret it*. Something like that. His eyes were so cold. All his friendliness was gone. He was just... scary. I forced the door closed and locked it, and then I called James. He came home immediately. Honestly, I was spooked. But the little man didn’t come back.”

“Hmmm.” Gabriel was surprised to find his mug of coffee empty. He wanted more, but it could wait. He was becoming absorbed in this woman’s tale. “Then what happened?”

Angela swallowed hard. “Edith and her husband didn’t come. Their plane literally

exploded while it was parked at the gate. Black smoke began pouring from the engine or something. There was a fire. All the passengers who were waiting to board stood at the windows and watched it. No one was hurt. But, needless to say, the flight was canceled, and her husband was too unnerved to book another. Then—” she squeezed her eyes as if in pain. “I gave the knife to James on his birthday. We went out to a nice restaurant near the Festspielhaus. I gave him the gift at the table. He loved it. He loved the story and just... everything. But within a few hours, James was d-dead.”

Her voice caught on a sob. She cried for a while, dabbing with that tissue, which was disintegrating. Gabriel got up and went to the kitchen, returned with a roll of paper towels, which the woman took gratefully.

“How did it happen?” Gabriel asked, when the woman was calmer.

She twisted a sodden paper towel in her lap. “We’d taken the underground. After the meal we waited at the metro stop. I turned my back for just a few minutes to help an old woman who was struggling with a number of packages and a walker. I heard the train coming in. As I was turning to hurry back to James, someone screamed. And he... he wasn’t there. On the platform. He was gone. The other people said he’d been standing there near the edge of the platform, and, as the train came in, stepped out, casually, like he was crossing a street. He just... stepped out.”

She wiped her nose with a bit of toweling and looked at Gabriel with fury in her eyes. “He would never do that! He’d never kill himself. And that night, of all nights! We were happy!”

“I’m sure you were.” The hair on the back of Gabriel’s neck was standing up now, and dread lay on his chest. “There’s more? You said something about a dresser and a dog.”

She nodded and made a visible effort to collect herself. “James died three weeks ago. I

thought about flying back to New Jersey, but the authorities wanted me to stay close while they investigate his... his apparent suicide. So, I've just been sitting in the apartment. And walking. I have to keep moving, you see. I've walked and walked. And there's this dog. A black dog. It's one of those small dogs—like a Scottie. And it's been following me. I see it everywhere. I know, it might not be the same dog. That's what I told myself! But I see it over and over, and it's never on a leash, never with a person. That's strange, right? And it looks at me. I catch it trailing me, if I look over my shoulder. Its eyes are... are purple. At least they seem that way from a distance. And I can tell it hates me!"

"Mmm," Gabriel said. Times like this, he wished he smoked.

"Then, yesterday, I was walking through a street of houses—old houses, tightly packed together. I was in a daze, I guess. Thinking about James and not paying attention. I heard shouting that got through to me. A workman grabbed my arm and yanked me and there, just where I'd been standing, a big, ornate dresser crashed to the sidewalk and shattered into a thousand pieces!"

Angela shook her head. "I realized they'd been trying to hoist it up to an upper floor. Because the staircases in those old buildings are so narrow, you know? There were two workmen up above, and the rope had snapped or loosened. I could have been killed! And that black dog was across the street, watching me. That horrible dog!"

She covered her face with her hands, which shook. "I know it's crazy, but that little man is after me! He somehow sabotaged Edith's plane, and he killed James, and now he's going to kill me too, only he wants to drag it out and make sure I know it's coming!"

"Okay. It's okay." Gabriel went over to sit next to the woman. He awkwardly patted her shoulder. "Look. I believe you."



“You do?” She looked up, surprised.

He nodded. “I’ve seen stranger things, believe me. First things first. Where is the dagger now?”

She grimaced. “I threw it away. About a week ago. But it didn’t help.”

So much for that idea, Gabriel thought. “Where did you throw it away? How?”

“I told my friend, Janine, about it over the phone. She’s into that sort of thing. Crystals and channeling and all that. She told me to throw it in water. So, I took it to the Staatsbrücke bridge, said a prayer, and threw it in the Salzach River. Then I took a train to Munich to get away for a few days. But I saw the dog last night! It was in a small park across from my hotel. And I can’t stand it anymore. I’ve never been so terrified in my life. Janine looked you up and told me you could help.”

*Thanks, Janine,* Gabriel thought wryly. Then he wondered at his own laziness. This might be an interesting case. And he had little else to do. The new book he was trying to write was a slog of blank pages, half-starts, and self-recrimination.

He had to get out of here. Do something.

A little man and a cursed dagger sounded more like a fairy tale than anything actually, like, dangerous. Rapunzel-ish. Three Billy Goat Gruff and co.

“Do you think we could find the dagger if we went back to Salzburg?” he asked.

“Tourists probably drop things off bridges all the time. Maybe there are divers who do that sort of recovery work.”

She made another face. This time, fear lurked in her eyes. “I don’t know. Do you think if we found the dagger and took it back to the antique store, or found the little man and offered it to him, it would end this?”

“It couldn’t hurt.”

She nodded eagerly, her face brightening. “Yes, we could try. Will you come with me? Oh God, I need someone! I don’t know how to handle this. This is way, way out of my league. I can pay you! Please.”

She folded her hands in supplication, her eyes pleading.

She was honestly afraid she would die. And she might. If no one helped her, she might.

“Give me your address. I’ll need to pack and get my shit together. I take the train tomorrow morning.” He cocked his head. “You mentioned a guest room. Is that available?”

“Of course! Anything you need. Thank you so, so much, Mr. Knight.”

“Bet it won’t take long,” he said with a smile.

He was a Schattenjäger, after all, a hunter of shadows, or evil, of vile things, with a bloodline going all the way back to a Centurion at the crucifixion. He was a bit of overkill for this little case, if he was honest. But she said she’d pay, so what the hell.

The woman departed, and he had a piece of toast to assuage his roiling gut. Then he poked his head in the castle’s library. The volumes in this room, collected by generations of Schattenjägers, ranged from incomprehensible, to ridiculous, to fascinating.

Grace had certainly found them fascinating. She’d spent hours reorganizing and cataloguing during that spell she’d spent at Schloss Ritter while he was in Munich chasing werewolves.

That was her thing. Cataloguing everything. Putting in her two cents with compounded interest. But she wasn’t going to change him—oh, no! Nein. Nyet. He was a free spirit. End of. The sex thing—that had been a mistake. They could have recovered from that, remained working partners if she hadn’t just... vanished.

Not even a postcard or text message to say where she'd gone, or that she was okay, or even to inquire about back pay. What was wrong with her? He couldn't enter this room without thinking about Grace. Which is why he didn't enter it.

Gabriel started to turn away. He didn't have enough information to do research, even if that was his thing. What would he even look up? Cursed daggers? That would take hours, and he'd probably find nothing useful.

Grace's voice popped into his head. *The Ichlan Dagger, Gabriel. It even has a name. Come on. It's not that hard.*

"Fine!" Gabriel muttered out loud. The woman could get under his skin even when she wasn't there. He turned back and entered the room.

He studied the overstuffed shelves for a few minutes, resistance itching inside him. His fists clenched once, twice. He turned to the desk and the binder Grace had been working on. Neatly typed and inserted into plastic sleeves were lists of books organized by topic. There were the personal journals of his ancestors, records of their cases, books on witches and demons, black magic and spirits. There were geography books—outdated—and religious tomes galore.

There was not a section on weapons. He scanned Grace's list again and found a category for *Tools and Rituals of Magick*. He could try that. He slammed the binder closed and something dropped out. It was an envelope. It landed face down.

He stared at it on the desk, his heart pounding thickly in his chest, in his throat. Had Grace left him a note after all? But when he picked up the envelope and turned it over, he saw it was addressed to Grace's mother, *Joy Nakimura*. No address. The flap was open.

With a grimace, he yanked a notecard from the envelope. It was entirely possible she'd said something about him, and if she had—

The front had a pastel scene of Lake Chiemsee. Inside was Grace's loopy, absurdly perfect handwriting.

*Mom,*

*I'd love to have you and Dad visit me in Germany, but I'll have to let you know when it's a good time. Right now, I'm chasing down leads to help Gabriel on a new case. I know. I know. This isn't what I spent six years of college studying, but I'm learning so much. (And I love it.)*

*Don't worry about me – I'm strictly behind the scenes, promise.*

*Love, Grace*



Gabriel frowned at the note. Her parents had wanted to visit Schloss Ritter? Why hadn't she said anything? Not that he *wanted* to meet the Nakimuras. The thought alone made him shudder. But he could have been conveniently elsewhere. He would have been happy to share the old pile of bricks with the 'rents. It might have even impressed them enough not to hate him quite so much.

It was the tone of the note that grated, though. It was so... nice. Grace wasn't nice. That is, she was a nice person, he supposed, but she was also brutally honest with a tongue that could flay a deer at ten paces.

*Love, Grace*, she'd written. And there were hearts. That didn't seem like Grace.

Not just *a* heart, either. *Five hearts*.

His thumb ran over them, as if they might be an optical illusion that would dissipate at a touch. But they were just ink, simple quickie hearts drawn with a pen. Nothing more, nothing less.

He tossed the letter down. So what? Grace had a different personality with her parents.

Who didn't?

*Five hearts.*

She might have had a different personality with *him*, if he'd let her.

*Shut up. The Ichlan Dagger, remember?*

He pushed the letter, and the woman, from his mind. It took him an hour, but he found the dagger in a book called, "The Rituals, Tools, and Herbology of Dark Magick". It had been published in 1924. There was a drawing of the Ichlan dagger on page 155.

### **The Ichlan Dagger**

**This cursed object is reputed to have been created in 1204 when the Fourth Crusade invaded Constantinople. According to legend, the dagger was commissioned by a high-ranking Crusader from an expert craftsman in Constantinople and paid for with stolen gold still stained with blood. The craftsman created the dagger to specification but embedded a curse in the metal to the effect that the dagger's owner would find victory but would meet their doom at their greatest moment of triumph. This supposedly came true when that high-ranking crusader was stabbed by an enemy he presumed to be dead as he walked through a victorious battlefield.**

**The Ichlan Dagger's curse continued to work its fatal magic on a dozen subsequent owners and was buried in a crypt in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century by those afraid of its power. Its location was lost to time, and it became a much sought-after relic with occultists, alchemists, and necromancers who believed it would lend power to their rituals.**

**The Ichlan Dagger was unearthed in 1900 by workmen moving graves in Istanbul. It was purchased for three hundred thousand kronen by an Austrian duke for his collection. The curse reared its ugly head again when, on the duke's wedding day in 1911 to a royal bride, his disenfranchised son removed the dagger from its display case and stabbed the duke in the heart. The dagger was confiscated by Austrian authorities and disappeared from their care in 1912. There has been no news of it since.**

Gabriel made a copy of the pages to show his client on the morrow. He folded them up neatly and packed a bag. The description of the dagger disturbed him.

Occultists? Alchemists? Necromancers?

*A funny little man. He seemed so nice at first.*

There was that black dog, too. A familiar, perhaps?

It was creepy, no doubt about it. But maybe the little man was just a collector, and maybe the dog, and the client's husband's death, were coincidences.

Hell, there was no point in worrying about it until he got to Salzburg.

###

He was in a coffee shop in Salzburg. He somehow knew it was Salzburg even though the cafe was a trendy place, the sort that could be New York or Paris. He sat at a counter at the window, drinking coffee.

It was crowded, and a man took the stool next to his. They exchanged a glance, smiled.

The guy, maybe late twenties, had dark hair to his shoulders and was softly handsome,

with an open face that shone. It literally glowed like a stained-glass window. His hazel eyes were clear and untroubled.

He said something about the weather. Or the tourist crowds. Gabriel said stuff back. The sort of things you say to a stranger in a coffee shop. In a dream.

In the morning, Gabriel would not remember the words, only the feeling.

The man was so *nice*. So... good. In his essence. God-filled. Like the vision of St. Michael that had come to Gabriel at his initiation. It was the kind of light Gabriel could never be. Was *supposed* to be, maybe. As a Schattenjäger. But wasn't.

The man got up to leave. "I need to get to class," he said. "I'm a teacher at a primary school. It's just a few blocks from here."

"Primary school? That's brave," said Gabriel. Thinking *better you than me*.

The man laughed and shook his head. "The children are brilliant. Truly." Then he went out the door. The bell above tinkled. The door closed.

Instantly, the shiny, ordinary coffee shop vanished. It was replaced by black and white images, like police photographs. Images of that young man lying on the ground—*click, click*—those clear hazel eyes open and fixed—*click, click*—his shirt open and a deep, black wound in his chest where his heart should be. *Click*.

Murder.

That poor young man was going to be murdered.

With a shout, Gabriel jumped up from the stool and yanked the shop door open. The little bell tinkled gaily as he ran out into the street. He saw the back of the young man up ahead, through a throng of pedestrians. He shouted, "Hey you! Hey!"

The young man didn't stop.

Gabriel pushed past people, frantic. “Hey! Hey, stop!”

The man didn’t hear him.

Gabriel tried to shout louder but found he couldn’t utter a word. He touched his mouth, and it wasn’t there. His fingers only found smooth skin.

That wasn’t important, not now. He had to catch the man.

He was suddenly looking down on himself and the man on a clear, open road. There was no one else around. Good! Now he could catch the guy! Gabriel tried to run, but his limbs were heavy, heavy, heavy, and he made slow progress. From the overhead view he could see the young man walking briskly and getting further and further ahead, ambling on his way unperturbed—

*Stop this or you’ll die.* The voice in his head was quiet, small.

Gabriel tried as hard as he could to move, but it was like he was stuck in cement.

—getting fainter and fainter up ahead—

*Stop this or you’ll die,* came the voice again, a bit louder.

“I’m trying!” Gabriel thought-yelled in frustration.

—until that young man vanished from sight.

“Hey!” Gabriel fought the bed sheets, trying to move, trying to run. They trapped his legs and he tumbled to the floor, cracking his elbow on the end table.

He sat there, rubbing his arm, his heart pounding.

*I have to go! I have to catch him!*

Go... where? Catch...?

Who was he trying to catch again?



It took a moment, but the dream faded, as dreams do, and Gabriel was simply sitting on the rug next to his bed with a pained elbow.

“Christ,” he whispered. “Geez.”

He rubbed his eyes and shook his head. It was okay. He didn’t need to go anywhere or find anyone. He wasn’t too late. The man didn’t even exist. It was fine. It was all fine. His heart could stop exploding now.

He took a sip from the glass of water on the bedside table. Two aspirin sat there, always on hand for a hangover. He downed them, then remembered that he hadn’t drunk last night.

Right. Because he had to leave for Salzburg this morning. He had a case. He was packed, ready to go. More than ready, if that dream was any indication.

He rose to his feet and shuffled to the window. A bit of fresh air would chase the last of the megrims away. He opened the curtains, unlatched the old castle window, and pushed it wide.

And saw it. He stumbled back a step, stared.

Down below, in the snowy field between Schloss Ritter and Rittersberg, large letters, at least ten feet high, had been etched in the snow as if by a gigantic finger.

They read: STOP THIS OR YOU’LL DIE.

*Stay tuned for more of FIVE HEARTS.*