

Chapter 1

“Time is not a flow. It is a maelstrom, exploding outward at the speed of light from every possible point, enabling every conceivable variation of history. These variations occur in timelines, each as ‘real’ as our world.

The Australian Aborigines sensed their existence, calling them ‘songlines’ — as though the gods were singing worlds into being in an infinite and eternal choir. . . ”

— *Lecture 3 to Special Program Eight, Temple of Knowledge*, Alessandra Evans.

On a crisp Fall Wednesday afternoon, seventeen-year-old Kristín Ormsdóttir had no inkling she would become the pivot around which three empires revolved.

She had come home from school.

At the front door, her mother, Viktoria, sobbed and hugged her.

“What is it, mom? What are you doing home?”

“They’re waiting for you, honey.”

“*Who’s* waiting for me?”

“Just go. . . ”

On her indoor crutches, Kristín hobbled into the living room to see her father, Ormur, and a man with a ruddy face and a bushy red mustache whom she recognized as the mayor, Per Holmsson.

Her older brother, Víkingur, leaned against their upright piano.

He was a tall, pale, wiry nineteen-year-old with white hair, electric blue eyes, and large callused hands on sinewy arms that were as strong as steel.

He smiled at Kristín.

Mayor Holmsson sat on the white sofa opposite Viktoria's upright piano, and Ormur occupied the white easy chair. A petite middle-aged woman in a blue dress stood between them. Potted red geraniums contrasted with the room's white walls and off-white wool rug on the floor.

"The woman of the hour!" the mayor exclaimed. "You bring great honor to our humble village — indeed, to our entire nation."

Kristín was at a loss for words.

"You're the only person in Harbor to *complete* the Temple exam," the mayor continued.

"The only one to pass since its inception, three years ago," the strange woman said. "In the *entire world*."

Kristín had spent Saturday and Sunday taking the Temple Exam — three hours in the morning and three in the afternoon for two days.

Twelve hours in all.

It had been the most eccentric exam she'd ever taken — with conventional tests of knowledge interspersed with bizarre and unexpected questions that jarred her soul.

Afterward, she'd even dreamed about them.

"I'm Margret Einarsdóttir, Minister of Education," the strange woman said.

"Her place in the University is guaranteed, then," Kristín's father said. "You'll *love* Reykjavik."

"*Reykjavik*?" Margret said. "She's going to Columbia! The Temple of Knowledge. I know you got a First in English, so you should have no language problems."

"I've read English since I was five," Kristín said.

"She's leaving the country?" Ormur said.

"Of course she is, you twit," Viktoria said. "We may never see her again!"

"Nonsense," the mayor said. "I'm sure she'll write. The Temple Foundation looks after its charges like mother hens. They'll insist on her writing."

"When do I leave?" Kristín said.

"Ah," the mayor sighed. "We'll get to that in a moment. When I was a young man, I visited the Temple of Knowledge, and that experience stayed with me my entire life. The Philosopher's Garden was particularly inspiring. . ."

Four ladies appeared at the door.

"Not yet!" the mayor said.

"Who are they?" Kristín said, nervously twirling her long, silvery white hair around her right index finger.

"They . . . um . . . will help you pack."

"I don't need help!"

"When does she leave?" Ormur said.

"Tomorrow morning," the mayor said. "Six."

"What?" Kristín and her family exclaimed.

"That's out of the question!" Viktoria said. "We need at least a week."

"This is a problem," Margret said. "The Prime Minister didn't want to inform you until certain preparations were finalized. Unfortunately, this left things to the last minute."

"What does the *Prime Minister* have to do with Kristín?" Viktoria said.

"You'll be Iceland's first representative at the Temple and Miskatonic University," the mayor said. "It's a matter of great national pride."

"As a favor to the Temple," Margret said, "Kaiser Johann II is diverting a Berlin to Knickerbocker flight to pick you up in Reykjavik. Two days from now."

"Wait a week and take a steamship," Viktoria said.

"Insulting both the kaiser and the Temple?" Margret said. "Not an auspicious way to start your studies."

"Why don't we wait two days, then?" Viktoria said.

"Reykjavik is four hours away from here," Margret said. "Bad weather or mechanical problems might make you miss your flight. We've arranged hotel accommodations. There are several people at the University who'd like to talk to you."

"I have to go, mom, dad," Kristín said. "It's what I've always wanted."

With her sand-shod outdoor crutches, Kristín walked along an arc of beach, watching water-spirits dancing across the foam.

The beach snored and shuddered like a sleeping dragon.

Every place had a spirit, an essence that revealed itself to her and, as always, this beach radiated primal energy.

The brisk wind whipped her hair, and she brushed it from her steel-blue eyes. Sand stung her face.

Black sand and gravel covered the beach, and jagged black rocks erupted from it like knights defending her land from invaders.

As a child she'd imagined that.

Since she'd been a little girl, she had wanted to leave her village and see cities like London, Paris, Berlin, and Knickerbocker — but had never dreamed her chance would come so abruptly, so without warning.

She thought of the story, *The Blue Fairy's Farewell*, with the lines, "I have granted your wishes, my dear, every single one. It is *you* who have forgotten them."

"You were right, Hekla," she whispered to her dead grandmother. "It has happened."

I could refuse.

Then she remembered times classmates had taunted her about her crutches, tripping her sometimes — and the fights Víkingur had gotten into defending her.

Death-marks had made matters worse.

When she was seven, Kristín had seen one on old Helgi as he left in his boat — and had blurted it out to her playmate, Sigrún.

Pieces of Helgi's boat had washed up on the beach later.

"A *witch* like you should be *burned* or sent to *prison!*" Sigrún had taunted her daily.

Kristín never mentioned death-marks again to anyone again, trying to ignore them, to not see them.

They always told the truth.

Seeing one on Hekla — the day before she had died — had broken her heart.

"You're pale and plain too!" Sigrún had also said. "Your eyes look creepy! Your white hair makes you look like a old witch. No one will ever marry you. You'll marry your books and have booklet-children."

In Harbor, girls who were unmarried at seventeen were considered old maids, and most had children by the age of twenty.

What else was there to do?

Black and white birds skimmed the molten-lead sea.

Storm petrels, Kristín thought — so-named because they could fly and fish during the fiercest storms.

I have to become like them.

At six in the morning, an enormous black Düsseldorf 900 self-stoking limousine awaited Kristín in front of her house.

She'd heard of these.

An automated conveyor belt carried coal from its fuel-trailer into its boiler.

The gray smoke from its stack made her cough.

A dead-fish stench filled the air as sometimes happened when northerly winds blew, and it drizzled.

A seagull glided overhead.

Kristín yawned; she hadn't slept five minutes the previous night.

Her mother, father, and Víkingur, hugged her as the stone-faced chauffeur loaded her suitcases into the luggage compartment.

Tears lined Víkingur's eyes.

She'd never seen him cry before; he hadn't even cried when a large fish hook had impaled his right hand, and Dr. Wilson had had to perform emergency surgery.

"You got your ticket out of here, sis," he said. "Knock em dead!"

When the time came, she stowed her crutches next to Margret in the the limousine's cavernous passenger area and climbed in.

She watched through the car's back window.

All the people she loved in the world grew small and distant as it carried her away, past Harbor's barren black cliffs and low tan buildings, past the stinking Holmsson Fish Cannery, past the geothermal plant belching steam, past her red brick school where her parents taught — away from her childhood and toward a dark and uncanny future.

She numbly shut her eyes and tried to ignore Margret.

Sobbing, she drifted off to sleep.

"Time to wake up, honey," Margret said, tapping her shoulder.

"Will you require assistance, Madame?" the chauffeur said.

"No," Kristín yawned, shaking off a vague dream about an odd woman who lectured her about telepathy.

The limousine stood before wide glass doors flanked by polished brass lanterns. The marquee over the doors proclaimed the place to be the Reykjavik Imperial Hotel.

"Your bags have been placed in your suite, Madame," he said.

Kristín gathered her crutches and hobbled into the hotel lobby.

She almost tripped as her feet and crutches caught in the thick carpet with its Fleur-de-Lis pattern over a dark blue background.

"You're probably hungry. Feel free to have lunch at the Gustatorium and charge it to your room. Number 600."

"OK."

"I'll pick you up for dinner at six, if that's OK with you," Margret said.

She nodded.

Kristín yawned and wandered around the lobby, passing an odd store called *The Stylish Filly's Attire Shoppy* in English. The sign proclaimed it to be a branch of Knickerbocker City's *The Elegant Pony*.

The twenty-something saleslady held a tiny blue and yellow box that played popular music.

What is that thing?

Past *The Sylish Filly* she found a bookstore and newsstand where she bought *A concise history of Columbia*.

She found a place called *Cafe Italia* that served coffee and pastries.

“What a depraved breakfast!” she whispered to herself as she bought two *cannoli* and two *bacione di taormina*.

The clerk explained that the latter meant Taormina kisses.

For a half hour, she sipped coffee, ate her pastries, and read her book.

She charged it to room 600.

“Was there something wrong with my service?” the waitress said.

“No,” Kristín said.

“It is customary to give a tip.”

“Sorry!” Kristín said, recalling having read of such things.

She added a 100% tip.

This satisfied the waitress.

How do I reach my room? she thought wandering around the lobby.

She finally went to the front desk and said, “How do I get to room 600? I can’t take the stairs.”

“Use the elevators,” the clerk sneered, pointing to a brass cage with a man in a burgundy uniform standing in it. “Right over there.”

“Oh,” Kristín said. She’d heard of elevators but had never seen one.

She hobbled over to the cage and said, “Please take me to the floor with room 600.”

“That would be six,” he said, pushing a lever to make the elevator lurch into motion.

When they arrived at the sixth floor, she said, “How do I summon you later?”

“Push the button on the wall.”

With panoramic floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out on Faxe Bay, this suite could have easily held Kristín’s entire home. Floral-patterned off-white silk fabric covered the walls, and an ornate pink-marble fireplace lay opposite the king-sized bed.

Framed oil paintings of seascapes adorned the walls.

She opened a sliding glass door and stepped onto a balcony.

Reykjavik's bewildering array of buildings with colored roofs lay at her feet, and snow-dusted mountains loomed behind it. Flocks of gulls swooped over the boat-filled harbor.

She'd never been in a hotel before.

The full impact of what had happened finally hit her.

My life will be divided into what happened before today and what happens after.

The thought terrified her.

Now she sensed Reykjavik's spirit: impressions of quiet energy and order.

Shivering, she hobbled inside and slid the door shut.

Her three battered suitcases had been stacked next to the enormous black lacquered wood wardrobe with mirrored-doors.

Inside, it had twelve wooden clothes hangers and a cloth sack marked "Laundry."

Kristín freshened up, lay on the bed, and dozed off.

A strange dream unfolded.

She sat in a cavernous lecture hall that was empty except for her and a teacher.

"I wish I was back in Harbor with my parents," she sobbed. "I wish I'd been born beautiful, and I wish I was healthy."

With no transition, Kristín became a little girl at home in bed, as her mother read her favorite fairy tale, *Jor Krozan and the Time Eaters*:

"I speak to you, O my best beloved, of a time when the world was young and the kingdom of Velonia lay in the Valley of Peace. The king, Norf, and his beautiful queen, Glinn, lived in a palace with many towers. They held court in a vast hall and listened to their loyal subjects.

Their lives were almost perfect, O my best beloved. All they lacked was the blessing of a child like you.

After ten years, two fairies appeared before them, Yel the Blue and Nimba the Red. They both offered to magically bless Glinn with a daughter. Yel's magic would produce a daughter who was pretty and brilliantly intelligent. Nimba's would produce a daughter whose beauty was greater than the sun and the moon.

Queen Glinn decided that a daughter needed beauty more than intelligence and chose Nimba the Red.

Nimba touched Glinn's forehead and the fairies vanished.

Sure enough, a month later, Glinn realized she would have a child. As Nimba predicted, it was a daughter — the most beautiful baby that had ever been born. They named her Aurora. There was great rejoicing throughout the kingdom.

As Aurora grew, so did her beauty. Troubadours sang of it, and courtiers complimented her. Aurora loved looking at her reflection. She loved this so much, she wouldn't go into any room that didn't have a mirror on the wall. Queen Glinn installed mirrors in every room of the palace. She even put mirrors on the trees in the garden, so Aurora would go there.

On days when nobody complimented her beauty, Aurora was deep in the morbs.

Knowing that her beauty would someday fade also put her in the morbs. So disconsolate became she, that she waxed deathly ill. Alarmed, the king called his chief wizard, Loris, and asked her what to do. Loris told of the time-eating insects — that steal youth and beauty. The only defense against them was the Ring of Eternity — that could be found in the Cloud-City of the Gods.

King Norf called his bravest knight, Jor Krozan, and asked him to find it.

Leaving out adventures that might give you nightmares, O my best beloved, Jor eventually found this ring and returned to the palace.

Queen Glinn placed the ring on Aurora's finger, and the princess froze.

She became a magnificent statue, harder than the hardest stone, stronger than the strongest steel. Loris explained: Time-eaters eat up past moments so new ones can happen. Without them, time stops and nothing changes.

Alarmed, Queen Glinn managed to pull the ring off Aurora's finger, and she came back to life. They explained what had happened and why she must never wear the Ring of Eternity. Aurora asked to wear it one last time, and struck a dramatic pose. As they slipped the ring onto one of her fingers, she made a fist.

King Norf called all his blacksmiths and magicians, but none could remove the ring. They even tried to cut off Aurora's finger, but it could not be damaged in any way — because, O my best beloved, damage would be change. The king and queen mourned the loss of their daughter.

Over the years, the great palace collapsed and the forest of Thamber reclaimed the land.

To this very day, there lies a ruined palace in a great forest. And in its midst stands Aurora, staring blindly — and forever unchanging. As beautiful as the day she put on the ring.”

She awoke with a start and checked her bedside clock.

Although the dream seemed to have taken days, only an hour had passed.

At six, she took the elevator to the lobby and spotted Margret and the limousine on this street.

“It’s overwhelming!” Kristín said, looking up and down the street. “There are more people on this *one street* than the whole of Harbor!”

Margret smiled.

“You’ve accomplished nothing!” Professor Williamson said in Icelandic with a pronounced British accent. “Yet you’re a celebrity. Based solely on hype!”

Trying to conceal tears, Kristín turned away and scanned the Arnarson University Faculty Club and the some fifteen faculty and administrators milling around and sipping cocktails.

A steam table held assorted foods and condiments.

“You have no right to hurl abuse at this girl!” Margret said. “She’s done nothing to earn your criticism.”

“That’s my point. She’s done nothing! She gets *this ...*”, waving his hands to indicate the reception, “while my minuscule funding’s frozen!”

“To hell with him!” Margret said, pulling Kristín away.

Long tables laden with hot food in chafing dishes, breads, salads, and deserts lined the room.

They picked up plates, selected baked cod, lamb chops, bread and butter and found seats at a round table in a corner.

“This reception wasn’t such a good idea,” Margret sighed. “We can leave after the Prime Minister makes his appearance.”

A mustachioed young man bowed and introduced himself as Aron Gunnarson, a professor in the School of Humanities.

“The Temple of Knowledge has always fascinated me,” he smiled. “It’s an obsession, really. I’m writing a book. *The Temple and Miskatonic University*. A historical monograph.”

Kristín looked up at him.

He had a kind face.

His elegant brown suit contrasted with his somewhat threadbare blue cape and eight-sided featherless black velvet cap.

“I’d love to hear your experiences with the exam,” he added.

“I don’t think she’s in any mood to chat,” Margret said. “She had a run-in with Williamson.”

“That’s OK,” Kristín said. “I’ll talk. . .”

A commotion erupted at the entrance as Prime Minister Ólafur Thorsson appeared with three aides, a reporter for the *Reykjavik Register*, and two photographers.

He wore a gray suit with a dark purple velvet cape inscribed with the Icelandic Coat of Arms.

He had a chiseled face with gray hair and eyes above a dimpled chin.

He motioned for Kristín to join him.

She hobbled over, and he put his arm around her and made a short speech.

The photographers snapped pictures.

Professor Williamson shouted, “You might increase funding in physics.”

“You might admit girls,” the Prime Minister smiled.

“Not in my lifetime. Our program would become the world’s laughingstock.”

The Prime Minister shrugged.

Afterward, Thorsson said, “I’d love to chat with you, my dear, but Prime Ministers are very busy men,” and left with his entourage.

Kristín returned to her table.

“What did he mean by admitting girls?” she asked.

“Ah,” Margret sighed. “Arnarson University has a . . . policy. Girls are forbidden to take science or math classes.”

“What?”

“Miskatonic University doesn’t have those restrictions,” Margret said. “And you’ll be a fully-matriculated student there.”

“Columbia’s more open-minded?” Kristín said.

“Ah, Columbia!” Professor Aron said. “That vast and chaotic land. Terrifying, sometimes. Our ancient rules don’t apply there. I wonder whether they have any rules at all.”

“Miskatonic’s more prestigious than Arnarson,” Margret said. “Almost a rival to Oxford.”

“Oxford’s dreaming spires verses Miskatonic’s *writhing* spires,” Professor Aron smiled.

“Writhing?” Kristín said.

“You’ll see,” Professor Aron said. “I envy you. When I was your age, the exams didn’t exist. I might’ve had a chance...”

Then he checked his watch and sighed, “I have to leave. Might I call on you tomorrow?”

“It’ll have to be in the morning,” Margret said. “I just learned that we have wonderful plans for her afternoon.”

Chapter 2

“God granted England dominion over the sea, France over the land, and Germany over the clouds. . . Such was Europe’s conventional wisdom. Where do Russia and Columbia fit into this trite picture? Not to mention China and the Empire of the Sun.”

— *Musings*, Velas Morder.

“Is there no *limit* to their incompetence!” Duke Alexander Drakonov growled as he scanned the report on his desk. “When did they identify . . . the candidate?”

“Two days ago,” his aide, Igor Veletnikov, muttered.

Duke Drakonov slammed his fist on his desk — a polished mahogany slab supported by four elongated brass dragons that represented his family crest.

He sipped tea from a glass in a gold tea-glass-holder.

That’s us, he mused, regarding the filigreed troikas chasing each other around the holder’s rim. *Running in circles and getting nowhere.*

He set the tea down, stood, walked over to the floor-to-ceiling window, and looked out across the muddy Griboyedov Canal at the Church of the Savior on Spilled Blood, with its gold and green onion-cupolas gleaming in the morning light.

He sighed.

“Who is it?” he finally murmured.

“An Icelandic girl, excellency. Kristín Ormsdóttir. It’s in the report.”

“Do we have a man in place?”

“No, but we’ll have one on the airship taking her to Knickerbocker.”

“Airships stop in Iceland?”

“No,” Igor replied. “But one will, by Kaiser Johann’s orders.”

“Interesting! What’s his game?”

“It’s rumored that they saved him from an assassination attempt,” Igor said. “Sorbs separatists.”

“The *Temple* saved him?” Duke Drakonov said.

“Their technology, at least. One of their ingenious artifices.”

“Well, Johann’s got his Sorbs, and we’ve got our Bolsheviks. Are there other interested parties?”

“The usual suspects, the British. . .”

“Of course,” Duke Drakonov interrupted. “Who else?”

“The Chinese and the Empire of the Sun. Even the Kingdom of Hawaii.”

“There will be more spies than passengers on that flight.”

“It appears so, excellency.”

“Nothing interesting will happen until this Kristín Ormsdóttir reaches Miskatonic. If even then.”

“They’re going where she’s going. Maybe they just want to get a look at her.”

“I think this whole thing is overblown,” Duke Drakonov muttered. “Nevertheless, my four-man team will be in place in Iceland.

He shrugged on his greatcoat, fastened his purple velvet cape, and donned his eight-sided, green velvet hat that sported two eagle-feathers.

“I have a difficult audience with the Father,” he said, leaving.

“Good luck, excellency.”

Chapter 3

“The money and energy of Miskatonic University and the Gofols Foundation proved to be an irresistible draw as The Temple’s center of gravity drifted toward the New World. It became Miskatonic’s division of basic research. And what extraordinary research it was!”

— *History of the Writhing Spires* by Mark Hemple.

After another strange dream of taking classes, Kristín awoke at six-thirty in the morning to a remarkable sight: a *fire* burning in the fireplace.

She showered and dressed.

At the front desk, she told the clerk about the fire.

“Fires create a *continental* ambiance,” the desk clerk said. “Europe lacks volcanic heating. And guests find fires more cheerful than hissing radiators.”

“My door was locked.”

“Secret passageways allow staff to enter rooms without disturbing our guests.”

She entered the dining room at eight, and Professor Aron waved her over.

“Forgive me for asking a personal question,” he said, “but. . .” He nodded at her crutches.

“I had paralytic fever when I was eleven.”

Even before her illness, Kristín had been clumsy, envying her older brother’s catlike grace and effortless athleticism.

She would never forget that fateful day.

It was at a Spring Dance, and although she had felt out of sorts that morning, she went to the dance anyway.

They'd held hands and whirled, the flowers in their hair flying in all directions. After the second dance, she'd needed to sit.

After that, she couldn't walk.

She'd been confined to her bed for three days, during which an enormous golden figure — her deceased grandmother, Hekla — had appeared and touched her forehead.

She never told anyone.

After months of physical therapy, she could walk — with crutches and a leg-brace.

"I've heard that they're developing a vaccine for that," he said. "In Columbia. Too late to help you, though."

The waiter served them soft boiled eggs in tarnished silver egg-cups.

"You wanted to hear about my exam?"

"Ah, yes! I'd love to hear about it. Mind if I take notes?"

"Go ahead."

Professor Aron opened his briefcase and pulled out a leather-bound notebook with a black pen.

She launched into her description.

The first exam, on Saturday morning, was a conventional test of general knowledge. There had been questions about mathematics, history, and many other subjects — the hardest exam she had ever taken. The mathematics and physics exams included many things she'd never heard of.

They'd told her to guess in those cases.

Several students left before the three hours were up.

The second session was more of the same, with occasional odd questions thrown in, like "What is your earliest memory?" or "Imagine your entire life has been a dream and you have just awakened. Describe your surroundings."

"I wonder what they were driving at," Professor Aron said. "How did you answer them, Kristín?"

"My earliest memory was of floating near the ceiling . . . in a large hall. It had marble walls and a pool in the center with a fountain. Men stormed into it and killed a man sitting beside the fountain."

"Remarkable!"

"It was a strange memory though," Kristín murmured. "It was as if time . . . no longer existed. There was motion but . . . no time."

"Most interesting," Professor Aron said. "You put all that in your answer?"

She nodded.

“What about the second question?”

“If I woke up from . . . from the world,” she said. “I imagined it would be like floating in water. Like when I almost drowned when I was very young. Then were playing water polo in a hot spring and didn't notice me slip under the surface. I sank like a rock. It was so peaceful there, and I saw my grandmother, Hekla. She had died the week before.”

“What happened then?”

“My brother spotted me and pulled me out.”

“Quite a story!”

She recalled the strange feeling of being watched, that Saturday afternoon. After the other students and even the proctor had left, leaving her alone in the exam room.

The exam on Sunday had been stranger still.

Although it was impossible, she had felt that the answers she had given Saturday had influenced Sunday's exam.

Part of the morning exam involved reading ten pages of gibberish that she was to pretend was a language and translate into “any European language.”

“I made up a story. About two brothers and a sister who lived on a farm by the sea. They were really princes and a princess with magic powers who were imprisoned there. Their enemy had put them under a spell that caused them to forget who they were. The spell gradually began to wear off, and strange things happened. The sister picked up a rock that turned into a live rabbit and hopped away.”

Professor Aron smiled.

“The two brothers were plowing the field one day and one of them saw a cloud in the sky and said it looked like a ship. Then a ship appeared in front of them, on the field. This terrified them, and the ship vanished. After a while, they began to recover their memories and magically made a ship and sailed away. That's as far as I got with the story.”

“Imaginative!”

Margret met Kristín after lunch.

“Ever heard of the *Elegant Pony*?” she said.

“There's a store over there. . .” she replied, pointing.

“It's a wonderful store in the heart of Knickerbocker,” Margret interrupted,

holding up an envelope with a flourish. “I have a wireless telegram from the main store. Let’s go shopping!”

She led Kristín to *The Stylish Filly’s Attire Shoppy* and handed the saleslady the envelope.

“Brigitte Valfon,” according to her name-tag, opened it, studied the letter, and nodded.

“It instructs me to clothe you as an elegant lady of Knickerbocker. I should spare no expense. Please come with me.”

She led Kristín to a back room where a middle aged tailor measured her in a hundred different ways.

Ms. Valfon picked out a long deep blue dress with matching tailcoat over a frilly white silk blouse, and a blue tulle-wrapped top hat. A polished brass chain held together the tailcoat’s front parts, and a gold necklace with a ruby pendant completed the ensemble.

“The height of fashion in Columbia,” Ms. Valfon assured her. “And everywhere else.”

“Shouldn’t the pendent be blue like the rest of the outfit?”

“No, madame,” Ms. Valfon assured her. “It’s *red* because it hangs over your heart. It represents your soul’s undying passion.”

“Oh.”

Alterations would be complete the following morning.

They also outfitted Kristín with two of their finest steamer trunks to carry her finery.

Kristín bought a one-piece black swim suit.

As she was about to leave, she spotted the blue and yellow box that had been playing music the other day.

“What *is* that thing?”

“Ah,” Brigitte replied. “A transistor radio. A radical new technology, sold only at *The Elegant Pony*.”

“I’ve heard of transistors, but never saw anything . . . with them.”

“Take it!” Brigitte smiled. “Compliments of the *Elegant Pony*.”

She spent the rest of the afternoon swimming in the hotel pool’s steaming sulfurous waters, which came from a natural hot spring.

At five, she went to the hotel gustatorium, read her book, and listened to her transistor radio as she dined alone.

Chapter 4

“I travel not to find myself but to remember who I have been all along. . .”

— *Myself Divided by Zero*, Countess Anastasia von Durfee.

The Day arrived.

Shaking off a nightmare, Kristín dressed in her new finery as hotel staff bundled her belongings into her new steamer trunks and loaded them onto two open horse-drawn carriages.

Outside, the airship *LS Helgoland* blanketed the city like an ominous thunderhead.

The drive to the embarkation point took more than twenty minutes because people thronged the streets.

A mob of curiosity-seekers surrounded the metal staircase extending from the airship’s underside, while passengers peered out its many open windows — straining to see the one responsible for this unscheduled stop.

Five men came down the staircase and disappeared into the crowd.

Kristín spotted familiar faces: her parents, brother, and Mayor Holmsson.

“We had to see our most important citizen off,” Mayor Holmsson declaimed.

“I twisted his arm,” her brother, Víkingur, muttered, hugging her for the last time. “Hell, I almost broke it off.”

“Kristín,” her mother said, hugging her. “You look like a *queen*.”

After many tearful farewells, two burly crew members appeared with a wheelchair.

They bowed and motioned for Kristín to sit.

Something’s horribly wrong! she felt, her teeth chattering.

She sat, they lifted her, wheelchair and all, and carried her up the staircase into the airship's bowels.

After her, one other man boarded the airship behind her.

In a polished aluminum corridor, a man in uniform greeted Kristín with a bow, heel-click, and handshake and motioned for them to follow.

A wave of nausea swept over her as the man introduced himself as Kapitän Vogel.

The two crew members carried Kristín and wheelchair down the corridor to a room and opened the door.

"*Sprechen Sie Englisch?*" the captain said.

"Yes."

"This is the Kaiser's Suite. He uses it when he travels on the *Helgoland*. We hope your time aboard ship will be pleasant. Dinner is served at seven."

"Oh. Where?"

"In the A-deck dining room, on this level. At nine we have a performance of de Jardin's operetta, *La Jeune Parisienne*, on B-deck. And a wine-tasting on C-deck."

"I see."

"If you are interested in attending either of those events, our crew will be honored to transport you," he said, nodding to the wheelchair and two crew members.

"Thank you. I'm not feeling well. I think I'll just go to bed after dinner. Uh, please thank your Kaiser for me. His generosity overwhelms me."

"As you wish," the captain said, bowing again and clicking his heels. "We expect to disembark in Knickerbocker at 4 o'clock post-meridian tomorrow. Weather permitting, of course."

"Of course."

"Before I forget," the captain said, handing her a large key on a brass chain. "Since this is the Kaiser's suite, its door locks. Automatically — every time it closes."

"Thank you," she said, taking the odd key.

They bowed and left.

She turned over the brass key in her hand and examined it. It was unusually heavy and bristled with . . . protuberances. In a rectangular opening on one side, she spotted tiny brass gears, like a watch's innards.

She inserted it into the lock.

With a buzz and the sound of meshing gears, the door slowly opened outward.

Thick bolts extended from it, apparently lining up with slots in the massive frame.

What the hell is wrong with me? she thought.

It came to her: the captain had had a *death-mark!* Everyone she'd met had had one!

She went into the room and shut the door behind her, which whirred with more activity.

She looked around.

Her steamer trunks lay stacked against a bulkhead to the right, beside a king-sized bed.

A portrait of a serenely smiling, white-haired, middle-aged woman hung over the bed, its brass plaque proclaiming it to be “Kaiserin Wilhelmina von Schleswig-Holstein-Sonderburg-Augustenburg und Königin von Preußen¹.”

What a burden! To go through life dragging so many titles behind you, like anchors chained to your neck.

To the left was a door to a washroom.

The bulkhead opposite the entrance sported a huge window with a breathtaking view of Reykjavik.

Far away, engines shuddered to life, and the airship nudged into motion.

Kristín carefully folded her elegant outfit in a steamer trunk and lay on the bed.

Will I survive this trip?

The propellers' distant drone lulled her off to a fitful sleep.

She freshened up in the washroom.

She hung the key chain around her neck and put on the clothes she had worn when she had arrived in Reykjavik — which the hotel had laundered.

Then she grabbed her book on Columbia and hobbled down the corridor toward the sound of music and many voices.

The door to her suite whirred shut behind her.

She entered a brightly-lit room with some forty people seated at ten tubular aluminum tables — which reminded her of lawn-furniture draped with white tablecloths.

A man in a black suit played what looked like an aluminum piano.

¹ß=ss. It was originally one cursive, lowercase 's' on top of another.

Music and conversations stopped as all eyes fixed upon her.

Loud enough for Kristín to hear, a middle-aged woman murmured to her companion, “She’s the kaiser’s niece. The Princess Luisa von Epelein. I have it on excellent authority.”

With a sweeping gesture, Captain Vogel invited Kristín to sit at his table and introduced her to his Executive Officer and Navigator.

Since she hadn’t worn a hat, she folded the brass hat-rack under the table, put her book under her chair, sat, and looked at a menu.

The piano music resumed.

“The wild boar is *ganz wunderbar*,” the captain told her with a smile.

“OK.”

The captain ordered for all of them as waiters in white uniforms served them water and red wine.

On edge, Kristín looked around the room.

To the right was a railing separating the dining room from a promenade with a row of dark, rain-streaked windows. A map of the world covered the wall to the left with the routes flown by the *Medebach Luftflotte Konzern* marked in red.

She looked around.

Everyone has a death-mark on them! I’m in a dining room full of corpses! Laughing, carefree corpses!

“Captain Vogel,” she said. “I have a *terrible* feeling. . . Could there be something wrong with this ship?”

“Dear lady,” he chuckled. “We have the finest and most experienced crew in the fleet. These days, airships are safer than surface ships.”

Waiters served their food on white bone china emblazoned with the corporate logo: an airship circling the globe.

As they were about to begin eating, an officer approached and whispered something to the captain.

He stood, motioned for the others to follow, and they left.

It’s happening!

She waited for something . . . anything to happen. The smell of her food made her stomach growl, and she tasted it.

The wild boar was, indeed, *ganz wunderbar*.

A wave of nausea washed over her.

She pushed her plate away and stood.

“Was the meal not to your liking, Fräulein?” a waiter asked.

“I’m sorry,” she replied, trying to ignore the death-mark on him. “I just don’t feel well.”

She grabbed a roll and hobbled back to her cabin.
A crew member — with a death-mark — stood guard.
He bowed and clicked his heels when she produced the all-important key and opened it.

Kristín went to the washroom and vomited.
Then she lay in the enormous bed and waited for the world to end.

She must've dozed off because an explosion woke her.
She fumbled around in her bed as a man crashed through the door.
She screamed.
With surprising speed, the man bounded to her bedside and jabbed a needle in her neck.
Blackness ensued.