

SOME BOOKS
ARE GOOD.

The

OTHERS ARE
PLAIN EVIL...

**DARK
VOLUME**

G.W. DAHLQUIST

with *The Glass Books* at the DREAM EATERS

The Dark Volume
by
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PROLOGUE

She did not know what time it was, because of the new rule. It had been the girl's habit to creep up the stairs and then, depending on the day and who might be home or what servants watching, slip into her mother's rooms, at the end of the hallway, or into her father's, to the right of the landing. Her mother's bedchamber was filled with the deliberate clicking of a clock made of Chinese porcelain, all creamy white with a flickering of red flowers. If she was careful and again unseen, she could lift it off its stand and put her ear against the brass-ringed face. Her father's rooms were altogether different: seldom occupied, and smelling of tobacco and dust. Here stood the tall, dark pendulum clock, with a glass front through which she could dimly see the swinging metal disc, lurking in its permanent shadow. It was this clock that most satisfyingly rang the hour, and the smaller Chinese clock that more reliably gave out the minutes in between. But it had been three days since the girl had seen her mother, and another three before that since her father had kissed her cheek at breakfast, the stiff collar of his uniform tunic scraping against her chin, then marched out to the street, already lighting his first cheroot of the morning. Mr Flempton had shut both rooms – telling all the other servants that the three children were forbidden the entire floor. The girl knew there were other timepieces in the house, indeed that her merest question to Cook, or their maid Amelia, or even the forbidding Mr Flempton, would give her the time in a trice, yet she refused to ask. If she could not go upstairs to find it for herself, she did not care to know.

Her brothers asked all sorts of things, persistent questions – especially Charles – but received no answers at all. This upset her, because she knew there *were* answers – her parents were *some* place – and she did

not understand why people she had trusted would avoid the truth so cruelly. She had retreated instead, for hours every day to their school-room, also empty, since their lessons had been suspended as well (she could not remember when she had last seen their tutor, Elöise – it was almost as if the woman had vanished along with her parents). As Charles hated lessons and Ronald was too young, the room became a place no other occupant of the house had any cause to visit. And so the girl passed her time with books, with picture paints, and with looking out the window to the square, where the coaches came and went as if the world was not profoundly amiss.

What vexed her the most, as she strove ever more diligently to read or draw or arrange the paint pots into a wall and jump the collection of her brother's carved wooden horses over it, like the soldiers in her father's regiment – the black horse always being her father's and always making the highest jump of all – was that those moments, her father at breakfast, her mother kissing her goodbye after supper, would be the last for so long a time. The girl had not fixed her parents into her mind – their smiles, their moods, their final very important words. If she could only get into her mother's clothes closet, she could shut her eyes and lean her face into the line of hanging dresses, breathing in the perfume. Instead she had the smells of servants and well-scrubbed common rooms, and worried whispers from the kitchens that stopped whenever she was seen.

It was after Cecile had collected her for afternoon tea, after so many hours of silence the maid's voice echoing up the stairway harsh as a crow's, that the girl found herself, hands washed and dress changed, waiting for Ronald – her younger brother was always troubled by shoes – and staring down the main hall, through the foyer to the closed front door.

The door chime was pulled, then after the briefest interval pulled again. Mr Flempton rushed past her, tugging at the cuffs of his jacket. Cecile touched the girl's shoulder to guide her away, but she ignored it. Mr Flempton opened the door wide to reveal three men in long black coats and high black hats. The men to either side held leather portfolios. The coat of the man in the centre was draped limply over one shoulder, the arm beneath it wrapped with white plaster.

'May I help you?' asked Mr Flempton.

'Ministry orders,' said the man with the plaster cast. 'We'll require your complete cooperation.'

ONE

WOLVES

One of his hands tugged cruelly at her hair as the other squeezed her throat. Miss Temple could not breathe – he was too strong, too angry – and even as part of her mind screamed that she must not, that there must be another way, she ground the revolver into the man’s body and pulled the trigger. It kicked against her wrist with a deafening crack, and Roger Bascombe was thrown into the cabin wall. The red imprint of his fingers marked her windpipe, but his shocked blue eyes – the fiancé who had cruelly thrown her over – showed only dismay at *her* betrayal. His gaze punctured her heart like a blade. What had she done? She stumbled, aware for the first time that her feet were freezing, that she stood in six inches of icy sea water. The airship had spiralled into the ocean. They were sinking. She would drown.

Dimly, Miss Temple heard her name – *Celeste! Celeste!* – the calls of Doctor Svenson and of Chang. Her memory seemed two steps behind . . . They had climbed to the roof, with Elöise. She must follow, it was her only chance to survive . . . but she looked again at Roger, crumpled and wan, and could not move – would they die together after all? But then something nudged Miss Temple’s leg. She cried out, thinking of rats on a ship, and saw it was a body, floating with the rising water . . . the Comte d’Orkancz, the alchemist-savant who had discovered the blue glass, run through with a sabre by Cardinal Chang. Miss Temple forced herself past the dead man’s bulk, barely able to feel her legs. Other bodies loomed as she crossed the cabin, each more gruesome than the last: Francis Xonck, with his flaming red hair and elegant silk waistcoat, shot by Doctor Svenson . . . Lydia Vandaariff, decapitated with a blue glass book . . . the Prince of Macklenburg, legs broken clean away. Miss Temple crawled up the stairs, the

foaming water keeping pace as her fingers clawed the cold metal. The cries above were fainter. With a piercing shock she remembered the one body she had not seen, that of the Contessa di Lacquer-Sforza . . . Had she jumped to her death? Had she somehow hidden and killed the others? Was she even then waiting for Miss Temple?

The cold salt water reached her throat, splashing at her mouth. Her arms became too heavy to lift. Behind lay Roger . . . her terrible guilt. Above floated the open hatch. She could not move for the ice forming around her legs, locking her joints stiff. She would perish after all . . . just as she deserved –

Miss Temple woke – weak, starving, and riddled with aches – to a sour-smelling room, with dark, raw-cut beams. A single smeared window framed the feeble light of a heavy, cloud-covered sky, the very image of boiled wool. She sat up in the frankly noisome bed, doing her best to shake away the vision of the sinking airship.

‘At least it does not reek of fish,’ she muttered, and looked about her for any sign of where she was or – for that matter – her clothing. But the room was bare.

She crept gingerly off the bed, feeling the unsoundness of her limbs and the lightness of her head, and peered under the frame to find a chipped porcelain chamber pot. As Miss Temple squatted down, she rubbed her eyes and looked at her hands, which were flecked with half-healed abrasions and cuts. She stood, slid the pot back from view beneath the bed with her foot, and noticed a small rectangle of glass, no bigger than a page of poetry, hanging from a nail – a mirror. She was forced to stand on her toes, but, despite the effort, stayed staring into the glass for some minutes, curious and dismayed at the young woman she there met.

Her chestnut curls hung flat and lank, which had the effect of making her face – from a certain vantage somewhat round – even rounder. This was set off by her sunken cheeks, the dark circles of distress beneath each eye, and once more a scattering of livid marks – the searing trace of a bullet above one ear, welts across both cheekbones, and greenish bruises on her throat that perfectly matched a vicious, squeezing palm. All this Miss

Temple took in with a sigh, grateful she had not, for instance, lost a tooth – that all could be mended by time, food, and the touch of a skilful maid. What struck her more forcefully, however – what she found *mysterious* – was what had happened to her eyes. They were still grey, still insistent, impatient, and sharp, but possessed a new quality she could not at first name. A moment later the truth appeared. She was a killer.

Miss Temple sat back on the bed and stared up at the darkening clouds. She had shot Roger Bascombe and left his body to the sea. Certainly the man had betrayed her, betrayed everything, and yet . . . what had she become in defeating him, in thwarting the powerful figures Roger had chosen to serve, chosen over her love, their marriage . . . what had she herself cast away?

Such thoughts were impossible on an empty stomach. She would eat, bathe, dress, locate her friends – still an oddly foreign notion to Miss Temple – and take assurance from their survival that it had all been necessary.

But when she called to the door, her voice an alarmingly ragged croak, there came no answer. Instead of calling again, Miss Temple lay down and pulled the blankets up over her face.

As she lay sniffing the dusty wool, she recalled what she could of her coming ashore. They had been on the roof of the dirigible's cabin, waiting to drown as it dropped into the sea, but instead of sinking they came aground on fortunate rocks, saved. She reached the sand on her hands and knees, half drowned and cold to the bone, frozen anew by the pitiless wind whose lashing impact curled her to a shivering ball. Chang carried her beyond the narrow ribbon of beach and over a hedge of sharp black rocks, but already she felt her body failing, unable to form words for her chattering teeth. There were black trees, the Doctor banging on a wooden door, racks of drying and salted fish, and then she was bundled in front of a burning hearth. Outside it was morning, but inside the hut the air was close and foul, as if it had been nailed tight against the cold all winter. The dirigible's original destination had been the Duchy of Macklenburg, on the Baltic Sea – but how far north had the airship flown? Someone held hot tea for her to

drink, then they – Elöise? – took off her clothes and wrapped her in blankets. Miss Temple felt her chills swiftly escalate into fever . . . and then dreams swallowed her whole.

Miss Temple sighed heavily, the sound quite muffled beneath the bedding, and slept.

When she next awoke the window had gone dark and there were sounds outside the door. Miss Temple crawled from the bed and stood more steadily than before. She plucked at her simple shift, wondering where it had come from, and pushed the hair from her face. How much must have happened while she slept? Yet, instead of forming the many questions she ought to have had – about her companions, their found her location, the very date – Miss Temple found her attention drawn to a lurid flickering – *already* – beneath the surface of her mind, like tiny bubbles in a pot growing to the boil. This was the Contessa's blue glass book of memories that Miss Temple had absorbed – and she shuddered to realize that each tiny bubble of memory found an echo in her flesh, each one threatening to expand to prominence in her mind, until the memory blotted out the present altogether. She had peered into the shimmering depths of the blue glass and been changed. How many of its memories had she consumed – experienced in her *own* body – and thus made her own? How many acts that she had never performed did she now *remember*? The Contessa's book was a catalogue of insidious and unmentionable delight, the sensual experience of a thousand souls crammed together. The more Miss Temple thought about it, the more insistent the memories became. Her face flushed. Her breath quickened. Her nostrils flared with anger. She would not have it.

She jerked open the door. Before her two women huddled over a large woven basket near an iron stove. At the sound of the door both looked up, faces blank with surprise. They wore plain dresses, soiled aprons, and heavy shoes, with their hair stuffed tightly under woollen caps – a mother and a daughter, sharing a thick nose and a certain flatness about the eyes. Miss Temple smiled primly and noticed that the basket was bundled full of linens quite broadly stained with blood. The younger of the two abruptly upended the pile to obscure the stains and shoved the entire basket from

view behind the stove. The elder turned to Miss Temple with a dotting smile – which Miss Temple would have been less disposed to despise had it not appeared as so open a distraction from the basket – and rubbed her chapped hands together.

‘Good-day,’ said Miss Temple.

‘You are awake!’ The woman’s voice bore an accent Miss Temple had heard before, from the mouths of sailors.

‘Exactly so,’ replied Miss Temple. ‘And, though I do not intend any inconvenience, it is true that I require rather many things in a short time. I should like breakfast – I have no sense of the time, so perhaps it is more supper I should ask for – and if possible a bath, and then some clothing, and more than anything information: where precisely might I be, and where are my companions? And of course, who are you?’ she added, smiling again. ‘I am sure you have been instrumental to my recovery. I trust I was not a burden. One never enjoys being ill – often one calls out, sometimes brusquely. I have no memory of calling out at all – I have no memory of coming here – so I trust you will accept my open regrets for any – well, for anything *untoward*. I do indeed feel much better. Some tea would be lovely. And toast – toast of any kind. And, yes, something to wear. And news. Indeed, most of all, *news*.’

She smiled at them, expectant and, she hoped, the picture of kind gratitude. The women stared at her for perhaps four seconds, when the elder suddenly clapped her hands, startling a squeak from the girl, as if she had been pinched. At once the poor thing darted from the room, pausing only to snatch up the basket as she went.

‘Bette will come back with food,’ the woman announced, lips pursed, her hands again rubbing together. ‘Perhaps you will sit by the stove.’

She indicated a rough wooden stool, but before Miss Temple could respond the woman took her arm and guided her to it. Wood chips and cinders beneath her feet, Miss Temple sat – for it *was* cold outside of her blanket, and much warmer by the stove.

‘What is your name?’ asked Miss Temple. ‘And where are we? I expect you know my name – undoubtedly my companions have spoken of how we

came to be here. I should actually be quite curious as to what they said –

‘I am Lina,’ the woman said. ‘I will make tea.’

The woman brusquely turned away, stepping closer to the stove and placing an iron kettle onto its flat, oily top. Keeping her back to Miss Temple, Lina crossed to a low, humble cupboard for a teapot and metal mug, and a small stoppered jar that held a dusty inch of black tea – each action making clear there was scarce hope of a lemon.

‘And where are we exactly?’ asked Miss Temple, even in her weakened state not entirely pleased with having to repeat herself.

Lina did not respond, pretending – poorly – not to have heard. Rolling her eyes, Miss Temple stood and without another word walked past the woman to the door through which Bette had disappeared. There was a sharp exhalation from Lina as she pulled it open, but a moment later she was through, shutting it behind her and slipping a conveniently placed wooden latch. Lina yanked on the door from the other side. Miss Temple ignored her.

Bette – who, Miss Temple now saw, as the girl looked up at her with shock – was, if not exactly fat, what one might in charity term *healthy*, with a wide, pale, pink neck and heavy arms that shook the entirety of her torso when they worked. At the moment Miss Temple entered, Bette had been fully occupied – not with any meal at all but in scrubbing the blood-soaked bedding in a steaming bucket of water, crimson-tinged soap suds lathering nearly to each elbow.

‘Hello again,’ said Miss Temple. ‘Lina is making my tea. I have been alone so long that I am quite keen for company. And whatever are you doing?’

Bette shifted on her feet, torn between the urge to hide the blood and to curtsy to a social superior, and succeeded only in losing her balance and sitting down on the floor. The impact caused one black-booted foot to kick the tub, launching a jet of bloody foam into the air.

The latched door rattled again. Miss Temple studied the room, of a piece with where she had slept – dark, wooden beams with a wall of inset shelves, all covered with boxes and pots and jars, one half taken up with soaps

and oils and the other equally occupied with fishing tackle. There were two more wooden tubs the size of the one Bette presently used, and the width of the room was spread with hanging cords upon which to dry things. Miss Temple saw these were strung with more bedding, and nothing she might wear.

‘That seems a lot of blood,’ said Miss Temple. ‘I am hopeful that it represents a happy outcome – the birth of a child?’

Bette shook her head.

Miss Temple nodded seriously. ‘I see. Someone has been injured?’

Bette nodded.

‘*Killed?*’

Bette nodded again.

‘And poor you, with the horrid task of washing it out.’ Miss Temple continued to ignore the rattling door behind her. She stepped to one of the other tubs, perching herself on its edge. ‘Do you know what happened?’

Bette glanced past Miss Temple to the door. Miss Temple leant closer to the girl.

‘Between *ourselves*.’

Bette’s hesitant answer was so hushed as to be nearly inaudible. ‘It was the *storm* . . .’

She wriggled back onto her toes and sank her hands once more into the tub, as if resuming her work would balance the impulse to gossip.

‘What storm?’

‘After you came ashore.’

‘I remember no *storm*,’ said Miss Temple. ‘But perhaps I was in no state to mark it – go on.’

‘It rained for two days,’ whispered the girl. ‘And when it was over, the beaches were different, and trees had come down, and the river had flooded the forest. That was why they said – because of the forest –’

‘The *blood*, Bette.’ Miss Temple attempted to be patient. ‘*Blood*, not forests.’

‘But they said that was why. No one had called on Jorgens since the storm, because he lived near the river, and the path was washed away. When someone did think to call, they found . . . they found them *dead*.

Jorgens *and* his wife. The door opened, dogs gone, their . . . their *throats* . . . and *then* –’

Lina banged on the door, frightening the girl to silence. Miss Temple spun round and barked with annoyance: ‘I will have my tea when I am *ready* for it!’

‘Celeste!’ cried Elöise Dujong. ‘You must come out at once – there is no time!’

Miss Temple dashed to the door and shoved the latch aside, just as Elöise yanked it open and took her hand. She felt a rush of pleasure at the sight of her friend and wanted nothing more than to wrap her arms around her and crush Elöise to her body, realizing in the moment how alone she had felt, and how delicate had become her fears. Instead, Elöise called to Lina that Miss Temple would need a bath at once, and then some food to take with them, for they must travel. These orders shouted – and they *were* shouted, Miss Temple heard with surprise, and they *were* orders (she had never seen Elöise so in command – but was she not a tutor or governess, and were they not prime whiphands all?) – Elöise yanked Miss Temple into her bedroom and swung the door shut with her other arm, which, Miss Temple noticed for the first time, was draped with clothing. She led Miss Temple to the bed and they sat together, Miss Temple’s bare feet dangling above the floor, Elöise flushed and out of breath, her boots quite caked with mud.

‘As I say, my dear, there is no time – it is nearly dawn. I did not know you were awake. I am so sorry not to have been here; I can only wonder what you thought. The fever was prodigious. Abelard – the Doctor’ – here Elöise blushed and dropped her eyes – ‘left only when he was certain the danger had passed – I have remained until you revived –’

‘The Doctor is *gone*?’ asked Miss Temple.

‘And Cardinal Chang – there is too much to explain – you must see if any of this fits while they heat water. We really haven’t time, but you must be craving a bath after so long – and there is no telling when we may find another –’

She thrust the mass of clothing onto Miss Temple’s lap and began to sort

it into piles – undergarments, shifts, petticoats, a corset or two, stockings, and several actual dresses. Miss Temple watched Elöise’s fingers darting about, and she struggled to make sense of her news. Chang was gone? And the Doctor?

‘But where –’

‘Back to the city. My dear, so much has happened. It has been over a week – there was, my goodness, *such* a storm –’

‘I have been told.’

‘We are far north, in a fishing village on what is called the Iron Coast – no harbours to speak of, no trains, the only roads washed out by this tempest.’

Miss Temple shivered to recall the terrible last minutes on the damaged airship, as it settled onto the freezing waves and began to fill – the dark rush of sea water lifting the bodies of the Prince, of Lydia, of Xonck, and of the Comte, transforming each from a person to an object. She shook the thought away.

‘But what is so pressing? Our enemies were destroyed!’

‘Try these,’ said Elöise, pointing to a sorted stack of worn white underthings.

‘I’m sure they will fit well,’ replied Miss Temple, already regretting the absence of her silks and suspiciously curious what had become of them, ‘but I do not understand the *urgency*.’

‘At least try the dresses,’ insisted Elöise.

‘Where did you get them?’ asked Miss Temple, holding up a cotton dress of a faded royal blue – simple but pretty enough in its way, and an admittedly fetching colour with her hair.

‘A local woman, Mrs Jorgens – the match in size was fortuitous.’

‘And she parted with them willingly?’

‘Please put it *on*, Celeste. I must see about the water. We must hurry.’

Through the door she could hear Elöise speaking to Lina, and then a general buzz of preparation that she knew had nothing to do with baths and everything to do with imminent departure. She stood naked with a dead woman’s dress pulled up to her waist, looking at her face and body in

the tiny square of mirror. Her skin was pale as milk, a fact that seemed less a part of her than the bruises and shadows traced across it, evidence of another life, just as the ruddy thumb smears at her lips and at the tip of each breast were signs of an interior hunger that struck her now – as she slipped her arms into each sleeve and shrugged the dress in place across her chest – as fully at odds with the colder creature she had perforce become. She pulled it from her shoulders and then brought it up to her nose. There was no scent of its previous owner, only salt air, dust, and camphor. It must have been her finest dress, worn but three times a year and scrupulously cleaned.

Miss Temple glanced behind her and saw, laid to the side of the pile of clothing, a tiny white shift and a cotton dress to match it, to fit a girl of five years at the very most. Elöise must have gathered them up along with the rest of Mrs Jorgens' things. Bette had not mentioned a child . . . had one been killed as well?

Elöise knocked on the door and opened it enough to say the bath was ready. From beyond the far room, Miss Temple heard the stamping of horses.

As she crouched in the wooden tub, the water none too warm but nevertheless welcome, Miss Temple saw Elöise pass Lina several silver coins, dug from one of Miss Temple's sea-battered green boots. How much money had been left in them – and how much had now been spent without her knowledge? Bette poured another bowlful of water over Miss Temple's head, interrupting her calculations, and worked the soap through her hair with thick fingers, as Lina packed food into a wrapped bundle. Glancing over to Miss Temple, Elöise saw that she was being watched.

'We will speak as we travel, Celeste,' she said. 'But we must travel at once.'

'Will not the Doctor or Chang expect to collect us? Will they not be confused when we are gone?'

'They will not.'

'Why? What are they doing? Where will we go?'

'Excellent questions – you are yourself once more –'

‘What has happened to our enemies?’

If Elöise replied, Miss Temple did not hear it. Bette emptied another bowl over her head, and another after that, pouring slowly to wash out the suds. Miss Temple carefully stepped free of the tub as Bette dabbed at her dripping hair.

‘I suppose it is impossible that my hair be curled,’ she said to Elöise.

‘The curls are quite natural to you, are they not?’ Elöise carefully replied.

‘Of course they are,’ snapped Miss Temple; ‘but that does not mean they are not better when *managed*.’

She raised her arms, the better for Bette to dry her, and nodded at Elöise’s hands rather pointedly. ‘Where is my other boot?’

Green-shod once more, Miss Temple stepped from the wooden house into a pallid light. The trees above were leafless, and the path to their wagon – a simple affair drawn by one weathered nag – was still moist from the rains. She smelt the sea and even heard the distant waves somewhere behind the house, tracing the air like a restless rope of wind. Lina and Bette stood in the door, watching them go with, Miss Temple recognized with annoyance, expressions of relief. She turned to Elöise to remark on the fact but saw for the first time the line of men that waited on the far side of the wagon – raw, hard-faced fellows with knives at their belts and staves in their hands.

‘Are they coming with us?’ she whispered to Elöise.

‘Ah, no,’ Elöise replied with a tight smile. ‘They have come to make sure we *go*.’

Miss Temple looked with more attention – perceiving women and children now peering out behind the line of men – and felt their gazes could not have been more cold had she and Elöise been diseased interlopers with the plague. She opened her mouth to speak, but stopped at the sight of a small girl with a haunted, pale face, hands gripped by two grey matrons – no mother or father near her. Her view of the girl was blocked by one of the men with staves, who met Miss Temple’s curiosity with a frown. The man sported a new pair of knee-high black leather riding boots, incongruous with his rough wool garments and fisherman’s beard.

Before she could point this out to Elöise, their driver – an aged man

whose wrinkled face seemed crushed between an untamed beard and a close-pulled woollen cap – reached down with hard knobbed hands to lift Miss Temple aboard. A moment later Elöise stood beside her, and a moment after that they groped for awkward seats on a pallet of straw, as the driver snapped the reins without a word. The bitter nameless village and its silent people receded from view.

Miss Temple frowned and hissed sharply to her companion, ‘I do not know what they think we have done – were they not paid?’

Elöise glanced at the driver’s back. Miss Temple huffed, quite out of patience. ‘What has *happened*, Elöise? I quite insist you say!’

‘I plan to – but you must know, these people –’

‘Yes yes, the rising river in the forest, I have been told –’

‘Indeed –’

‘People were *killed*.’

Elöise nodded, and spoke carefully. ‘The implication is a wolf. Or wolves, actually –’

‘Which is no reason to glower at *me*.’ Miss Temple looked up at their driver. ‘How *many* wolves?’ she asked waspishly.

‘It depends on how one reads the attacks.’

‘Well, how many attacks were there? Bette mentioned the Jorgens. I saw her washing the bloody linen.’

‘Mr and Mrs Jorgen died two nights ago – or that is when they were *found*. Without the Doctor no one could specify when in fact they died. But before that a fisherman was found in his boat. And before *that* two grooms at the nearest stable.’

Miss Temple snorted. ‘What sort of wolf goes in a *boat*?’

Elöise did not reply, as if, the question having no answer, nothing further might be said. Miss Temple felt no such hesitation. ‘Where is the Doctor? Where is Chang?’

‘I have told you –’

‘You have told me nothing at all!’

‘They have each gone ahead of us.’

‘*Why*?’

‘The roads, for one – they have been ruined by the weather, and, as you

were so very ill, we did not know if you could travel – the last thing one wanted was to be two days out and then stranded without shelter, if *another* storm –’

‘That might perhaps convince me with regard to the Doctor, but never Chang.’

‘No, indeed, Chang departed earlier.’

‘*Why?*’

‘Did you see that Lina has put together a parcel of food? How kind of her.’

Elöise smiled at Miss Temple, mildly but determined. Miss Temple pursed her lips, grudgingly working for a topic that might be safely overheard.

‘This *storm*,’ she offered with patently false interest. ‘One gathers it was *prodigious*.’

‘You did well to sleep through the thing,’ replied Elöise at once. ‘In truth we felt – for it was the very night after we’d come ashore – that all the anger of our enemies was being vented through the heavens – as if the waves were the late Comte’s attempts to dash us to pieces, and the lightning bolts sent down from the dead Contessa’s furious eyes.’

Miss Temple said nothing, aware that the other woman could not have mentioned the Contessa lightly. When she finally replied, her own voice had become distressingly small. ‘The Contessa is certainly dead, then?’

‘Of course she is,’ said Elöise.

‘I did not know you’d found the body.’

‘We did not need to, Celeste. She fell from the airship into the frozen sea. You and I could barely swim in our merest underthings – that woman’s dress would have taken in enough water within one minute to sink her down to hell itself.’

‘It is just that . . . I spoke to her on the roof of the airship – it must have been just before she leapt to the sea . . . her face . . . even then so proud, so uncaring. She haunts me still.’

‘She is dead, Celeste. I promise you.’

Elöise put her arm around Miss Temple’s shoulders and squeezed. Never one to anticipate affection of any kind, Miss Temple did not know what to

do, and so did nothing, looking instead at her salt-cracked boots and the dirty planking. Elöise squeezed again and took her arm away, a trim smile on her lips, as if she were not entirely sure of the gesture either, but then she reconsidered and reached up to smooth the hair from Miss Temple's face.

'I know you feel better,' she said, 'but we are travelling while you would still be best in bed. Lean against my shoulder and I will tell you what I know' – her voice dropped to a whisper – 'and what has taken the Cardinal and the Doctor from our sides.'

'The first night was spent in a fisherman's hut. I do not exaggerate to say the Doctor was hard pressed to keep you alive, while tending to Chang – for the icy sea had done nothing kindly to his lungs – and to myself, for I admit to very nearly drowning. That night the heavens erupted in a storm the likes of which I have never seen – a raging sea, the land awash, trees torn from the earth by the winds. In the morning Chang and the Doctor went for help, and that afternoon, during the briefest break in the tempest, you were moved to Lina's house. You lay there for six days, quite incoherent. It was only on the fourth day that your fever finally broke and the Doctor saw fit to leave.'

'But where was Chang?' Miss Temple burrowed more tightly into the crook of Elöise's arm and allowed her eyes to slip closed.

'The Doctor felt it vital that, once the storm was over, we should get a boat and return to the fallen airship: to collect what remained of the glass books, to find any papers that might tell of our enemies' agents in Macklenburg, and to bring ashore what bodies we could for decent burial.'

Miss Temple's thoughts went to Roger, imagining with dismay what her fiancé must have looked like after two days in the sea. She had seen a drowned sailor once on a beach and remembered – indeed, could never forget – his swollen and shapeless cast, as if submersion had half transformed him to a fish, with only his unseeing eyes and hanging, open mouth showing protest at the horrid injustice done to his body. She imagined Roger's thin, nimble fingers, bobbing bloated and pale in the dark water,

already subject to the gnawing of scavenger fish or industrious crabs. She pictured his softening face –

‘But the airship was gone,’ Elöise went on. ‘Dragged out to sea no doubt by the water-logged balloon. Scraps of canvas washed ashore . . . but that was all.’

‘What’, Miss Temple forced herself to ask, ‘of the . . . bodies?’

‘We saw no sign. But they were inside the craft. They would be carried with it, down below.’

‘And all the glass books?’

‘All of them. And all the Comte’s machines – everything they had brought to conquer Macklenburg.’

Miss Temple exhaled. ‘Then it is truly finished.’

Elöise shifted slightly. ‘And *then* the dead grooms were discovered – horses driven from the stable – and then the poor fisherman in his boat. The local folk have little doubt of the killer – the victims’ throats were all torn out most savagely, and this *is* a land where wolves are *known*. But, after this – after Chang and Doctor Svenson had both taken their leave – the Jorgens were discovered –’

‘But why *did* Chang go?’

Elöise shifted her position to look into Miss Temple’s face. ‘You and I have lived in the city. The villagers who took us in became frightened, in the sober light of day, by our strange appearance: you and I dressed as if we’d escaped a *seraglio*, and the Doctor a foreign *soldier* – but most of all by the Cardinal – his figure, the scars, the long red coat, the obvious capacity for violence – all of this brought suspicion upon *us* as these deaths began to appear so suddenly, one after another. And of course Chang *is* a killer. Once the villagers began to whisper amongst themselves – once there were *deaths* – well, Doctor Svenson –’

‘And where is *he*? If he went to make sure of the road, why did he not *return*?’

‘I do not know.’ Elöise’s voice sounded hollow. ‘The Doctor left the day before yesterday. We . . . I am ashamed to say we quarrelled. I am a fool. In any event I knew that I must stay with you, and that the two of us must leave as soon as you were fit. That we were to meet them –’

‘Where?’

‘My family has a cottage, outside the city. It will be safe, and a peaceful place for you to get your strength.’

Miss Temple was silent. None of this made a bit of sense, from the wolves to the feeble excuses given for her own abandonment. Did Elöise think her so credulous, or was Elöise still speaking for the driver to hear? Surely *she* did not believe such nonsense . . .

Miss Temple cleared her throat. ‘Will you and Doctor Svenson be married?’ she asked.

Elöise stiffened beside her. ‘I beg your pardon?’

‘I merely wondered.’

‘I – I’m sure I have not given it a thought – we have been too busy seeing to you, haven’t we? And, my goodness, it feels we have not exchanged ten words of friendly conversation.’

‘You seemed quite disposed to one another.’

‘I barely know him, truly.’

‘When you were captured by the Comte, and taken away by Francis Xonck – at Harschmort House – the Doctor was especially keen that we save you.’

‘He is a kindly man.’

‘Why did you quarrel?’

‘I’m sure I do not remember.’

‘Perhaps you prefer Cardinal Chang,’ wondered Miss Temple, her voice airy and musing. ‘He is more . . . dangerous . . .’

‘I have had enough of danger,’ replied Elöise, with a touch of tartness. ‘Though I owe the Cardinal my life –’

‘What do you think of his *eyes*?’ asked Miss Temple.

‘It is a terrible thing,’ Elöise said, after a careful moment. ‘Impossibly cruel.’

Miss Temple recalled seeing Chang’s scars for the first time at the Hotel Boniface, when he removed his glasses to look into the blue glass card Doctor Svenson had found. After several strange glimpses of one another, on trains, across the ballroom of Harschmort, in secret tunnels, the three

had met unexpectedly at Miss Temple's own hotel and, in an even more unlikely turn of events, joined forces. Chang had looked into her eyes upon taking off his glasses, a deliberate mocking challenge to what he assumed was her tender, ladylike sensibility. But Miss Temple had seen such scarring before, in fact quite regularly, on the faces of her own plantation. Yet even so, she had never considered disfigurement as a regular part of her life, for it had never afflicted anyone for whom she cared. She wondered if she could have loved Roger if he had been lacking one hand, and knew in all truth she never would have opened her heart to begin with. But that was the queer thing: she had not purposely opened her heart to Cardinal Chang – or to the Doctor or to Elöise – yet somehow its confines. It was nothing like what Miss Temple had felt upon choosing Roger Bascombe – that *was* a choice, and for a type of life as much as for the man himself, though she had not fully understood it at the time. Of course it was impossible to relate men like Chang or Svenson to any reasonable type of life whatsoever.

She looked up again at the trees, aware that a nagging itch had grown between her legs as her thoughts had wandered. If she had been alone in her room, she might have allowed her hands beneath her petticoats, but with Elöise so near Miss Temple merely pressed her thighs together with a frown. It was the glass book again, the one she had looked into – been swallowed by – in the Contessa's rooms at the St Royale. The book had contained thousands of memories – the lives of courtesans, adventurers, villains of every kind, decadent sensualists, the indulgent and the cruel – together creating a sort of opium den that had trespassed over every border of her own identity, and from which she had wrenched herself free only with the most desperate effort. The problem for Miss Temple was the way the glass books captured memories – insidiously, deliciously, and terrifyingly. Looking into a book caused the viewer to physically experience the memory from the point of view – the *experiential* point of view – of the original source, whether this was a man or woman. It was not as if Miss Temple had merely *read* a lurid account of the goings on at the Venetian *Carnevale*; she now remembered performing the same deeds with her own body. Her mind teemed with false memories so vivid they left her breathless.

She had not spoken of the glass book to anyone. Yet a part of her craved a moment of conversation with the only people who could comprehend the true extent of what she'd undergone – her darkest enemies, the Comte and the Contessa. She felt the warmth of Elöise's arm around her – for Miss Temple was a woman unused to being touched by any person save a maid doing up her corset – and at even this meagre contact unbidden visions began to rise, like smoke from a slow-catching fire, abetted by the jostling cart wheels, until every tingling nerve had grown to glowing. She could help it no more and shut her eyes . . .

Suddenly she was inhabiting a man's body, with such wonderful strength in her arms and in her deliciously thrusting hips . . . then it was the rushing thrill of another girl's greedy tongue between her legs . . . her hands caught the girl's head and raised her up – a smiling kiss and she tasted herself . . . one after another the visions flowed together – Miss Temple's face flushed as red as if her fever had returned – until another kiss, another liquid tongue, became – she realized quite abruptly with horror – the Contessa di Lacquer-Sforza dragging her tongue across Miss Temple's eye with a knowing, angry, sensuous sneer. Miss Temple gasped aloud. That incident had really taken place, in Harschmort House. What did it mean, that Miss Temple's true memories could be entwined so seamlessly with what she remembered from the book, as if such a distinction was a boundary for the weak, or no real boundary at all? If she could not keep her own life apart from and what she had consumed from the lives of others, how could she retain who she was? She sat up at once.

'Celeste?' asked Elöise. 'Are you all right? Are you too cold?'

'I am fine,' said Miss Temple. She dabbed a pearling of sweat from her upper lip. 'Perhaps there is something to eat?'

Lina had packed cold mutton, hard cheese, and some loaves of country bread. Miss Temple unhappily chewed a mouthful of meat while gazing about her. The woods had continued to deepen.

'Where exactly are we?' she asked Elöise.

'Heading south. Beyond that I cannot say – past the forest there are apparently hills. On the other side of *them* we may have hope of a train.'

'The road seems perfectly fine,' Miss Temple observed.

'It does.'

Miss Temple watched Elöise closely until the woman met her gaze. Miss Temple made a point of speaking loudly.

'This forest . . . is this where the people were killed?'

'I've no idea,' said Elöise.

'I would think it must be.'

'It is entirely possible –'

'Did you not go there?'

'Of course not, Celeste. The clothing was brought to me – Lina knew what we needed –'

'So no one has seen the Jorgens' cabin?'

'Of course people have *seen* it – the villagers who *found* them –'

'But that is not the same at all,' cried Miss Temple. She called to the driver in her firmest voice, 'Sir, we will require you to take us to the cabin of Mr and Mrs Jorgens. It is most urgent.'

The man pulled his horse to a stop and turned. He glanced once at Miss Temple but then settled on Elöise as the person in charge.

Miss Temple sighed and spoke in the most patient tone she could muster. 'It is necessary we visit the cabin of Mr and Mrs Jorgens. As you can see, I am wearing the poor woman's dress. It is incumbent upon me – for *religious* reasons, you understand – to pay my respects to her memory. If I do not, it is impossible that I shall sleep soundly *ever again*.'

The man looked again at Elöise. Then he turned and snapped the reins.

Miss Temple took another bite of mutton, for she was extremely hungry still.

It was perhaps twenty more minutes until he stopped the cart and pointed to their left. Through the trees Miss Temple saw a winding path washed away in more than one spot, like a pencilled line incompletely marred by the jagged pass of a gum eraser. She scrambled from the cart without assistance and then gave a hand to Elöise, whose expression was far reflecting from her own excitement.

‘We will not be long,’ Elöise called to their driver. ‘It is just – just along that path?’

He nodded – Miss Temple wondered if the man possessed a tongue – and pointed. Miss Temple took her companion’s hand and pulled her away.

The washed-out sections were moist and required careful steps to avoid thick mud, but in minutes they were out of sight of the cart, even though Elöise kept glancing back worriedly.

‘He will not leave us,’ Miss Temple finally said.

‘I’m glad you think so,’ answered Elöise.

‘Of course he won’t. He has not been fully paid.’

‘But he has.’

‘*You* think he has – but *he* surely plans to charge us that much more again once we are stranded with him in the hills.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘Because I am used to people wanting money – it is the dullest of things. But now we can speak – and *look*, Elöise . . . there it is!’

The cabin was small, and nestled comfortably between the trees on one side and a lush meadow. All around them Miss Temple could see the flotsam left from the flooding rain and its recession. The air was tinged with a certain whiff of corruption, of river mud churned and spread like a stinking condiment amidst the grasses and the trees.

‘I’m sure I don’t know what you hope to find,’ said Elöise.

‘I do not either,’ replied Miss Temple, ‘but I do know I have never seen a wolf in a boat. And now we can speak freely – I mean, honestly – *wolves!*’

‘I do not know what you would like me to say o’

Miss Temple snorted. ‘Elöise, are our enemies dead or not?’

‘I have told you. I believe they are dead.’

‘Then who has done *this* killing?’

‘I do not know. The Doctor and Chang –’

‘Where are they? Truthfully now – why did they leave?’

‘I have *been* truthful, Celeste.’

Miss Temple stared at her. Elöise said nothing. Miss Temple wavered between dismay, mistrust, and condescension. As this last came most easily

to her nature, she allowed herself an inner sneer. ‘Still, as we are *here*, it seems perfectly irresponsible not to investigate.’

Elöise pursed her lips together, and then gestured about them at the ground. ‘You see the many bootprints – the village people collecting the bodies. There is no hope of finding the sign of an animal’s paw; nor of disproving such signs were here.’

‘I agree completely,’ said Miss Temple, but then she stopped, cocking her head. To the side of the cabin steps, pressed into the soft earth, was the print of a horse’s shoe – as if the horse had been tethered near the door. Miss Temple leant closer but found no more. What she did find, on the steps themselves, was one muddy boot print, followed by a thin, trailing line.

‘What is that?’ she asked Elöise.

Elöise frowned. ‘It is a horseman’s *spur*.’

For all her bravado, Miss Temple found herself taking a deep breath when she opened the cabin door – slowly, and with as little sound as possible – and wishing she’d some kind of weapon. The interior was as simple as the outside promised: one room with a cold stove, a table and workbench, and a bed – plain and small, yet large enough to hold a marriage. Beyond the bed was an aching little cot, and beyond this Miss Temple saw the trunk where her dress had undoubtedly been kept. She felt Elöise behind her, and the two stepped fully into the room, amidst the trappings of dead lives.

‘I’m sure the others have . . . have cleaned,’ said Elöise, her voice dropping to a whisper.

Miss Temple turned back to the door, to the hinges and the handle. ‘Do you see scratch marks? Or anything that would suggest a forceful entry?’

Elöise shook her head. ‘Perhaps Mr Jorgens opened the door himself upon hearing a noise – they apparently had dogs, and if there was barking –’

‘They were killed in bed – I saw the bedding, quite covered in blood.’

‘But that could be only one of them – when the other had opened the door, allowing the animal inside.’

Miss Temple nodded. ‘Then perhaps there are signs of violence in the door’s *vicinity* . . .’

‘Celeste,’ began Elöise, but then stopped, sighed, and started to look as well.

But there was nothing – no scratches, no blood, no sign at all. Miss Temple crossed to the bed – at least someone had been killed *there*.

‘Can you search the stove, in case anything untoward has been burnt?’

‘Such as what?’

‘I’m sure I do not *know*, Elöise, but I speak from experience. When the Doctor, Cardinal Chang, and I searched the workroom of the Comte d’Orkancz – we knew the Comte had been keeping a woman there who had been injured by contact with the blue glass – I located a remnant of the woman’s dress, which proved a helpful clue.’

Elöise took all this with a tolerant sigh and set to clanging about with a poker. Miss Temple pulled back the bed’s patchwork quilt. The mattress below was marked with rust-brown stains, from a liquid that had soaked through the absent sheets. The marks were heaviest near one end of the bed – the head, she assumed – but they had spread across its width in a series of lines and whorls.

‘There is nothing here but ash,’ muttered Elöise, setting down the poker and wiping her hands with a grimace.

‘I believe both husband and wife were in the bed,’ said Miss Temple. ‘If the Doctor were here, he might confirm it – but the stains suggest two occupants. Of course, we have no idea where the bodies were found –’

‘With their throats torn out,’ said Elöise, ‘the blood would be prodigious.’

‘Where was the child?’

‘What child?’

‘There is her cot,’ said Miss Temple. ‘Surely you would have been told –’

Elöise sighed. ‘After a certain point it was simpler not to mix with the villagers at all. Perhaps there is an orphan. Lina never said.’

‘But was she *here*?’ asked Miss Temple. ‘Did she see it?’

‘Of course she wasn’t,’ said Elöise. ‘Any wolf would have killed a child as well.’

Miss Temple did not reply. She stepped past the bed to the small cabin’s only window. It was latched, but she could see, fine as the tip of a needle drawn across the worn wood, a tiny scratch. Something sharp had been

driven between the frame and the pane. Miss Temple slipped the latch and pulled the window open, only to have it stick half-way.

‘The wood has warped,’ said Elöise, pointing to an imperfection in the upper frame.

Miss Temple leant forward and looked out the window to the ground, some five feet below. Who could say what climbing or jumping might be possible? She was about to shove it closed when her eye caught something flicked by the wind. At first it seemed a shred of cobweb, but when she reached out to take it she saw it was a hair. She plucked it from the splinter where it had snagged. A very black hair, and some two feet long.



If there was anything else to find in the cabin, it escaped them. Retracing their steps across the moist forest floor, Miss Temple glanced up at Elöise, who walked ahead. The one black hair was wound in a loop and stuffed into the pocket of her dress – Miss Temple’s dress had no pockets (not that she normally sought pockets; it was why one carried a bag or walked with servants). Elöise’s hand persisted in absently plucking at it as they went, as if her mind wrestled with the truth behind their discovery.

Miss Temple took the moment to study Elöise – for she had not before in all their time together taken any particular time to examine the woman, involved as they had been with fires and killings and airships. The tutor’s brown hair was piled sensibly behind her head and held in place with small black pins. To her sudden surprise Miss Temple noticed within Elöise’s hair one thin strand of grey, and then upon searching two or three more. Exactly how old was she? To Miss Temple the very idea of a grey hair was outlandish, but she accepted that time did grind all before it (if not in equal measure) and became curious about how such a thing felt. Such projection of interest, if not sympathy, drew Miss Temple’s eyes down Elöise’s body, where she found herself satisfied by the woman’s practical carriage, her slim but sturdy shoulders, and her ability to walk without whingeing over muddy and rough terrain. Of course, she knew Elöise had been married, and that married life expanded a woman’s experience in a way that left Miss Temple morally ambivalent. On the one hand, experience tended to improve a person by removing illusions – and at the least giving them more to speak of at the table – but, on the other, there was so often in married women a certain vein of mitigation, of knowledge that served to reduce rather than expand their thoughts. She suddenly wondered if Elöise had children. Had she *ever* had children? Had they possibly *died*?

With a sudden urge, for she had no vocabulary to express the deep unsettled thoughts behind such questions, Miss Temple stepped up her pace and took Elöise’s restless hand in hers. ‘We must be careful,’ she said, looking down at her boots and away from the surprise on her companion’s face. ‘Never having been acquainted with the late Mrs Jorgens, it is strictly possible the hair is hers . . .’

Elöise nodded. Miss Temple took a breath and went on. ‘But I have a

memory, from the airship, that the Contessa carry – well, a vicious sort of spike upon one hand – and you see, it is how they have described the wolves – the woman’s throat *torn out*’ – Miss Temple’s voice went hoarse, to her great frustration – ‘with such *slashes*. I simply cannot forget poor Caroline Stearne’s forlorn face above the wound . . . any more than I could forget the Contessa’s *smile*.’

Elöise squeezed Miss Temple’s hand. ‘There is our cart, Celeste. You were correct, our man has waited.’

Miss Temple looked back to the cabin. ‘We are fools,’ she said. ‘I am sure we might have availed ourselves of some weapons from the house –’

‘Not to worry,’ whispered Elöise. For the first time Miss Temple noticed the tight bundle in the woman’s other hand. ‘I have borrowed a pair of Mr Jorgens’s knives.’

It was another hour before the trees began to thin and one more after that before the land changed to brown and tangled meadows, full of stones and rising gently to a line of hills whose rocky tops looked as if they had been blackened by a flame.

Through some of this Miss Temple had managed to sleep, and she woke, blinking, surprised by the flat open light around her, now that the trees had gone. The cart had stopped, and she saw their driver walking into the grass to relieve himself.

‘Do you know where we will rest tonight?’ she asked Elöise, who had used the man’s absence to unroll the cloth she’d taken from the cabin.

‘I was told it is an inn,’ she replied. ‘A mining town within the hills.’

She looked up to see Miss Temple’s attention on the knives. One was three inches long and perhaps one fat inch across, razor sharp on one side and dull on the other, with the blade curving quite as much as a Turk’s scimitar.

‘Might it be for *skinning*?’ offered Miss Temple.

The other knife was slightly longer, stabbing to a needle-sharp point, with a heavier blade than its length would seem to warrant.

‘I would hazard it serves to strip meat from a bone,’ answered Elöise. ‘Mr Jorgens may have been a hunter.’

‘I have no pockets,’ Miss Temple announced crisply, and reached for the longer, straighter blade, ‘but this will slip easily in my boot.’ She glanced once at their returning driver, then settled the weapon neatly alongside her right instep.

Elöise palmed the other and balled up the cloth as the cart shifted, their driver swinging himself into his seat. He peered at them with the sour expression of a man unjustly burdened, spat a brackish jet of tobacco juice, and snapped the reins.

Feeling after another rest nearly her peremptory, impatient self, Miss Temple nevertheless did not speak of the matters most pressing to her mind. Instead, Miss plied her companion with the polite questions there had never been time to ask before – where her people were from, her preferred blend of tea, favourite fruit, and colour of sealing wax. This lead naturally enough to Elöise describing her life as tutor to the Trapping children. She spoke not at all of the Trappings themselves, or of the two Xonck brothers (Mrs Trapping’s powerful siblings – the elder, Henry, as mighty and distant as the younger, Francis, was cunning and wicked), as if Elöise’s position in life had no relation whatsoever to the adventures that had swept her up like a rising tide, in the past weeks, or of any urgent questions that might still face them.

As a lady of property, Miss Temple had been well trained for conversation about family and social ritual (for amongst her social peers, such talk was a currency vital as gold coin), and so she nodded and smiled in turn as Elöise described in suffocating detail the parkland cottage of her uncle, with its stone wall lined with yellow rose bushes that had been tended by her mother as a girl. Yet it was ultimately of no use, for Miss Temple’s tender mind, like a mill trembling with the motion of turbines and wheels, simply contended with too many forces to permit distraction.

Elöise had just confessed her love for the opera, despite the difficulty of securing tickets, and was offering an account of a particular favourite from some seasons ago, *Les Jardins Glacés*, an apparently wandering adventure from the mountains of deepest China. Upon reaching a point of pause – where Miss Temple might enquire politely about the music or the scenery

– she instead found the young woman’s grey eyes fixed on the scrub-filled meadows around them.

‘Celeste?’ Elöise ventured, after the silence had taken full root.

Miss Temple looked at her and flicked the corners of her mouth in a smile. ‘I am sorry,’ she said. ‘I had a thought.’

Elöise put away her neglected story of the opera and smiled gamely. ‘What thought?’

‘Actually several thoughts, or several that make one large thought clustered together – like chairs around a table, don’t you know –’

‘I see.’

‘One of those cunning tables one can *extend*.’

‘What thoughts, Celeste?’

‘I was thinking about killing.’

‘*Killing?*’

Miss Temple nodded.

‘I’m sure it is a subject to weigh upon us both,’ began Elöise, with a careful air. ‘We have seen so much of it in so short a time – the killings at Tarr Manor, people hunted through the hallways of Harschmort, the truly savage battle on the rooftop before the airship could fly, and then death after death once we were aloft – and for you an even more difficult and sensitive question, in your unfortunate and foolish and corrupted former fiancé –’

The cautious deliberacy of her words was mortifying. Miss Temple waved her hands. ‘No no – it is not that at all! I am occupied with our *present* business. We are miles away, and it is all my mind can hold – certainly there is no room there for a wolf! If we are to help the Doctor and Chang, who must have become caught up in these same events –’

‘But these recent deaths,’ protested Elöise, ‘we know very little –’

‘We can extrapolate!’ cried Miss Temple. ‘We are not fools. If one has studied dogs, one then knows how to lead a pack of hounds. If we assume the three incidents are part of one tale –’

‘What three incidents?’

Miss Temple huffed with exasperation. ‘In the fishing village! The grooms killed in the stable, the fisherman dead in his boat, the Jorgens in their cabin. By stitching them together we will see whether the resulting narrative

reveals the raw hunger of a beast or the calculated actions of a villain. We can *then* determine where *next* –’

‘How can we? Not having witnessed the incidents – not having seen the stable or the boat, not knowing how the bodies were disposed –’

‘But you must know! Doctor Svenson must have told you –’

‘But he did *not*.’

‘We at least know in what order the killings occurred, and at what times –’

‘But we *don’t*. We know only when the bodies were *found*, Celeste.’

Miss Temple did not enjoy others referring to her Christian name at whim, and enjoyed it even less as punctuation to a thought she was supposed to find self-evident.

‘Then perhaps you will tell me when *that* was, Elöise.’

After a wary glance at their silent driver and another sigh of resignation, Elöise shifted closer to Miss Temple and spoke in a voice barely above a whisper. ‘The two grooms were discovered first, after the storm. The wind was still quite high, but the rains had eased enough for people to leave their homes. Several horses were found roaming free. When they were led back to the stable, the doors were found open, and the grooms dead. The Doctor and Chang were both there. I was tending to you, not that I regret being deprived of the sight.’

‘And some horses are still missing.’

‘Apparently, yes –’

‘And there was a hoofprint at the Jorgens’ cabin – along with the mark of spurs. Did you see the man in the village wearing new boots?’

‘I did not.’

‘*Riding* boots. In a *fishing* village!’

‘With spurs?’

‘No,’ snapped Miss Temple. ‘But that barely matters – such boots are as unlikely in that village as a tiara.’

‘I disagree – they are fishermen, there was a storm – they all increase their living through salvage.’

‘What of the *boat*?’ asked Miss Temple.

‘The fisherman’s boat was found after the grooms. Since a savage animal

was already settled on as the killer, there was only curiosity at how such a beast had managed to come aboard.'

'Did the Doctor venture an opinion, having seen the bodies?'

'Doctor Svenson did not share his opinions with me.'

'Why *not*?'

'You will have to ask *him*, Celeste!'

Miss Temple tossed her hair. 'It is all quite obvious! The Contessa was rescued by the fisherman. Upon landing, he was of no further use to her and she killed him. Then she came across the unfortunate Jorgens. Killing them provided her with new clothing, food, and a place to warm herself. Thus restored, she finally proceeded to the stable, where she killed the grooms and took a horse, driving the others away to make the attack look like a wolf.'

'That does not explain the hoofprints at the cabin. Or your spurs.'

'I cannot be expected to answer *everything*.'

Elöise was silent, running her tongue against the inside of her teeth, which Miss Temple realized was a sign of the woman's irritation.

'*What*?' snapped Miss Temple.

'It is geography,' answered Elöise. 'You have seen the forest, and where the river runs – and the width of its flood during the storm. Believe me when I say it was impassable for at least two days – exactly why the Jorgens were not found sooner. Further, both the fisherman's boat and the livery stable were divided from each other by still *more* flooding. There truly is *no* way, in the given span of days, that a single person, however viciously inclined, might have accomplished all five of these killings.'

'But we found the hair,' Miss Temple said, frowning.

'It could have been Mrs Jorgens.'

'You know it wasn't.' Miss Temple replied coolly. 'Why did you and Doctor Svenson quarrel?'

'I should prefer not to speak of it,' replied Elöise.

'Is it related to our peril?'

'It is not.'

Miss Temple flounced her dress across her legs. 'I expect it weighs upon you cruelly,' she observed.

Elöise said nothing.

Miss Temple pulled another hank of dark bread from their second loaf. She was not especially hungry, but gave herself over to an earnest series of bites and swallows, studying the rocky hills. She'd no experience with such landscapes, stones driving up through the earth like some primeval carcass whose flesh had been melted away by a thousand years of rain, the bones blackened with rot but remaining, stiff and unfathomably hard. The soil was gritty and coarse, sustaining only tough, greasy grasses and squat, knotted trees, like sclerotic pensioners bent under the weight of impending death.

Staring into this barren landscape, Miss Temple cast her mind back to the airship. She attempted to recall the fate of each member of the villainous Cabal – it *had* been frenetic. The Contessa had leapt – unseen by anyone – from the dirigible's roof into the freezing sea. Francis Xonck and Roger Bascombe had been shot, the Comte d'Orkancz shot *and* stabbed, the Prince of Macklenburg horribly killed, and of course poor Lydia Vandaariff . . . Miss Temple closed her eyes and shook her head to dispel the image of the blonde girl's head splitting off from her body even as the crack of stiffening blood echoed out from her mouth. The airship had become a tomb of icy water as the cabin filled – she herself had seen the sodden corpse of Caroline Stearne, murdered by the Contessa, bobbing against the rooftop hatch – but if no one had survived, or no one aside from the Contessa, then how could she explain identical murders on the shore?

Miss Temple sighed again. Was this not a good thing? Was it not better the hair had belonged to Mrs Jorgens, and the plague of wolves exactly that? Was it simply that she could not trust such luck, or was it that the absence of further intrigue forced her to face her recent actions in a more sober light? It was all well and good to have killed in the heat of battle, but what of life afterwards? And could she truly convince herself that Roger Bascombe had been shot in battle? Certainly her fiancé had been angry, even perhaps dangerous – but she had been *armed*. Why had she not simply left him there alone, locked into a wardrobe? Miss Temple took another bite of bread, swallowing it with difficulty, her throat gone dry. The airship had been sinking – would she have allowed Roger to drown? Would drown-

ing have been any less a murder? She saw no way past what she had done, apart from wishing – and then taking it back at once – that Chang or Svenson had taken Roger’s life instead. The task had been hers – to kill him or set him free.

And could she not have done that? Did not her entire adventure prove how little Roger Bascombe had come to matter? Could he not have lived? Why had she pulled the trigger?

Miss Temple had no answer it did not hurt to think on.

The sun had set by the time their cart entered the tiny town of Karthe, a stretch of low stone huts, and here and there a larger storehouse or barn. The driver had stopped in front of a two-storey wooden structure – wood seeming to Miss Temple to be an expensive commodity, given the total lack of trees – with a hanging painted sign, its image a flaming star passing across a black sky.

‘The inn,’ he muttered. In an uncharacteristic gesture of politeness, the driver climbed from his bench and helped first Elöise and then Miss Temple down from the cart. ‘I will settle the horse. I will stay at the livery, but return to take you to the morning train.’

He paused and turned his slightly damp eyes towards Elöise. ‘As to the price we had discussed –’

Though she had anticipated (and looked forward to smashing) this stratagem for extracting more money from two ostensibly helpless women, Miss Temple barely marked what the man was attempting to say. ‘We must discuss your suggestions between ourselves,’ she announced firmly, stopping the driver’s narrative of desert in its tracks. Immediately she hooked her arm in Elöise’s and pulled the woman a half-turn, so Miss Temple’s mouth was pressed against her ear. ‘It is the perfect opportunity to answer all of our questions! I will ascertain if any village horses have arrived – whether there have been any riders from the north – while *you* locate signs of any unexpected persons here at the inn. Also the Doctor and Chang – we will know they have travelled safely!’

‘But – wait – Celeste, if they have left us – and they *have* – perhaps they have no wish to be found.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ said Miss Temple. ‘I will find you in our room.’

She pressed two coins into Elöise’s hands – having taken a moment during the day to pull off her boot and ascertain their financial state – and then indicated with an extended arm that their driver ought to remount and proceed directly to the stable with her as a passenger. Neither Elöise nor the driver seemed particularly pleased, but neither could they find any persuasive reasons to protest. The driver helped her back into the cart and climbed into his seat. Miss Temple went so far as to wave as her companion receded into the dark.

The stable was as modest as the rest of Karthe, making plain by a meagre number of stalls exactly how few horses were owned in the environs. Miss Temple watched the driver arrange for his nag – an earnest, ageing creature who would certainly prick her heart if allowed to do so, thus her choice to ignore it utterly – before stepping herself into a sharp hagggle with the groom, agreeing to cover the costs for both man and beast as a fair extension of their original bargain. Hoping for more but sensing the steel in her tone, the driver agreed – yet was more than a bit surprised when she followed along as the groom installed the horse and acquainted the man with his place of rest. Miss Temple did so solely intent upon her investigation. It did not occur that she was seeing where the man would lay, perhaps in advance of some later assignation – the idea was too absurd – until the curious glance of the groom to the driver and the driver, somewhat abashed, back to the groom stopped her cold. She reddened with anger and waved brusquely at the stalls.

‘As a livery this seems rather *meagre*,’ she huffed. ‘I suppose you must depend on strangers for your pay – are we your only tenants?’

The groom grinned at what now seemed to be an enquiry about *privacy*.

And it was then, in the midst of her sneering exasperation at the foul minds of men in general, that Miss Temple’s thought was seized from within, overborne for a desperately clotted instant with a swirl of memory from the blue glass book. As ever, these experiences – and her own unnatural participation in them – were in that first moment irresistible. Set off by the

smirking men, the details of the stable dredged into her memories like hooks, catching echoes of straw, horse stalls, leather, sweat, and musk. Miss Temple became in her flashing mind both man and woman – and indeed man and man – as each detail of an assignation caught hold: her ripened lady’s body, bracing shoulders against a wall, pushing her hips back like a stretching cat . . . or feeling, as a boy, the rough imprint of straw on her knees, quivering at the difficult entry of the older boy behind . . . or her own hard, masculine fingers mauling the soft flesh of a farm girl, legs wrapped round his waist, pulling tight inside her, the fervid quickening . . . She bit her lip to draw blood and blinked.

The driver and the groom were staring at her. How much time had passed?

‘I ask, of course, because I will be staying at the inn,’ explained Miss Temple. ‘A lady is often well prepared to know who else may be in residence at such an establishment – whether to expect gentlemen, or figures of trade, or unsavoury adventurers, all of whom must in turn billet their mounts with you.’

The groom opened his mouth, then shut it, his hand floating up to indicate the stalls. For the first time Miss Temple noticed the pallor of the young fellow’s complexion. Was he ill? She cleared her throat importantly, rising up to her toes and peeking into a stall. ‘I see we are not your only tenant, after all – excellent. Are these animals locally owned?’ The horse inside ignored her, snuffing at its feed. ‘Who in a mining town such as this would own a horse?’

‘P-people need to ride,’ stammered the groom.

‘Yes, but who could *afford* one?’ asked Miss Temple.

‘Foremen,’ offered her driver. ‘Or to let out to travellers.’

Miss Temple could not imagine anyone travelling to Karthe for any reason at all. She peeked into the next stall. It was empty but strewn with straw and droppings.

‘This horse is gone,’ she called. ‘Is it let out, as he says, or did it belong to a traveller?’ She turned to face the groom.

‘T-traveller.’

‘And this traveller has *gone*?’

The groom’s stretched throat bobbed nervously as he swallowed. Miss Temple could not prevent her mind, for it was now a trait she associated with grooms in general, from drifting to an image of that bobbling throat slashed wide.

‘One horse or two?’

‘T-two.’ The single word emerged in parts, as if traversing an ill-swallowed bone. What was possibly making the fool so unsettled?

‘And when? When did these *two* travellers leave? And who *were* they? Were they together?’

‘I never saw them.’

‘Why not? Who did?’

‘Willem. The morning boy – but – but he – he –’

‘He *what*?’

‘You should ask the others.’

‘What others?’

‘If anyone’s there.’

‘*Where*?’

‘At the inn.’

The driver laughed lewdly, as if even mentioning the inn was to conjure rooms and assignments. Miss Temple brusquely pushed past both men to the tack room, where the driver was to sleep. The humble room was wholly unremarkable, as was the tattered straw pallet the man would use.

‘A whole silver penny for this?’ Miss Temple scoffed loudly. ‘It is not worth the half!’

‘Beg pardon –’

‘No doubt he is used to no better,’ she sneered. ‘Yet on principle – this pallet, for example –’

With a heave she lifted up one corner, wincing at the dust that rose to her face. Feeling ridiculous – why had she gone further into the stable instead of just walking away? – she flung the pallet from her, flipping it over. Miss Temple looked down, turned back at the now silent groom, and then down again. Seeped into the pallet’s canvas cover was a brilliant blue stain the size of a china saucer.

A further search before the gaping faces of her social inferiors revealed no more than the Jorgens' cabin had disclosed after the single hair. Miss Temple strode back up the darkened lane to the inn, dismissing any suggestion that she be accompanied by either man. What did it mean that the blue stain was positioned on the pallet precisely near a sleeper's head? Or that there were two horses from the north? Could *this* be what the Doctor had discovered – why he had so swiftly followed the Cardinal? But how could the two men have left her – both of them! – with such danger in the village, and only Elöise to protect her – or, as Miss Temple was already refiguring their likely dealings in her busy mind – for *her* to *protect*?

Miss Temple turned at a rustling noise. There was nothing. She looked at the tiny cottages, each showing a chink of light beneath a bolted door or between closely drawn shutters . . . but one, just ahead to her left, showed no light at all, nor did a plumed shadow of smoke rise from its chimney. Miss Temple stared. The door was ajar. Something was wrong in Karthe . . . something had been wrong with the groom . . . she had found the blue stain . . . Miss Temple stepped quickly off the road. The door opened silently at a push and she went in.

She allowed her eyes to penetrate the dark until she located a standing bureau where one might expect to find, and then did, a tallow candle and a match. Shutting the door to hide her house-breaking from any prying eyes in the street, she examined the room with a light in one hand and, after a deft reach to her boot, Mr Jorgens' sharp knife in the other.

The hut differed from the Jorgens' cabin in that it contained at least three rooms, receding one after another in a line, but the size and low ceiling of the first main room was nearly the same, a fact that only accentuated Miss Temple's disquiet upon seeing a bed stripped of its linens, a cold stove, and a large trunk whose lock had been prised open with force. The floor was such a jumble of footprints that no inferences – apart from a lamentable lack of house care – could be made. The trunk was empty. She turned to the various shelves and cupboards. These were also bare. The

only exceptions were the candles to one side of the door, and to the other, on the floor, a wadded ball of cloth. Miss Temple was not at all surprised to find it stained with blood.

The next room was windowless. It was clotted with furniture, chairs and tables and bureaus, stacked all against each other and pressed to each wall, the piles topped with a spinning wheel, wrapped burlap bundles, and heaps of bedding. Either the occupants were leaving Karthe or someone had died.

On the threshold of the final room Miss Temple paused. At her feet lay the crushed stub of a cigarette. She crouched down but could not determine if the unlit edge had been crimped in the Contessa's lacquered holder, or if it had been consumed by Doctor Svenson, again availing himself of that filthy habit.

The last room – and then she really must rejoin Elöise – was as empty of furnishings as the second was full, but its smell – a smell Miss Temple never would forget – remained pungent. It was a stomach-turning mix of burning tar and sulphurous, smoking ore – the smell of indigo clay: the noxious raw mineral the Comte d'Orkancz used to make the blue glass. She'd had a whiff of it the stable pallet, but that was nothing compared to the saturation in the hut: – almost as if someone had been smelting clay, or some hapless citizen of Karthe had fallen victim to the Process – the Cabal's cruel procedure to imprint their authority onto a victim's mind, making the man or woman a willing slave to the dreams of indifferent masters. But this required machinery, and there could be none – it was all back at Harschmort, or under the sea in the sunken airship. She held the candle high and turned slowly – nothing but an empty room with cheap, patterned paper pasted to each wall. Miss Temple crossed to the one window, leaning close to the sill. At first she saw nothing, then suddenly squeaked with shock and dropped the candle to the floor, where it went out, plunging the room into darkness.

She'd seen a face, and stumbled back blind before crouching and scuttling until she reached the wall, the knife held before her. She heard nothing save her own breath, and held her breath only to hear her pounding heart. She waited. The face had been pale, disfigured – no face she felt she

knew by sight, yet exuding in the scarcely remembered instant the baleful malevolence of a ghoul.

She must leave at once.

But she could not do so without one last look at the window. Miss Temple crept to the wall beneath, peered into the darkened doorway, then seized her courage and popped to her feet, staring into the glass. A clouded fluid had been sprayed, dark and clinging, on the glass. It had not been there before. Miss Temple turned and ran.

With a surge of fear she pulled the door open and dashed outside. She looked back at the house, the wide night sky and the open street underscoring how alone she was. The cabin door hung slack and empty, a mocking mouth in the dark.

Her breathless arrival at the inn minutes later did not in any way forestall Miss Temple's fears, nor, stepping into the common room, with its low glowing fire and wooden benches, did she find the hoped for comfort of numbers inside. The room was empty. Miss Temple closed the door behind her and dropped into place a wrought-iron latch.

'Excuse me?' she called, her voice not yet as controlled as she might prefer. There was no answer. The only sound was the popping of embers.

'Elöise?' she called, her tone encouragingly firmer. 'Elöise Dujong?'

But Elöise answered no more than any innkeeper.

Miss Temple stepped towards the kitchen. There she found, again, no person, but the complete trappings of a half-prepared meal: fresh loaves, salted meat, pickled vegetables floating in an earthenware dish.

'Hello?' called Miss Temple.

Past the high wooden table was a door to the sort of yard where one might house chickens or tend a garden or dry laundry on poles – or perhaps store barrels of ale (it being the *only* inn in the village, she guessed that the Flaming Star's ale being good or indifferent did not so much matter). But Miss Temple did not explore further. Instead, she closed the door, slipped its latch into place and returned through the common room to stand at the base of a stairway.

‘Elöise?’ she called.

There was a glowing lantern somewhere above, but not in view, as the stairway turned back at a tiny landing. She climbed up, boots echoing despite her care. At the top of the stairs were three doors. The two to either side were closed. The lantern light came from the middle one, open wide.

On its narrow bed lay the wrapped bundle Lina had prepared that morning, but there was no other sign of Elöise. Miss Temple took up the lantern and returned to the landing. She looked at the two closed doors and weighed – given that the inn seemed empty, and that no light came from beneath either door – what to her mind was a very minor moral choice.

The first room was certainly let out, for there were several leather travel bags – one on the bed and three on the floor, and an odd, long, leather case, as if for a parasol, set into the corner. The bags were lashed tightly, however, and, aside from a chipped white dish smeared with ash, she saw no sign of a particular occupant.

The third room had no occupant at all, for the bed was stripped of blankets. Miss Temple sniffed for the slightest whiff of indigo clay, but she perceived only a problem with mice under the floorboards. She dropped to a crouch to look under the bed. Directly before her lay a slender book. She picked it up. The book’s cover of pale white pasteboard – *Persephone: Poetic Fragments* (translated by a Mr Lynch) – was finger-smeared with long-dried blood.

She recalled their first meeting, on the train – a man reading such a volume, a straight razor open on the seat beside. The book was Chang’s.

Below her someone rattled the inn’s front door. Miss Temple leapt out of the empty room, hurriedly set the lantern and the book back next to Lina’s bundle, and ran down the stairs. As she dashed into the common room, wondering who could be at the door and whether running to them so openly was a very stupid thing, a woman emerged from the kitchen, wiping her hands on an apron.

‘You must be the other young lady.’ The woman smiled tolerantly as she crossed to unlatch the door. ‘I was told you’d arrive.’

Before Miss Temple could say a word – or even fully form the question as to where the woman had been hidden – Elöise Dujong burst in from the street, followed by two men. She rushed to Miss Temple and clasped hold of her hands.

‘O Celeste – there you are!’ Elöise turned back to the men with a relieved smile. ‘You see – she is no figure of my imagination!’

‘I had begun to think it, I confess,’ chuckled the elder of the two, a tall, broad fellow with black hair that curled about his ears. He wore a thick travelling cloak that covered his body, down to a pair of black leather riding boots.

‘This is Mr Olsteen,’ said Elöise, extending her hand, ‘a fellow guest at the Flaming Star who quite nobly agreed to walk with me!’

‘Can’t have a lady alone in the street.’ Olsteen chuckled again. ‘Not with everything I hear about these mountains.’

‘And this is Franck.’ The second man was shorter than Olsteen and young, with rough, sullen eyes. His hands – which the fellow persisted in squeezing into fists – were unpleasantly callused. ‘Franck is Mrs Daube’s hired man here at the inn – our hostess, whose acquaintance I see you have already made –’

‘I haven’t, actually,’ managed Miss Temple, ignoring the gaze of both men upon her person.

‘We have been searching for you, Celeste,’ continued Elöise, as though this was not perfectly obvious. ‘Apparently some of the regrettable events from further north have anticipated our arrival. When you did not return at once, I became worried.’

‘We walked all the way to the stables,’ said Olsteen. ‘But they said you had already gone.’

‘And yet we did not pass in the street,’ observed Miss Temple innocently. ‘How very queer.’

‘Mr Olsteen is one of a party of hunters just back from the mountains. And both Mrs Daube and Franck informed me –’

‘Of the deaths, I expect,’ said Miss Temple, turning to their hostess. ‘The wretched occupants of that particular squat cottage – across the road and some twenty yards along? Quite recent, I should think – and one can only guess how horrid.’

To this no one replied.

‘Because it had no *lights*,’ Miss Temple went on, ‘nor smoke from the chimney – alone of the entirety of Karthe. Thus one draws *conclusions*. But, tell me, how many were killed – and, if I might be so pressing, *who* were they? And killed by *whom*?’

‘A boy, Willem,’ said Franck, ‘and his poor father –’

‘Not young Willem,’ Miss Temple asked with sympathy, ‘the morning boy at the stables?’

‘How did you know that?’ asked Franck.

‘She just come from the stables,’ said Olsteen with a shrewd smile. ‘No doubt this Willem’s death was all the other lad could speak of.’

‘You are correct, sir.’ Miss Temple nodded severely. ‘People will peck at another person’s tragedy like daws at a mislaid seed cake.’

Elöise reached out for Miss Temple’s hand. ‘But the groom did not say who had *done* the murders,’ added Miss Temple, a touch too hopefully.

‘I shouldn’t expect he did,’ said Mrs Daube.

‘Shall we retire for a moment to our room?’ Elöise asked Miss Temple.

‘Of course.’ Miss Temple smiled at Olsteen and Franck. ‘I am obliged to both of you for your kindness, however unnecessary.’

Elöise dipped her knee to Mr Olsteen, gently turned Miss Temple towards the stairs, and then respectfully addressed their hostess. ‘Mrs Daube, if it would be no trouble for us to dine in some twenty minutes?’

‘Of course not, my dear,’ answered the innkeeper evenly. ‘I shall just be carving the joint.’

The women sat side by side on their bed, door latched, whispering closely.

‘It is *Chang’s*,’ exclaimed Miss Temple, holding out the blood-stained book. ‘I found it in the other room.’

‘I’m sure it must be. And *here* . . .’ Elöise dug in the pocket of her dress, and came out with a small smooth purple stone, and a cigarette butt. She

snatched the stone away with her other hand and held out the cigarette butt to Miss Temple. ‘. . . is evidence of Doctor Svenson.’

Miss Temple studied the butt end without success for any sign of crimping.

‘Are you sure it must be his?’

‘It was crushed to the floor just *here*.’

‘But perhaps Mr Olsteen or one of his fellows – may they not have been in this very room?’

‘As I’m certain many men read poetry.’

Miss Temple did not see the comparison at all. ‘I have seen Chang with this very book,’ she explained. ‘The consumption of tobacco is as common as cholera in Venice.’

‘Doctor Svenson purchased a quantity of Danish cigarettes from a fisherman,’ answered Elöise. ‘You will see the maker’s mark.’

She turned the foul thing in her hand until Miss Temple could indeed discern a small gold-inked bird.

‘Well, then,’ Miss Temple said, ‘perhaps it tells us more. I found another such *remnant* – though I do not know if it bore this mark – in the abandoned house I examined on my way back from the livery. If the Doctor had *also* been inside it –’

‘You went into an abandoned house? Alone? In the midst of these *murders*?’

‘I did not know I was in the midst of *anything*,’ began Miss Temple.

‘And you just brazenly lied to us all downstairs!’

‘What *ought* I to have said? I do not know those people, I do not know what involvement they might have had –’

‘Involvement?’ cried Elöise. ‘Why should they have any *involvement* – they were trying to help you!’

‘But why?’

‘Kindness, Celeste! Plain decency –’

‘O Elöise! The hair, the bootprints – and now there have been murders *here*! That empty house belonged to these most recent victims –’

Elöise threw the cigarette butt to the floor. ‘We went looking for you, Celeste – as soon as I learnt what had happened, we went the length of the

road to the stables! We should have seen you on our way! But you had vanished! I was quite disturbed and frightened!’

‘Oh, you had your burly fellows,’ said Miss Temple.

‘I was frightened for *you!*’

‘But I have discovered –’

‘We have discovered we are in great danger! We have discovered the Doctor and Cardinal were both here – but we do not know if they *survived* to leave!’

It was not a thought that had occurred to Miss Temple. So happy had she been to find Chang’s book that the notion of its somehow being a token of his *peril* seemed too cruel a contradiction. It was then, looking up at Elöise – whose gaze had fallen to the cigarette stub – that Miss Temple noticed the tears brimming about the woman’s eyes. She saw in an instant that Elöise was right, that anything could have happened, that Chang and Svenson could have been killed.

‘No no,’ she began with a dutiful cheer. ‘I’m sure our friends are quite safe –’

But Elöise cried out sharply, even as twin lines of tears broke forth down her cheeks. ‘Who are you to know anything, Celeste Temple? You are a wilful thing who has been happily asleep these past cruel days – who has money and confident ease, who has been rescued from your brazen presumption time and again by these very men who may now be dead – or who knows where? Who I have watched over, night after night, by me, only to have you abandon me at every adventuresome whim that pops into your spoilt-brat’s brain!’

Miss Temple’s first impulse was to slap the other woman’s face hard, but she was so taken aback by this outburst that her only response was a certain cold loathing. It settled behind her grey eyes and imbued their formerly eager expression with the watchful, heartless gaze of an ambivalent cat.

Just as immediately Elöise placed a hand over her mouth, her eyes wide.

‘O Celeste, I am sorry – I did not mean it – forgive me –’

But Miss Temple had heard such words before, throughout the whole of her life – from her imperious father to the lowest kitchen maid; often

divided the persons she knew into those who had voiced – or, she suspected harboured – such criticisms and those, like Chang, Svenson, and up to this very instant Elöise, who had not. She was routinely obliged to retain regular contact with those in the former category, but future dealings were irrevocably changed – and, as she stared coolly at Mrs Dujong, Miss Temple ignored what a less forceful person might have recognized as evident regret on the woman's face. Instead, taking care and interest as things once more to bury fully within her own heart, Miss Temple shifted her attention, as if it were a heavy case on a train platform, to the very real and pressing tasks at hand, next to which any *intimate* misunderstandings must be insignificant.

‘We shall not speak of it,’ she said quietly.

‘No, no, it was horrid, I am so sorry’ – here Elöise stifled an actual, presumptuous sob – ‘I am merely frightened! And after my quarrel with the Doctor, our foolish, foolish quarrel –’

‘It is surely no matter to me either way.’ Miss Temple took the opportunity to rise and straighten her dress, stepping deftly beyond the reach of any guilt-driven comforting hand. ‘My only concern is to confound and defeat this party of murdering villains, learn who is responsible for these crimes – and discover whether anyone else survived the airship! Lives are at stake – it is imperative we find *answers*, Elöise.’

‘Of course – Celeste.’

‘Which brings me to ask, as it was impossible to do so downstairs, whether in your search you glimpsed any other *figure* in the village streets?’

‘Was there someone we *ought* to have seen?’

Miss Temple shrugged. Elöise was watching her closely, obviously on the point of apologizing once more. Miss Temple smiled as graciously as she could. ‘It is only this morning that I have been from my bed. Suddenly I should like nothing more than to shut my eyes.’

‘Of course. I will tell Mrs Daube that we shall be some minutes more – you must take all the time you like.’

‘That is most kind,’ said Miss Temple. ‘If you would take the lantern with you and close the door.’

As she lay in the dark, facing the pine plank wall, holding Chang's volume of poetry between her hands, Miss Temple told herself that in all truth it was simpler this way – and who knew, perhaps Elöise's quarrel with Doctor Svenson had been similarly impulsive and short-sighted, the outburst of an unreliable, skittish woman who had, quite frankly, always been something of a bother. She took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, feeling a catch in her throat. Nothing was changed – apart from it being that much more important to get back to the city. If she slept on the train, there would be no need for her to speak to Elöise at all, apart from the sorting of tickets – and no reason to visit her family's cottage either. Miss Temple could find a new hotel. Chang and Svenson could seek her out there. If they were alive.

She sighed again, then sat up in an abrupt rustle of petticoats, fumbling for a candle and a match. She did not want to think about Elöise, or the disfigured, corpse-white face in the window, or her visions from the glass book, or the Contessa, or Roger. She didn't want to *think* about anything. Miss Temple looked down at the book in her hand and leant closer to the light.

She was never one for poetry or, if it must be said, reading in particular. It was an activity most often undertaken at the behest of someone else – a governess, a tutor, some relative – and so a source of resentment and disdain. Yet Miss Temple imagined Chang must feel about poetry the same way she felt about maps, maps being the one sort of reading she could happily essay. She opened the book and began to flip the pages, gauging the amount of text per page (not very much) and the number of pages in all (not very many) – an easy sort of read that would have appealed to her impatience save that this sparsity gave off at the same time an unwelcome whiff of pride.

She closed the book, and then, on an impulse, opened both covers at the same time, allowing the pages to open on a random poem. The one that fell to view did so because the binding had been repeatedly doubled back, and the page's corner deliberately folded down to mark its place.

It was composed of but one simple stanza, titled 'Pomegranate':

Six blood-swept seeds, consumed in grief
A dismal realm of fetid torp'rous air
No sky above her for relief
Compacted with damnation, beyond care.

Miss Temple closed the book. She was not against poetry as a rule – the *idea* of its density even appealed to her. Yet to Miss Temple this meant nothing *written* but knotted, sensual experiences she could not imagine bound into mere words – moments too unwieldy, too crammed with what shivered her bare spine: the rage of a September surf, the snarl of her sweet cat upon catching a bird, the smoke of burning cane fields drifting across her morning veranda . . . distilled instants in which she perceived some larger inkling of the hidden world . . . moments that left her feeling both wiser and bereft.

If she concentrated she could of course recall the legend of Persephone, or enough of it to make her sigh with impatience, but she did not know what kidnapping, pomegranates, and so forth meant to Chang. That the binding had been bent and the page folded spoke to the poem's significance in his mind. She did take a certain pleasure at 'blood-swept' and appreciated the hopelessness of a realm lacking a sky, as one supposed an underworld must. But as to the poem's *subject*, a princess taken into the underworld . . . Miss Temple sniffed, supposing it must refer to Chang's courtesan love, Angelique. She pursed her lips to recall the regrettable whore who, like a foolish girl in a fairy tale, had rejected Chang in favour of vain promises from the Comte d'Orkancz – a choice that had led to Angelique's enslavement, disfigurement, and death. Such things of course happened – a great many unwelcome men had cared for Miss Temple any number of times – and yet it seemed that the Cardinal, who was so *able*, ought to have been immune to so common an affliction. And yet, far from spurring a dislike of Chang for this failing, Miss Temple found herself sighing in unexpected sympathy for his pain.

She sighed again, looking into the candle flame. A sensible course would have been to go downstairs, eat a good meal, and then sleep through to the

morning. But her thoughts were still too restless (nor was she especially looking forward to sharing a bed with Elöise). It occurred to her that the other guest, the hunter, Mr Olsteen, must have used a local horse for his hunting. Perhaps he could answer some of the questions she would have put to the murdered groom . . .

Miss Temple tucked the book under the pillow and blew out the candle. She stepped onto the landing and again straightened her dress, wondering if Mrs Daube might be prevailed upon in the morning to curl her hair, a thought that quite unbidden brought a smile to her face. She descended the stairs breathing in the smells of food and a crackling fire, the hardening of her heart so normal a sensation as to be but scarcely noticed.



Miss Temple found Mrs Daube in the kitchen pouring a very dark gravy from a pan on her stove into a small pewter cruet. The innkeeper had set a modest table with two places. But Elöise was not there.

Mrs Daube looked up at Miss Temple, her eyes kind and bright. 'There you are! The other lady said you were resting, but I am sure a hot supper will do you nicely.'

'Where is Mrs Dujong?'

'Is she not by the fire?'

'No.'

'Then I'm sure I don't know. Perhaps she's speaking to Mr Olsteen.'

'Why would she be doing that?' asked Miss Temple.

'Perhaps to apologize for his needless searching for you?' said Mrs Daube with a smile, as she placed bowl of steaming vegetables onto the table, next to a brown loaf dusted with flour.

'Where would she be?' asked Miss Temple. 'They are not upstairs.'

'Will you sit?' asked Mrs Daube. 'It is much better eaten when ready.'

Miss Temple hesitated, both annoyed and relieved at Elöise's absence, but then she considered that time with Mrs Daube was an opportunity of its own. She slipped past with a trim smile to a chair on the table's far side, where she could speak to the innkeeper without turning.

'Here you go.' Mrs Daube set a meagre chop on a heavy Dutch blue plate before her. 'The end of last week's mutton. I make no apologies, for you'll get no better in Karthe. There have been no stores come north these last five days – as if we have not the needs of finer folk. One vexation after *another*. I am not sure I ever got your name.'

'I am Miss Temple.'

'I am poor with names,' said Mrs Daube tartly. 'It is good I am an excellent cook.'

Miss Temple occupied herself with the pewter cruet, the bread, and a wooden bowl of what looked like mashed turnips with some scrapings of nutmeg – a grace note that indeed bettered her opinion of her hostess.

'I believe you have recently seen a friend of Mrs Dujong and myself,' Miss Temple observed, pasting a smear of butter across her slice of bread. 'A rather daunting person, in a red coat and dark glasses?'

Mrs Daube shifted two pots to different places on the stove, making room for an iron kettle. When she looked back to the table, her lips were thinly pressed together. ‘The gentleman, if I may call him such, is not one to slip the mind. Yet he paid for one meal only and went on his way. We barely spoke ten words, and most of those with regard to passing the salt.’

‘Would Mr Olsteen have spoken to him?’

‘Mr Olsteen had not yet returned from the mountains.’

‘What about Franck?’

‘Franck does not speak to guests.’

As if the young man had just been brought back to mind, Mrs Daube turned to a small door to the side of the stove that Miss Temple had not before noticed, draped as it was with a hanging piece of cloth, and shouted like a sailor: ‘*Franck! Supper!*’

No answer came from the hidden room.

‘This bread is delicious,’ said Miss Temple.

‘I’m glad to hear it,’ said Mrs Daube.

‘I am quite fond of bread.’

‘It is hard to go wrong with bread.’

‘Especially bread with jam.’

Mrs Daube felt no need to comment, jam not presently available on the table.

‘And what of our other friend?’ Miss Temple continued.

‘You have a great many friends for someone so far from home.’

‘Doctor Svenson. He must have passed through Karthe at most two days after the Cardinal –’

‘Cardinal? That fellow – all in red, and with those *eyes*? He was no churchman!’

‘No no,’ said Miss Temple, chuckling, ‘but that – in the city – is what everyone *else* calls him. In truth I have no knowledge of his Christian name.’

‘Do Chinamen have Christian names?’

Miss Temple laughed outright. ‘O Mrs Daube, he is no more from China than you or I are black Africans! It is merely a name he has acquired – from the scars across his eyes, you see.’

Miss Temple happily pulled her own eyelids to either side, doing her best to approximate Chang's disfigurement.

'It is unnatural,' declared Mrs Daube.

'Horrid, to be sure – the result of a riding crop, I believe – and it would indeed be difficult to call the Cardinal *handsome*, and yet – for his world is a harsh one – their ferocity speaks to his *capacity*.'

'What world is that?' asked Mrs Daube, her voice a bit more hushed. She had stepped closer, one hand worrying the scuffed edge of the table.

'A world where there are murders,' replied Miss Temple, realizing how much pleasure she took in disturbing her hostess, and that it was all a sort of boasting. 'And people like Cardinal Chang – and Doctor Svenson, and – though I know you will not credit such a thing – myself, have done our best to discover who has been doing the killing. You did meet Doctor Svenson, I know it. Mrs Dujong found one of his crushed cigarettes upstairs – it is *proved* he was here.'

Miss Temple gazed up at the woman – older, taller, stronger, in her own home – with the clear confidence of an inquisitor not to be trifled with. She set down her knife and fork, and indicated the empty chair opposite her. Mrs Daube sank into it with a grudging sniff.

'Karthe does not take to strangers, much less those that walk about looking like the devil himself.'

'How long after Chang arrived did the Doctor –'

'And then came the murders – of course men from the town went looking, even your other friend, the foreign Doctor –'

'He is a surgeon, to be precise, in the Macklenburg Navy. Where is the Doctor *now*?'

'I told you – he joined the party of men to search. I'm sure I don't know what's taken them so long to return.'

'But where did they go – to the train?'

Mrs Daube snorted at this ridiculous suggestion. 'The mountains, of course. Dangerous any time of year, and even more so after winter, when what beasts that have survived are ravenous.'

'Beasts?'

'Wolves, my dear – our hills are full of them.'

Miss Temple was appalled at two such violently complementary thoughts – the missing men and a propensity for wolves – existing so placidly next to one another in the woman’s mind.

‘I beg your pardon, Mrs, Daube, but you seem to be saying that Doctor Svenson left Karthe with a party of men, travelling into the wolf-ridden mountains, and has failed to return. Is no one worried? Surely the missing townsmen have families –’

‘No one tells *me*,’ snapped Mrs Daube sullenly. ‘Merely a poor widow, no one cares for an old woman –’

‘But who *would* know where they went?’

‘Anyone else in Karthe! Even Franck,’ the woman huffed. ‘Not that he’s breathed a word to me, though one would only think – after my generosity –’

‘Did either of you mention this to Mrs Dujong?’

‘How am I expected to know that?’ she snapped, but then grinned with poorly hidden relish. ‘But I can guess how the likes of *him* would enjoy frightening her with stories.’

Miss Temple shut her eyes, imagining how news of the Doctor’s vanishing must have been taken by Elöise.

‘My goodness, yes,’ Mrs Daube went on, ‘ever since the first strangers – and then your man Chang –’

‘Wait – what *first* strangers? Do you mean Mr Olsteen and his fellows – or someone else?’

‘The Flaming Star is extremely popular with travellers of all sorts –’

‘What travellers? From the north, like us?’

‘I’m sure I do not know,’ the woman whispered; ‘that is the very *mystery* of it.’ She leant over the table with a conspiratorial leer that revealed the absence of an upper bicuspid. ‘A boy – the same that died – came running from the livery to say a room would be wanted, the finest we had. But then the fool ran on before we knew for who or how many! Every effort was made, rooms cleaned and food prepared – such expense! – only to have not a single soul appear! And then your man Chang arrived – *not* from the stables, for he had no horse – and the *next* day, before I could switch that

lying horse groom raw, I was told both he and his shiftless father had been *killed!*'

'But . . . you don't actually believe that wolves, driven down from the hills, could have stalked into the streets of this village?'

Mrs Daube, apparently revived for having voiced her pent-up discontent, took it upon herself to dunk a piece of bread into the turnips, and spoke through her chewing. 'It has not happened since my grandmother's time, but such a dreadful thing is *possible*. Indeed, my dear, what ever else but *wolves* could explain it?'

Two minutes later, the sharp knife in her hand, Miss Temple again strode down the main road of Karthe. The air was cold – she could see her breath – and she regretted not having a wrap, impulsively refusing the musty brown cloak offered by Mrs Daube (ingrained as she was to reject any brown garment out of hand). The moon had dropped closer to the shadowed hills, but still shone bright. She felt sure Elöise would have sought the murdered stable boy's hut, and all too soon Miss Temple found herself, unsettled, at its door – no longer hanging open, a sliver of yellow light winking out where it met the ground.

The door was latched from within and would not open. Miss Temple knocked – the noise absurdly loud in the night. There was no answer. She knocked again, and then whispered sharply. 'Elöise! It is Miss Temple.' She sighed. 'It is *Celeste!*'

There was still no answer. She pulled on the handle with no more success than before.

'Mr Olsteen! Franck! I insist that you open this door!'

She was getting chilled. She rapped on the window shutters but could not pry them apart. Miss Temple stalked to a narrow passage that ran between the cottage and the stone wall of its neighbour, straight through to the rear of the house. She swallowed. Was it likely that Elöise had gone instead to the stables? Where were the two men? Had *they* done something to Elöise, luring her to such an isolated place? Or was it someone else in the house entirely? Someone with a corpse-like, ravaged face?

She took another breath and entered the passage, slipping from the moonlight like a ghost, her feet rustling through grass thick with dew, wetting her dress and swatting at her ankles. This wall held no windows, and she heard nothing from inside the house as she went. Miss Temple made sure of her grip on the knife and slowly, like a drop of grudging honey into a cup of tea, leant around the rear corner.

A waft of evening wind nearly smothered her with the fumes of indigo clay.

She swallowed, throat burning and eyes blinking tears, but forced herself to look once more. Behind the cottage was a patch of grass strewn with an odd assortment of wooden hutches – abandoned now but once housing chickens or rabbits – all brightly illuminated by a square of yellow light thrown from the house, from the very window she had peered through in the rearmost room, its frame and glass now fully shattered, as if by a brutal series of kicks. Miss Temple studied the snapped remnants of the panes that dotted the window's edge like a sailor's meagre teeth, and realized they were bent back into the room. The force to smash the window had come from outside.

She crept closer. The window was too high to see through – but there had to be a rear door if there was a yard. She padded past the window and found it behind the hutches, made of hammered-together planking and hanging feebly from a pair of rusted hinges. Her first pull on the handle told her it was held by a chain from within, which made sense – if the door was open, why would anyone kick in the window?

Reasoning that between rattling the chain and calling out for Elöise at the front door she had already alerted anyone inside as to her presence, Miss Temple noisily dragged one of the hutches over to the window, tested its strength gingerly with one foot, and then carefully climbed up. From this height she could just see over the battered sill. On the floor lay Franck, curled away from her on his side. Set down in the centre of the room was a lantern, its bright beams revealing the glittering shards that covered the floor.

More glass still stuck out in brittle needles across the length of the sill – she could not possibly climb through without injuring herself. She exhaled,

happy for a good excuse not to ruin her dress, and then, remembering her first visit, looked down at the centre of the frame. A dark, sticky stain had soaked into the wood. She sniffed at it and was rewarded with the loathsome, mechanical odour of indigo clay. But Miss Temple frowned and sniffed again, shutting her eyes to concentrate . . . salt . . . and iron. She opened her eyes and grimaced. Mixed into the noxious blue fluid was blood.

Miss Temple leapt off the hutch and strode back to the rickety door. With a satisfying thrust she shoved the knife blade between the planking and the frame and tugged upward, catching the chain. She jerked it upwards again, exclaiming with irritation as a sliver of wood caught on her hand, and dislodged the chain from its post. In an instant she stood at the room's threshold, holding her nose with one hand and licking a bead of blood from the other. The man on the floor was quite dead. Glass crunching beneath her boots, Miss Temple moved cautiously into the middle room, stacked with furniture, aware that it afforded ample nooks for concealment and ambush. She did her best to peer underneath, but found her attention taken by details she'd not noticed before – heaped clothing, a box of battered toys, a folded Sunday jacket and shoes. With an uncomfortable swallow she went on to the final room – darkest, being furthest from the lantern – which remained as empty as ever. Though it gave her no pleasure, she returned to the body.

Miss Temple set her knife on the floor, needing both hands to turn Franck, but as his face rolled into view she covered her mouth and wheeled away, fighting nausea. The hired man's features were pale as paste and his eyes stuck despairingly wide, but his plaintive expression was not the source of Miss Temple's horror. Steeling herself, she carefully peeked back, then spun away again, waving the indigo fumes away from her face, a prickling tang of bile in her mouth. Miss Temple had never seen anything like it – Franck's throat was *gone*. She could see the gleaming ridges of his spine.

She forced her eyes away from the wound to the rest of his body, doing her best to imagine how Doctor Svenson would proceed. Were there other scratches or cuts – as there surely must be to credit an animal with the killing? Miss Temple found nothing . . . and then, more than this, she

realized that she was not – as she surely ought to have been – standing in a spreading pool of the poor man’s blood.

In point of fact, there was no blood anywhere. How could that be? Could he have been killed out of doors and then thrown *through* the window? It was possible, but still such a massive wound must flow even then, and there was not a drop that she could see, not even on the fellow’s *shirt*. With trepidation, Miss Temple knelt and extended the knife, using the tip to peel back the dead man’s collar.

In a crease of skin between his battered neck and shoulder was a tiny crust of blue flakes . . . of dark blue glass.

The murder had been done by an insertion of blue glass, freezing the flesh around it without the slightest spray of blood. Then, the killer must have taken the time to prise out – with a knife? with their fingers? – every morsel of flesh that had been alchemically transformed, leaving an appalling wound no one would think to question.

Miss Temple lurched towards the dim front room. But how had Franck come to be here by himself? And what had he seen to make his death necessary? And where were Elöise and Mr Olsteen? Miss Temple had assumed the three to be together – had the others simply fled? Or had Franck come alone? But then where *was* Elöise – in the company of the broad-shouldered huntsman, with whom she seemed far too taken . . .

And how was it that the front door was still latched? Even if Franck *had* been killed outside and then thrown through the window, the window showed no evidence of anyone returning through it *back* to the yard – the glass splinters were proof enough of that. Yet both doors were latched from the inside, indicating that whoever latched them to begin with . . . must still be inside . . .

The noise of a wooden chair scraping against a floorboard pierced her thoughts. She wheeled towards the middle room. The scrape was redoubled as a bureau was pushed – and then the end table that must have been atop it clattered – was thrown! – to the floor, bouncing into view with the shocking force, in the tiny still cottage, of a cavalry charge. Miss Temple screamed. Behind her the table was kicked aside. She heard *footsteps* –

heavy, stomping – tore the latch free and wrenched on the handle as a sickening wave of indigo fumes reached around her shoulders like a pair of clutching hands. The door was open. Miss Temple leapt through it.

The door of the Flaming Star yawned open when she reached it. Something was wrong. Miss Temple burst into the common room, shouting for Mrs Daube, for Elöise, only to receive no answer. She clawed the latch in place on the door and then launched herself up the stairs – snatching Chang’s book from beneath her pillow – no sign of Elöise, but Olsteen’s door was open, and his bags ransacked and scattered across his room. She careered to the kitchen, calling again, her breath coming raw and her head palpably beginning to swim. She was not well. She ought to be in bed with tea, with someone kind in a chair reading ridiculous items from a newspaper as she slipped into sleep. But instead Miss Temple rounded the corner into the kitchen and skidded off balance into the wall as her boot slid through an overturned bowl of turnips. The table lay on its side, the food was strewn everywhere amidst sharp blue-white chips of broken plates and upended dripping pans. The door to the yard hung wide, and Miss Temple rushed to it. Behind her the front door rattled against the vicious kick of what sounded like a plough horse.

Mrs Daube was on her knees in the grass, gasping for air. Strewn all around her, tangled and wet, lay linens and clothing, as if a wilful child had sorted through a week’s worth of laundry, only to toss whatever he did not fancy to the ground.

Miss Temple dug her hand under the innkeeper’s arm, trying to haul her up. ‘Mrs Daube – you are in peril . . .’

The woman did not seem to hear, or even note being moved. She muttered and shook her head, a bead of clear saliva suspended from her lips.

‘Mrs Daube – *this way* – have you seen Mrs Dujong?’

Dragging the innkeeper, Miss Temple kicked through the towards balled-up sheets a gate at the far end of the yard. Another kick roared from inside the inn, and then a third – a savage battering the door could never bear.

‘Mrs Daube! *Please!* Have you seen Elöise? Have you seen Mr Olsteen?’

At last the innkeeper looked up, eyes wide and black, blood at the corner of her mouth. ‘Mr Olsteen?’

‘Do you know where he is?’

‘She – she came back –’

‘Elöise? Where did they go?’

‘She . . .’ Mrs Daube choked with fright, still overtaken by what she must have seen. ‘She – she made me help her – but then Mr Olsteen – *no!*’

This last came at the realization that Miss Temple was dragging her towards the gate – swinging open, another sign of Elöise’s flight. Mrs Daube moaned like a beast, dug in her heels, and fought away from Miss Temple’s grip, only to topple back to her knees, dissolving into tears. Elöise had made Mrs Daube help her how – search through Olsteen’s bags? But why tip the table and scatter the laundry? Had Olsteen caught up with them – had Elöise escaped, with him in pursuit?

Miss Temple spun to the kitchen door with a sudden chill. The kitchen lamp had blown out – the only glow the creeping firelight from the common room. Then this was blotted out by a shadow in the door, thick and impenetrable. With a cry of her own, Miss Temple abandoned the sobbing innkeeper and clawed her way through the gate.

She had not gone fifteen steps before the night was split with a scream from Mrs Daube. Miss Temple sobbed aloud and drove herself on, desperate as a hawk-sought hare. If she could only find Elöise – dear, stupid Elöise – perhaps the two together might defend themselves. Yes, Miss Temple scoffed, with their little *knives*. The bark of her breath fogged in the cold.

The rough dirt path ran to the rear of the other houses of Karthe village, but each was bordered by a stone fence with a heavy gate. By the time she might reach any one and raise the house with shouting, she would be captured. Her gasps were ragged and her body slick with sweat – she would get another fever, she would die, she would trip and snap her ankle like a twig. She looked to the rising hills – could she leave the path and hide in the rocks? No. Such a choice was to abandon Elöise, which Miss Temple could not – perhaps as much in pride as care – allow herself to do.

The path abruptly dropped into a ravine split by a trickling watercourse tumbled with smooth stones. On its other side, flat on the path in the moonlight, lay the broad figure of Mr Olsteen. Miss Temple hurdled the dribbling stream and crept near. Olsteen's throat was whole, but the pulsing stain on his once-white shirt betrayed a wicked puncture near his heart. His eyes caught hers, and his hand slapped towards her, ineffectual and weak. It held the curved skinning knife carried by Elöise Dujong.

'Should have killed you both on sight,' he gasped. A welling of gore spat past his lips, and Olsteen's further words were wetly smothered by blood.

She heard a noise on the opposite bank. To turn was to face whoever hunted her. Fear gripped Miss Temple as fiercely as a hand around her neck. She ran on.

The way abruptly forked – to the right curving back towards the town, to the left winding away through a squat tumble of boulders. She paused, chest heaving, willing herself with a brutal severity to look behind her: she saw nothing. Was she a fool – imagining ghosts? No – no, she swallowed, Mrs Daube's horrid scream still rang in her ears. She forced her tired mind to study the two paths for the slightest sign as to which way Elöise might have gone, knowing she could spare but seconds. The fork to the town led over an open flat meadow; the one to the rocks disappeared almost at once. If Elöise were frightened, she would want to hide. Miss Temple flung herself towards the blackened stones.

Not twenty steps on a flashing stripe across a moonlit boulder caught her eye – a smear of blood, a hand hurriedly wiped clean. She had chosen correctly. Elöise must be running as fast and as fearfully as she herself was now. Perhaps she thought Olsteen was still in pursuit – or had she seen the Contessa? Had Elöise been a witness to Franck's death? What had happened for Olsteen to attack them, Elöise and Mrs Daube? Could Olsteen be in league with the Contessa? Could he have travelled not to the mountains but to the north, leaving his bootprints outside the Jorgens, cabin? But why was he warm and sound at the Flaming Star while his mistress skulked in the shadows? Yet if the man was not the Contessa's ally, why had Elöise taken his life?

The path dropped downhill across a moonlit meadow towards a copse of gnarled trees. Miss Temple's heart leapt at the sight of a woman running across the knee-high grass and into the shadowed wood. She brushed the hair from her eyes, skin damp, shambling on in an exhausted trot. Elöise was running to the train! Appalled at the evident ease with which Elöise had seen fit to abandon her (granting peril, granting fear, but *still*), Miss Temple imagined with disdain the feeble excuses the woman might offer Chang and Svenson to explain her own consignment to death. In the time it took to reach the copse of woods, Miss Temple had fully restored her earlier feelings of outrage, chasing Mrs Dujong as much as anything to fiercely box her ears.

The trees were dark and dense, and she made her way quickly to the other side. Below her yawned another, deeper ravine, split not by a watercourse but by the rail tracks themselves. Miss Temple stumbled to the edge, looking down, and then saw smoke rising into the air around a turn, some hundred yards away. There would be engineers, firemen, a guard – surely enough to forestall the actions of one woman! She craned her head down the tracks and saw Elöise just vanish around the bend, too far away to hear any call. Miss Temple began a hesitant shuffle down the slope. Half-way down, she was compelled by gravity to sit, scooting the rest of the way like a crab. She swatted the dirt from her dress as she jogged alongside the tar-soaked wooden ties.

Miss Temple found herself suddenly taken with another question that had slipped her mind: the smell of the blue fluid on the windowsill. It had without doubt been infused with blood . . . yet that made no sense. From what she had seen in the dirigible and from what she could guess from Franck's body, the blue glass acted in an instant to solidify human blood, and thus the flesh seethed with it, into glass. So how was the blood-tinged liquid on the sill, spat from the mouth of the ghostly face, *still* a liquid? How could the blue fluid, which utterly, utterly stank of indigo clay, be taken inside a body without hardening whatever flesh it touched? If only the Doctor were there! Perhaps this was one more reason he'd gone ahead to warn Chang. Miss Temple fought away a tentative impulse of pity for

the Contessa, for the ghastly, pale face spoke to an unthinkable price paid for survival. Yet the disfigurement of so cruel a seductress could be no cause for sorrow – such ironies of justice were more aptly met with outright glee.

Miss Temple saw the train. Most of the carriages were open and piled high with what must be ore to be taken south for smelting. Miss Temple needed to lie down, to sleep, to bathe, and she kicked at a nearby stone with irritation. She reached the rearmost carriages, hissing aloud.

‘Elöise! Elöise Dujong!’

The woman must have gone on towards the engine, where she would find more protection. Miss Temple sighed – she was not in any state to meet anyone, much less unfamiliar men smothered in coal dust – and followed on.

Near the front of the train was a squat building topped with skeletal scaffolding and a metal chute – whence the ore was poured into the carriages – and next to it a more modest cabin whose windows gleamed with yellow light. Miss Temple padded on, cautious at an eruption of voices, trainmen shouting to each other with sudden urgency. A gang of nine or ten burly fellows in helmets and long coats had gathered around a figure on the ground, directly beneath the loading chute. The figure writhed and moaned as some of his fellows held him down and the others ran about for bandages or water or whisky to ease his pain. She crept forward in the shadow of the train.

‘Elöise?’ she whispered.

The carriage seemed empty, and, with a sudden surge of effort, Miss Temple tossed the book and the knife in before her and jumped up, catching the carriage’s floor just above her waist. She hung for an awkward second before heaving herself inside and crawling inelegantly from view. The trainmen still ringed their fallen fellow – someone knelt over him, tending a wound on his face. Miss Temple ducked from sight, doing her best to still her heaving breath.

She looked down at the book in her hands and on a whim let it fall open, expecting to take comfort at its opening to the same poem. But the book

did not. Instead, to Miss Temple's great dismay, it fell to the *next* page – the reverse side of 'Pomegranate'. How had she not seen! The folded – over page was bent in the opposite direction – it was to mark not *that* poem but the *next*! This poem, 'Lord of Sighs', was even shorter (*two* meagre lines!), leaving more room for Cardinal Chang to write his own words in the open space:

Our enemies live. Leave this inn.
Trust no one. Travel by night. Stay together.
I will wait at noon the Lord's Time.

Outside the carriage a footstep turned the gravel. Miss Temple slipped further from the door into shadow. Was it one of the trainmen? What if the fellow locked the door? Was she prepared to remain on the train for its journey south to the city? What had happened to Elöise? What would *she* say to Svenson and Chang – what feeble excuses? The steps crunched closer, and, curling like an unseen cobra into the chilled air of the carriage, she smelt the first creeping, reeking tendrils of scorched indigo clay.

An unnaturally long shadow stretched across the open doorway, the smell becoming harsh. Miss Temple sank into a crouch behind a barrel, no longer able to see. She realized with a spark of hope that she was in a goods van and that the barrels were full of fish oil, giving out a stench that would hopefully hide her own scent from her pursuer. But would they? The indigo fumes made her head swim, and the sniffing came on, insistent as a bloodhound but broken by hideous swallows and spitting. The reek made Miss Temple's eyes water and her throat clench. The shadow came closer. She felt as if she must faint or cry out.

From the darkness behind her a firm hand fell hard across her mouth and soft lips pressed full against Miss Temple's ear, the words that slipped between them scarcely louder than a sigh. 'Be *still*, Celeste,' breathed the Contessa di Lacquer-Sforza, 'or it will mean the death of us *both*.'