



Chapter 1

Storm brewing at the Red Fortress

“Do you know Lazlo Lichter?”

I shook my head. My interrupted meal lay before me.

The hunched little man who’d just sat down facing me stubbed out his cigarette. A tourist’s bicycle clattered along the cobblestones a few feet away. He scowled.

“Lazlo tells everyone that he, and only he, is the original student of Dr Fang Te-P’i. His students, in their black overcoats, believe him. He has made his own cult!”

The man pointed to his *Kongress* nametag. “Well I, Odie Malachin, knew Dr Fang first.” His mouth turned down while his voice raised. “I introduced them. I had been studying with Dr Fang for almost a year. He taught *me* things Lazlo still knows nothing of. Secret things! Deadly things.”

At this he seemed to catch himself, and his shifty eyes became guarded. After a pause, he said in a quieter voice “Yes, I introduced them and soon from Dr Fang all I hear is Lazlo this and Lazlo that.” His pinched face grew ugly.

“Lazlo is charming, they say. But *I* say he is a pimp!”

“I have never even seen him,” I said.

He pointed at me. “You want to see him? Well, you can see him in Hell!” With that he lifted himself from the table and limped out into the street.

I dipped my last bit of sausage into mustard and chewed it, slowly.

Rothenburg 1987 was going to be an interesting conference.

My Irish cousin Branna and her German boyfriend Werther had met my train from Frankfurt that morning. He was Chairman of the Kongress for this year, the 18th TCM Kongress to be held in Rothenburg. Showing me to my room at the *Eisenhut*, he advised me to register at the Reichsstadthalle. When I found it, it looked like a large stone barn, set apart from the other town buildings, with a courtyard and two large trees. People were milling around the open double doors. The spring weather was mild.

“Welcome to Rothenburg,” said the pretty blond girl sitting behind a little table. She looked at her sheet, then up to me. Her eyes held a strange look. “San Francisco,” she said.

“Yes, have you been?” I asked.

She shook her head. “My father died in San Francisco,” she said, and handed me a bag full of brochures and notes. Her eyes grew wet and she looked down. I stood there awkwardly.

A heavy hand descended on my shoulder, pulled me toward the door. A head leaned close to my ear. “Pay no attention to our Sophie,” the voice said. “She has a strange sense of humour. It must mean she likes you.” By now we were outside. I turned to look. The owner of the voice was a large man in a black overcoat, intense eyes with smile creases, and black hair going grey at the temples. This could only be...

“Lazlo Lichter,” he said, and extended his hand.

“Malory Chan,” I said, shaking it. “So, you know Sophie very well?”

His smile was rakish. “You could say that.” I glanced back over my shoulder. Sophie was ignoring us, face set, back stiff.

Another man approached, also wearing a black overcoat. He was shorter and thinner than Lichter, and his face held the severity of an ascetic. He spoke to Lichter in German, including me with a glance and a nod.

“We should speak English for Mr Chan, Alfred,” Lichter said, then turned his hand palm up, indicating. “Alfred Götze, my senior student.”

“Chan?” Alfred said. “This is not an English name.”

“I’m part Chinese.”

Alfred sniffed, then turned to Lichter. “Lazlo, the gathering...”

“Yes, I will be there soon,” Lichter replied with a sigh. He watched Alfred march away, then turned to me. “It may be presumptuous of me, since we don’t know each other, but can I buy you a coffee, Mr Chan?”

“It’s Mal,” I said, intrigued. “And yes, why not?”

As we left I noticed Sophie watching us, eyes narrowed.



Chapter 2

Sins of the father

We found a café; in the window the owner was stacking colored schnee-ballen into a pyramid. I had coffee, Lichter ordered schnapps.

“We are strangers, Mr Chan. But I like your face. Do you find people tending to unburden themselves to you? Confess their sins, so to speak?”

“Call me Mal,” I said. “And no, not often. I grew up with a bad crowd. They did not confess their sins, as a rule.”

He leaned forward. “Well, then this might be a special situation for both of us. But I have to tell someone.” He sat back, closed his eyes and was silent for a moment. When he spoke, his voice had become sombre. “There was a girl. She was... young, younger than I knew. When I found out, I broke it off. Gently, I thought. But she... killed herself. She leapt from the tower of the town hall.” He paused again. “It was a year ago, exactly. Her name was Roselle.” He opened his eyes and leaned forward. “And it was here, in Rothenburg. So you see, it is difficult for me. It was not that I did not have feelings for her. But this damned school of mine, always so much pressure. People look up to you, idolise you, copy you even.” He gestured toward his head. “It plays with your mind. You begin to think you really are as infallible as your students think, as great as they say. You... you take advantage, sometimes.” He gave me a disturbed look.

“Good spirit but weak flesh, is that what you’re saying?”

My voice was not sympathetic. A man knows what he is getting into. At some point you make a choice. If you make it wrong, the choices start to

make you, to bury you even. But that choice is still there, even if you try to hide it from yourself.

He nodded but had not really heard me; his attention was all inward. “For a while it can all be very pleasant. Then you realise they are only projecting their own fantasies onto you. They want a father figure, someone to tell them what to do, a leader to take away the burden of having to think for themselves. A system that gives them a simple answer for the difficult questions.”

His face hardened, he looked into the distance. His schnapps sat untouched. Then he turned to me. “Well, I am finished with it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m done. Through. I will teach my classes here at the conference and then close the school. Maybe I’ll go away, someplace where they do not know me, and practice quietly.”

He stood up, removing his black overcoat with a dramatic flourish. He handed it to me. “Thank you, Mr... Mal,” he said. “You have helped me more than you know. I’d like you to have this.”

I realised that this was probably a common gesture with him, aimed in a subtle way at creating loyalty. He might not even be aware of why he did it, or the effect it had. As there was little else I could do, I took the coat and he shook my hand. “I’m sure we will meet again,” he said, and gave me a rather sad smile before continuing: “Perhaps in Hell.”

We separated outside the café. It was easier to wear the coat than to carry it, so I slipped it on, planning to discard it in my room. But I had not gone far before I found myself being jostled by two men then abruptly pushed into a narrow alley. One wore a black bomber jacket, the other had suspenders over a flannel shirt, but both had the requisite tattoos, tight jeans and combat boots: skinheads. Before I realised what was happening, the shorter man behind me dragged the heavy leather overcoat down to my elbows, trapping my arms. The one in front was bigger, and landed a solid punch to my solar plexus that knocked the wind out of me. I collapsed and the boots came into play. I wriggled my arms out of the coat and tried to cover my head. A good kick in the belly, and one in the kidneys, then I heard a distant whistle. One skinhead said to the other in an urgent voice “*Es ist der falsche Kerl!*” and they were gone, taking the black overcoat with them.

I pushed myself up to a sitting position and leaned against the wall, checking with soft and slow touches for anything broken. Nope. The guys were pros: the most pain for the least visible damage. But all that for an overcoat? I shook my head. They could have had it for the asking.

The Road to Perdition

I struggled to my feet and returned to the registration area. Knots of people converged, congealed briefly, and then dispersed. My grandfather's teachings on the *Yi Jing* made me see these movements as a reflection of the impermanence of the universe, and myself as one temporary node in an endless mass of flux. This led inexorably to the next thought: I need a drink.

I walked over to Sophie's table. She was finished, packing things into boxes.

She looked at me. "What happened to you?"

"Nothing," I said. "Look, I'd like to make it up to you about your father."

She frowned. "Make it up?"

"Make it good, say I am sorry that he died in San Francisco."

"Oh, you don't have to do that. He died happy. He was gay, you know."

I smiled even though it hurt. "So if he was gay..."

"I know," she said. "How did I get here? It's a puzzle." She lifted a box, gestured toward another for me to carry, and we walked to a car parked by the side of the building.

"Your English is..."

"Very good. I know. I grew up in New York City. But I've lived here in Germany for 10 years."

We walked up the Spitalgasse, passed under a high tower, then turned left into a smaller lane. We walked well together. Sophie pointed over a low wall at a large building, yellow walls with a sloping red-tiled roof.

"This is the famous torture museum," she said, flipping her long hair. A floral fragrance swept over me. Jasmine? No, the scent of rose blossoms. She nudged me and pointed. An empty cage hung high on an iron chain from a thick beam. "People who are mean to me end up there," she said, and laughed.

"Oh yes? Many so far?"

"Most people are nice to me," she said, an impish light in her eyes. "But there may be a candidate or two."

"I hope you don't mean me when you say that," I said. "We barely know each other."

"Well, you have the look," she said. "A real heartbreaker. I know." She stopped and indicated a squat building with a peaked roof then said, "And you were bound to end up here sooner or later."

The words *Zur Höll, 900AD* were written across the front of the faustian construction. The figure of a devil was done in filigree over the entrance. Sophie threw open the door. The smell of cooked flesh mingled with the

light of dancing flames, smoke, heat, and a cacophony of sound. She invited me to step over the threshold.

“Welcome to Hell,” she said.

Regis inferni

Sophie and I found a table under a pitchfork, next to the mortared-stone wall and ordered beer with a cheese platter. The room was packed, the clink of glasses and the smoke from a hundred cigarettes overwhelming. The largest group, all in black overcoats, sat at a raised table inside of a huge ancient fireplace. There was a figure at the centre, like a painting of the Last Supper: Lazlo Lichter. Around him at the raised table, his students showed every sign of feeling superior, heads raised, covert glances around the room to see who was watching, self-consciously turning to Lichter to hear his least utterance.

Suddenly a large man in a sports jacket with short black hair and heavy sloping shoulders approached the group. Two overcoats stepped in front of him. The man shoved them aside with ease, then stood pointing a finger at Lichter. It was too noisy to hear. We caught only the last words, as the room became aware of what was happening and conversations paused.

“Joogoolei, are you looking for death?”

Lichter sat unmoved, his eyes closed, not acknowledging the assault.

A smaller figure, a young woman, rushed up and pulled at the large man’s arm, squealing something in a high-pitched voice, her long dark hair thrashing as she pulled without moving it at all. Then he turned and stalked out, the woman still hanging off his arm. Definitely oriental, Korean I’d guess, big square head, fury on his face.

I looked at Sophie.

“Lazlo has that effect on people,” she said, picking up a piece of cheese.

“And you?” I said. “What effect does he have on you?”

“He’s a bastard,” she said. “But his disciples love him... except for the ones that hate him.” She pointed. “See that one? The thin one?”

I looked, then nodded.

“He is really the organiser of the group,” she said. “That is Alfred Götze. He makes sure Lazlo gets where he has to be, and cleans up his messes. He promotes the group’s image, and generally protects ‘the brand’.”

“What’s in it for him?” I asked, recognising the severe face that had approached Lichter and me outside the Reichsstadthalle.

“He is second in command,” Sophie said. “In fact, he may be first in command. I’m not sure Lazlo cares about his little cult. He can’t, the way he carries on.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“Lazlo left his wife for a colleague. Then he discarded her for someone else. It goes on, in a long list of shattered relationships.” She reddened. I leaned forward and put my hand on her arm. “Are you on that list?” I asked. She jerked her arm away from me and said “Don’t push it, sailor.” She glanced away and back and then said “Lazlo Lichter deserves whatever he gets.”

There was another disturbance at the big table, loud voices raised, but we were distracted by Werther and Branna making their way through the crowd to our table. Branna shook out her long black hair. Werther’s handshake was firm but rather damp. He knew Sophie, and introduced Branna.

“We were just talking about Lazlo Lichter,” I said.

“Oh, god,” said Branna. “Can we not, please, Mal?” The look on her face made me exclaim “Branna! Not you too?”

She frowned, made a quick glance at Werther, then pushed at me angrily. “What are you talking about?”

Werther seemed oblivious. “Look at him,” he said. “He is like the King of Hell, holding court.”

I tried to change the subject. “I met someone today who said he was the original student of Fang Te-P’i in Taiwan, not Lazlo, and learned things that Lazlo never knew.”

“You must mean Odie Malachin,” Werther said. He turned to Branna. “He came up to us earlier.”

“Oh, *that* man. I was going to give him a nasty look,” said Branna, with a flash of her green eyes, “but he already had one.”

“Yes, that’s for sure,” Werther said. “Well, yesterday I was sitting outside of the Ratsstube and he came by, very drunk, and sat down at my table. He leaned forward—his breath was terrible—and bragged to me that Fang had taught him a sequence of ‘death points’ used by assassins in ancient China. The patient dies within three hours of your ‘treatment.’”

“Not very good for business,” Branna said.

Sophie laughed and said “Could come in handy one day, though.”

Werther looked shocked. “Sophie! Sometimes I don’t know when you are joking.” A look at her face made me wonder the same thing.



Chapter 3

Getting of wisdom

Over the next two days I attended some interesting sessions held in different venues around the little medieval town. One was entitled *Tzimtzum and the Jingluo*, taught by a Kabbalist who mapped the Sephirotic Tree onto the human body and guided his treatments according to that. Another was taught by an American, dressed like a cowboy but with a New Jersey accent, disputing the canonical status of the Yellow Emperor's Classic. That one was entitled *The Nei Jing, the non Jing*. I passed by a room in which Odie Malachin, with grotesque facial contortions, was standing in front of a blackboard ranting at three people who were gauging the distance to the door. In between sessions I came upon the New Jersey cowboy sitting on the grass, rolling a homemade cigarette. A mauve envelope lay open next to him.

"I enjoyed the lecture," I said.

"Bit of an obsession," he replied, and offered me the bag of tobacco. I shook my head.

"I'm Vincent," he said. "Been doing Oriental medicine long?"

"All my life," I said. "Family tradition."

"You're lucky," he said. "My family thinks I'm crazy." He gestured and I sat down on the grass, enjoying the spring sunshine.

He lit up, took a drag and blew the smoke away from me. “But they want to control everything,” he said sadly. “Even my girlfriend.” He nodded at the letter. “She’s dumpin’ me. Family pressure too much.”

“What’s the problem?”

A little smile touched his lips. “Age,” he said. “I’m 29. When I met her I thought she was, like, 36 or so.”

“But she’s really...”

“She’s 41. I only found *that* out when I met her daughter. Who’s like, in college.”

“So, do you want to break up with her?”

“No way! She’s funny, loves dancing and she’s great... in other ways.” He shrugged. “But *she’s* dropping *me*. What can I do?”

“You can fight!” I said. “Write her back, tell her you don’t care what the family thinks. Meet her somewhere away from the family and convince her.”

“Ya think that’ll work?”

The bearding of the lion

That afternoon, there was standing room only in the ancient and cavernous Reichsstadthalle. Lazlo Lichter was lecturing, the front five rows full of black overcoats. The lecture had reached the secret method Fang Te-P’i had to diagnose diabetes—he would throw the patient’s underpants on an anthill; if the ants swarmed over them that clinched the diagnosis—when a woman stood up halfway down the hall and said “With all due respect, what makes Fang Te-P’i so special? I mean, there are many practitioners with over 30 years of experience, why do you think he is more important than anyone else?”

With murmurs of displeasure, each head in the first five rows turned around and stared hard at the presumptuous enquirer, until she quailed and sat down shakily.

“These are important questions that need to be answered,” Lichter replied. “Why one day I remember Dr Fang talking about his distant ancestor who was, in fact, Shao Yu, the teacher of the Yellow Emperor. He told me how the lost arts that the ancestor had tried to teach the Yellow Emperor had been preserved in his family at great cost, being finally passed down only to him. Dr Fang felt unworthy to be given such a great responsibility.”

Croons of delight could be heard from the first five rows.

A middle-aged man in a tweed blazer stood up, toward the back, and said “Do you have any documentation for that?”

“Yes, but I’m afraid it is all in Chinese.”

“That is no problem,” the man said. “Some of us have taken the trouble to learn.”

Lichter opened his mouth, hesitated, then smiled a circus barker’s smile and said “Well, leave your address with Alfred here and I will send you a copy.”

“I’d be happy with the name of the book, and I can look it up myself.”

“It comes from Dr Fang’s personal documents.”

“So it is not published anywhere,” the man said, and shook his head. “It is the same old story, outlandish claims with no support, relying on people being unable to check them. Don’t you get tired of spinning all of this rubbish?”

Lichter looked down. A long moment of silence went by. Finally he looked up and said, “You have no idea.”

Alfred’s head turned toward the podium in alarm.

The man continued: “Well, why don’t you stop then?”

By then Alfred had reached the podium. He switched off the microphone in front of Lichter even as he said into the other one, “Dr Lichter is rather tired at the moment. I will be continuing the lecture at this point.” His voice changed as a couple of helpers assisted Lichter away from the podium.

“Most people do not realise,” said Alfred, speaking loudly, “that Dr Fang also has a professorship, and a knighthood, making him Professor Doctor Sir Fang Te-Pi. He is of course too modest to use these titles, but they explain why we feel the respect we do toward him. Why...”

I had stopped listening by then, and the whispered conversations throughout the hall made it hard to hear anyway. People were getting up to go. The first five rows sat frozen, except for one person who stood up, carefully folded her black overcoat, set it down on the seat and left the hall.

Payback

I was walking back to my room when I saw the two skinheads ahead of me. They separated at the fork in the road that led to the lower gate. The small one took the high road. I stayed behind the big one until we reached the dark recesses of the Kobozeller gate. There was no one around. Coming from behind, I grabbed him, spun him around and bounced his head off the stone wall. Then I returned the solar plexus punch he’d given me two days before. His belly was soft. He slumped with his eyes closed. I slapped his face until they opened again.

“Remember me?” I said. Drawing on my schoolboy German, I added “*Schwarzen Mantel?*”

His eyes uncrossed and focused on me for a moment, then he shook his head. “*Falsche Mann.*” Then he said in English. “Wrong man. Sorry.” “Were you after Lazlo Lichter?” I asked, shaking him. “Who sent you?” He closed his eyes, then suddenly sprang up, pushing me away. He was out of the gate and gone before I could recover.

Walking back up toward the main street I met Werther.

“You look happy,” he said.

“Just ran into an old friend,” I said. “It was nice to catch up.”

The banquet

That night was the official banquet, dinner and dance. The Kabbalist turned out to play a passable jazz saxophone.

I was seated at a table with Sophie, an Englishman with a very healthy tan and Vincent, the New Jersey cowboy. Vincent’s mood seemed better after our talk on the lawn earlier.

“I thought all you English types were pasty-faced,” said Vincent. “So what’s with the tan?”

“I have been on holiday in Marrakech,” the Englishman replied. “Have you been?”

“Naw, this is my first time otta the States.”

“But you mentioned that you knew Lazlo Lichter.”

“Yeah, me and a couple of other guys hosted him on his U.S. tour. Man, that dude can party,” Vincent said, and laughed. “I’ll tell ya, if there’s a diem around, Lazlo’s the guy to carpe it.”

After we collected our food from the buffet, the conversation turned to the strange occurrence at the Reichsstadthalle earlier that afternoon.

“He lost it,” said Vincent.

“I think Lichter has reached the end of his tether,” said the Englishman, “and wants to pack it all in.”

“It’s a trick,” said Sophie, speaking around a mouthful of food. “I know. He is just trying to confuse his enemies.”

“What enemies?” asked Vincent.

Sophie shook her head, swallowed and said “These days Lichter is like Eichmann in Jerusalem. Due for some major pain. He knows it and he’s squirming.”

Vincent changed his voice and said “Life is pain, Princess. Anyone who says otherwise is selling something.”

“So who do you wanna be,” Sophie said. “Inigo Montoya?”

“If you’ll be Buttercup, sure.”

They made eyes at each other for a moment, then Sophie laughed, put her hand on my arm and leaned her head on my shoulder. “You’ll need to deal with the Man in Black here then, Vinnie.”

Vincent looked at me and said “One of Lazlo’s brigade?”

I shook my head. “But I don’t have it in for him like everyone else.”

“Mind if I ask Sophie here to dance?”

I didn’t, and she didn’t, so off they went. The Englishman was coming back from getting a drink. He bent down by Sophie’s chair and handed me a silver locket on a chain. “I think this belongs to your girlfriend,” he said. I took it and before I could comment on the “girlfriend” Branna came up to ask me to dance.

“Where’s Werther?”

“Talking with Alfred about Lazlo’s weekend class, seeing if he is still up to it.”

“Where is Lazlo?”

“Resting in his room, apparently, getting some acupuncture.”

We moved to the saxophone’s slow jazz as it slid from note to note, bending their edges. I saw Sophie spinning with the cowboy. Branna followed my glance and said. “Sophie is a strange one.”

I nodded. “Seems sad, underneath.”

“Werther told me about her,” Branna said, as we moved over the dance floor. “Lazlo was her great love, or so she thought. Totally head over heels. For him, just another conquest, in fact he was seeing someone else, a young girl, even while he was seeing Sophie. Dropped them both at the same time.”

“Was that here, in Rothenburg?”

“Yes. Last year. Sophie has never gotten over it.”

“And the young girl?”

“I don’t know. Werther didn’t tell me what happened to her.”

She died, I thought. I knew that much. But Sophie’s sometimes unbalanced behaviour now made more sense.

There was a break in the music. Werther had returned and stood up to announce several speakers.

“He is so cute,” Branna said, as we made our way back to the table. “He told me not to come to his room tonight, he said he’d be tired, but I just can’t help it.” She gave a wicked smile. “I know how to make him change his mind.”

Back at the table Sophie was on her third wine. I put the silver locket next to her glass. Alfred Götze came up and toasted us in a formal and cold fashion before moving on to the next table.

“Damage control,” Sophie slurred, and picking up the locket, opened it. She pointed at the photo inside. “Thaz me,” she said, and put it down. I only caught a glimpse, but I was sure the photo was not of Sophie. The speeches had commenced, with the promise of more dancing after they finished. We listened to one or two and then I leaned over to Sophie and said, “I’m calling it a night.”

“Don’t leave me here, sailor,” she said. We got up and eased through the crowd to the door. The night air outside was clean, crisp and quiet, a relief after the noise in the hall. Then we caught the whiff of a cigarette. Werther was leaning on the wall by the door.

“Sophie! All *finished* for the night? Sneaking off to your room with Mal, here?”

Sophie smiled. “Really?” Then she curled her lip and said, “What’s it to you, Werther? Where I go is none of your business. You might be the big conference organizer but you don’t organize my life.”

“Somebody should, Sophie. It can’t get much worse.” He stubbed out the cigarette under his foot and went back into the hall.

I gave her a searching look. What was *that* about?

“Come on, Mal,” she said, her voice shaking. “Take me home.”

We passed another bickering couple, the Korean standing with his arms crossed and his back to his girlfriend with the long hair. She was wearing a black overcoat and saying something in a pleading voice. His answers were low and furious.

When we got to her hotel she said “I don’t want to go in, Mal. Can we go to your place?”

“Look, Sophie...”

“Please, Mal. I don’t want to be alone, not tonight.” She took my arm.

“What’s so special about tonight?” I said.

She shook her head. “It’s the anniversary of a friend’s death... well, not really a friend... someone I knew, someone I felt responsible for. Everyone loved her.” She paused. “And it was my fault. I just feel so bad. I don’t know what I can do to make it right.”

I held her close as we walked. The baggage tickets alone on this girl were a handful, but I felt for her. A soul in pain, my grandfather used to say, can only be cured by melting.

Our lovemaking was sweet and sad. When I woke, she was gone. All that remained was the fragrance of damascene rose.



Chapter 4

Dusk till dawn

I left the rumbled bed early the next morning. It was not yet dawn as I wandered through a gate and went outside of the old city. I revelled in the grey distances of the valley with deep breaths of the fresh spring air, then followed the ancient city walls around until I found another way in. It was a small door, arched in stone. Stepping through, I was back at the bar from a few nights before, Zur Höll. The fire had gone out of it, though, in the dawn: it just looked old and spent. I took a second to orient myself and turned toward the torture museum.

Then I stopped. There was something lying on the cobblestones. I bent over. It looked like some sort of voodoo fetish in a coal-coloured mantle. No flesh remained on the legs, which ended in claws. The bones stretched away from what seemed a blackened skull, or a carapace ringed with fur. Legs coming out of a head? I looked more closely. No, there was no head. A ragged feather poked out of the petrified mess at a weird angle. Then my eyes found their focus. It was a huge raven, dead so long that the carcass had merged with its own nest. It must have fallen, dislodged by a wind, from a high parapet.

In the morning light the decayed carrion was obscene. I shuddered, and stepped over it.

The torture museum was ahead to my right. The cage still rode high on its iron chain from the thick beam, but now swung slowly in a heavy arc. And it was no longer empty.

Corpus delicti

One arm hung through the bars, pointing at the stone road below. The lapel of the black overcoat hid the face. I covered my fingers with my sleeve and lifted the lapel away. It was Lazlo Lichter. His grimacing lips were ghastly pale. They matched the pearl-handled knife stuck in his chest. There was no blood under the cage or anywhere on the body that I could see. I checked the pulse on his stiffening arm, but it was just a formality. The man was dead. Sophie's prediction had come true. My lips tightened. Had she *made* it come true? Rigor of the face had set in, with the arm beginning to follow. That meant Lichter had been dead at least two hours and maybe more. Sophie had been with me up until not long after 1am. She would have had to rush from my room to Lichter's and stab him with no delay to make that schedule, but it was not impossible. What was impossible was that she could have lifted him into this cage.

I shook my head. This was not my concern; it was one for the German police. Still, it rankled. Sophie's voice at the banquet came back to me: "Lazlo is due for some major pain. He knows it and he's squirming." The poor guy had felt his fate looming over him, like the iron mallet of Shaitan. He had even turned and tried to run. But was this justice overtaking him?

I raised my head. The dawn sunlight had begun to crawl down the gothic towers of the city.

What about justice for Lazlo Lichter?

I walked up the street toward the main square.

At the corner of Spitalgasse and Wenggasse I saw Odie Malachin dragging a suitcase over the cobblestones. He'd attached a portable set of wheels to the bottom of the suitcase. He was finding it slow going as the wheels fell off every few steps.

"Not staying for the end of the conference?" I said, catching up to him.

He spun around. "Oh, it is you." His eyes were shifty. "No, I... I have just had bad news from home. I... have to go, now."

"Not going to see your buddy Lazlo?"

Rage convulsed his face. "Lazlo! Everything is always Lazlo. Well, I have left a gift for Lazlo with one of his students." He smiled. It looked evil, although it was probably just normal for him.

Did he not know that Lazlo was dead? Or was he just a good actor? And the “gift” sounded ominous.

“What sort of gift?”

‘Let’s just call it... a surprise.’

He refused to say more, and dragged his suitcase away as fast as he could.

I shrugged. The police could catch up to him.

One street over I saw Alfred Götze, the thin-faced senior student, walking quickly with a worried look.

“Hello, Alfred!” I called and went over. He stopped by the window of Käthe Wohlfahrt’s Christmas store.

“Ah, Mr... Chan. We met the other day.”

“Yes. You are up early.”

“I am looking for Mr Lichter,” he said, peering around at the empty streets. “He is not in his bed.”

“Is that unusual?” I said. “I mean, I’ve heard he often ends up...”

He seemed to take offence. “He was there, in his own bed, by himself, last night. One of our best students had just given him an acupuncture treatment, and he was feeling extremely relaxed. He said he was going to have a good long sleep.”

“Well, he was right,” I said. I told him what I had found, and advised him to get the police as soon as possible. He rushed away toward the museum.

Ok, you have done your duty, I said to myself. You can now wash your hands of it. Planning to do exactly that, I headed back to my room, but found Branna coming out of the door of the Eisenhut.

“Oh, there you are. I was just coming to get you. Sophie came by Werther’s room very late last night,” she paused. “And Mal... she’s in a bad way.”

Femme fatale

We went to Werther’s room, a nicely appointed suite overlooking the main thoroughfare. Sophie reclined on a chaise lounge in front of the bow window, her blond hair spread out around her, with Werther sitting, holding her hand. Branna’s eyes narrowed. Werther jumped up when we came in. “Oh good! Branna found you.”

Then Sophie turned and I saw her face in the early morning sunlight: bruises covered her cheek and her left eye was starting to blacken.

“Sophie! What happened?”

Then she told her story. When she had left me late last night—she gave Werther a shy look then lifted her chin defiantly—she had been on the

way back to her room when, out of nowhere, a man had assaulted her, striking her, then running away. Tears welled in her eyes. Branna murmured something comforting.

“It was a violent night,” I said. “Lazlo Lichter has been murdered.” I told them about my morning find. Their reactions were interesting. Branna looked horrified. Werther appeared puzzled. Sophie tried to look surprised.

Branna took Werther off to a corner of the room and was making emphatic gestures.

“You knew!” I said to Sophie. “How?”

“I, uh, saw Alfred Götze.”

Well, I thought, I had just seen Alfred too, and he had not known about Lazlo until I told him. Or had he? Or was she lying? And if so, why? I could not make sense of it. Then I mentally slapped myself. I did not have to make sense of it. This was not my case. I could just leave it completely alone. Sophie had closed her eyes and lain back, looking pale and bruised. Branna came over and stood before me, her hands on her hips; her green eyes flashed, and her black hair shone.

“Mal, Werther and I think you should find out what is going on,” she said.

“What?”

“This is what you do, you’re good at it.”

“Branna, I’m an herbalist.”

“And a private investigator. You can’t help it. It’s in your blood, your grandfather...” Like all my Irish cousins, Branna had heard the stories. But that made no difference.

“This is a job for the German police,” I said. “Not me. Maybe if we were back in San Francisco, it might be different.”

“Ah, so it is only the jurisdiction! Well it turns out Werther’s uncle is the head of police here. And Werther has agreed to recommend you!” Branna smiled a devastating smile.

If she thought she had me, she was wrong.

Police were as happy to have someone interfering as a debutante is to find she has herpes. It would never happen.

“Fine,” I said. “But only if they agree. I’ll have nothing to do with it otherwise.”



Chapter 5

**Alles klar,
Herr Kommissar?**

On that basis we set off to the torture museum. Walking along, Werther explained how things worked here.

“The Kripo—that’s the *Kriminalpolizei*, the Criminal Police—carry out criminal investigations, and send the results to the *Staatsanwaltschaft*, the, uh, State Lawyer?”

“Attorney?” I suggested.

“Yes, State Attorney. He makes the final decision about prosecution.”

All the better, I thought. Even if the local chief of police, in a fit of madness, agreed to me working the case, his superior would squash that right away.

We turned the corner and found a police photographer taking photos and four cops in peaked hats and short-sleeved green and tan uniforms standing around under the cage, smoking. A small crowd gawked from a respectful distance. Alfred Götze was pacing back and forth.

We were looking at Lazlo scrunched in the cage when we heard behind us the clacking of metal-shod heels on the cobblestones and someone whistling Falco’s *Derr Kommissar*.

Werther turned, lifted a hand and greeted him.

The moustached middle-aged man in a short jacket with a fur collar and

hair over his ears flicked away a cigarette and with a smile said something in German to Werther.

He then walked over and took a long professional look at the body. By this time, the photographer had finished and the white coats had arrived. After they had a look he ordered the policemen to remove the body, a difficult job as the elbows and knees had stiffened.

When he saw his uncle had finished giving directions to the uniforms, Werther walked over and spoke to him. I saw Werther gesture at me. The uncle shook his head. Werther became more animated. Suddenly the uncle's eyebrows raised and he lifted his head, then smiled. They turned and came over to us.

"This is my uncle, Kommissar Karl Albers," said Werther.

"Happy to meet you, Mr Chan," said the Kommissar, with only the barest hint of an accent.

"Kommissar Albers, I don't want to interfere with your..." I started to say.

"No, no trouble at all. And call me Karl," the Kommissar said. "Frankly I am happy to let a visiting colleague show us how things are done in the big city."

I searched his face for a sign of irony, but he was very good: not a trace.

"I have to admit," the Kommissar said, "at first I was not pleased. But then Werther told me you are a famous private investigator from San Francisco, Mr Chan! Home of Sam Spade and Charlie..." he peered at me.

"Are you a relative?"

"Ah, no actually," I said.

Again, not even the most minimal indication of mockery.

"I love Dashiell Hammett, the *Maltese Falcon*. I've always wanted to see how a real American private eye works! Tell me, what do you think is going on here? Is it like *Red Harvest*?"

"I hope not," I said. Half the town died in that book, thanks to the machinations of the chubby little Continental Op.

"Quite, quite." He shrugged, then looked at me. "All right, then. Where should we start?"

I felt trapped. It was not supposed to go like this. Wait a minute, there was a way out. What had Werther told me?

"But Kommissar," I said, "don't you have to clear this arrangement with the State Attorney?"

The State Attorney would be having none of this farce, I was sure. He would put a stop to it immediately.

"Ah, no, I'm afraid that would do no good," he said. "And call me Karl."

"All right, Karl. Why would it do no good?"

"Because the State Attorney is Werther's father."

Taking charge

We stood in silence for a moment. The Kommissar lifted an eyebrow.

“Ok,” I said with a sigh, “The first thing is stop people leaving town.” I told him about Odie Malachin. He called over a uniform, gave instructions, then said something to Werther. He turned back to me. “My nephew will provide a list of those who have left. Now what?”

“The next thing is to get the techs working on that knife. And we need to search Lichter’s room before it gets disrupted.”

I knew that Alfred had been to the room already, looking for Lazlo. Who knows how many other people had been in and out?

We called Alfred over, and he showed us the way to the hotel. Lichter’s room was on the first floor. We opened the door, but I held him back.

“Have a look, Alfred, before we go in. Does anything look different from what you remember this morning?” I watched his face. Had he been one of the disciples that hated Lazlo? Sophie had implied as much. How much did he know, really?

Alfred looked around the room from the doorway. “I don’t know. I only saw that the bed was empty. Herr Lichter should have been there.”

“Should have been there because you knew he was dead, and you wondered where the body was?”

“No, of course not.” Emotions flitted over Alfred’s face. Anger? Or guilt?

“All right, but Lazlo did get around, so to speak. What was the big surprise about him not being in his own bed?”

Alfred was silent.

Meanwhile the Kommissar had gone in. I stayed with Alfred just outside the door, allowing the police first inspection. He gave the room a careful look, then stopped by a pile of mused sheets. He pointed at me to come in, then gestured at the bed.

“No blood,” he noted. “So Lichter was not killed here, perhaps?”

He looked around, indicated the crushed butt of a hand-rolled cigarette in an ashtray, then froze for a heartbeat. He bent over and picked up a silver locket, holding it to the light. “A woman’s,” he said.

I stayed silent, but my pulse sounded in my ears. I knew that locket.

The Kommissar said “It is a common type of woman’s locket. My niece Roselle had one like it.” His voice caught. He opened the locket, looked, then stood with his eyes closed and the locket clasped in his hand. When he opened his eyes and looked at me again, he seemed to have aged.

“*Ihre...*” he said.

Hers. “Do you know the woman?” I asked.

“There was no woman here!” Alfred’s voice shouted from the doorway.

Damage control, I thought, Sophie's words coming back. *Protect the brand.*

"You were not here all night though, were you, Alfred?" I said.

"No, but..." He thought for a moment. "It is just that when I left, Herr Lichter had just had his acupuncture treatment, and was so relaxed he could barely lift his head. He waved us away and said he just wanted to sleep."

This, at least, was consistent with what Alfred had told me this morning.

"Did you happen to see Sophie this morning, Alfred?"

"No," he said. "Why?"

Another lie of hers, I thought. *And the locket. Sophie has some explaining to do. Unless Alfred?*

But wait a moment.

"Who did the acupuncture treatment?"

"A student of ours, Fritz."

"Not Odie Malachin?"

Alfred looked outraged

"That Bulgarian imposter!"

"Call Fritz."

The Kommissar lifted an eyebrow. "What is so important about the acupuncture? Or who did it?"

I explained about the death point protocol Odie Malachin had claimed to know.

"I know nothing of this acupuncture," he said. "Werther is my favourite nephew, so I do not tell him my doubts. But able to kill?" He shook his head. "I cannot believe it."

I turned to Alfred. "Tell me everything that happened last night, Alfred. Leave out no details."

"Lazlo did not want to go to the banquet. He was... tired, so we went back to his room. Werther stopped by to arrange the next day's lecture. He had just left and I was giving Lazlo his usual tonic drink when Fritz came by and offered to provide a special Fang Te-P'i rejuvenation protocol. Lazlo was very interested."

"Not suspicious?"

"No, why should he be?"

"Well, where would Fritz have learned it?"

"Dr Fang *did* have other students..." Alfred pursed his lips. "You think Odie Malachin?"

"Let's ask Fritz."

Fritz was tall and skinny, with protruding eyes. His English was not very good, so Alfred translated.

"Tell me about this rejuvenating treatment, Fritz," I said.

"A Fang Te-P'i treatment, very special, very rare," Alfred said, after listening to Fritz.

"So you learned it from Lazlo Lichter," I stated.

Fritz shifted in his seat, glanced at Alfred, then averted his eyes. He answered, and the answer was met with a burst of rapid German from Alfred. The Kommissar looked interested. Fritz answered defiantly.

"What did he say? Was it Odie Malachin?" I asked.

"Yes," Alfred said, looking disgusted. "The boy swears it is a genuine Fang Te-P'i protocol. 'Why should it matter where he learned it?' he asks. The fool."

The death point treatment, I thought, if Malachin's boast was to be believed. This poor kid was a pawn.

One of the police came and spoke to the Kommissar, who turned to us.

"He said our suspect is at the Reichstadhalle."



Chapter 6

The points of death

Odie Malachin had been detained at a railway station 10 kilometres away. He was brought into the little room to the side of the main hall, dwarfed by the two large Kripos on either side of him. He readily admitted teaching Fritz a rejuvenation protocol, but denied the death point story, and even when we brought Werther in to tell about the night at the Ratsstube, Malachin claimed not to remember saying anything about death points.

“He was very drunk,” Werther confirmed. Alfred, his face red with fury, had to be restrained from attacking Odie Malachin, yelling “*kaltblütiger Mörder!*” He was led out by one of the large Kripos.

I turned to Malachin, who looked scared. “What did you mean, then, when you told me you had left Lichter a present with one of his students?”

Odie Malachin rolled his eyes and his lips squirmed in what I guessed was an attempt to look innocent, said “Why, the rejuvenation protocol, of course.”

“And why would you want to do something good for Lazlo Lichter?”

The little man’s face went through another series of bizarre contortions, then he said “I wanted to show Lazlo that he had not been the only one to learn things from Fang Te-Pi!”

That I believed. But he still denied the treatment had any sinister intent. I took the Kommissar out of the room for a conference. Returning, I said

to Odie “It must be a marvellous treatment.”

“Oh, yes, Fang Te-P’i treatments are very special, very rare.”

“Then you won’t mind if Fritz gives us a demonstration.”

He looked confused and said “No, of course not.”

“A demonstration on you.”

“You mean, actually do the protocol on me, with real needles?”

“Yes. Why? Are you afraid of something?”

Saying yes could land him in prison for attempted murder. Saying no could cost him his life. It all depended upon how deadly he believed the protocol was. But how could he doubt it? He learned it from the teacher he worshipped.

I thought I could see panic in his eyes. Then a new look came over him, his face cleared and he said “Why no, not at all.”

We had one of the portable beds used in the conference brought in, and Fritz arrived. The Kommissar asked him to repeat the procedure he had done on Lazlo.

The protocol began, *Shaoshang* (LU-11) and *Zhongfu* (LU-1), followed by *Qimen* (Liv-14) and *Da Dun* (Liv-1), then the first needles were removed and *Zuqiaoyin* (GB-44) added, followed by *Tongziliao* (GB-1). More points followed, always removing two and adding two.

To me, the logic was clear: it aimed to reverse the natural flow of qi through the channels.

After the third channel Odie Malachin said something in German. I looked at the Kommissar, who leaned over and whispered “He told Fritz that he had the wrong sequence, that he should do something else here.” So that was the ploy, I thought: change the protocol, confuse Fritz. But he had picked the wrong student.

The tall student hesitated, then fixed his protruding eyes on Odie and shook his head. He said something, his voice adamant. The Kommissar smiled and whispered “He said no, I remember very well, you said it must go like this, with no mistake.”

Malachin said something else, insisting. His voice was strident. Fritz looked at the Kommissar and me. I said “Tell him to do what he was originally taught.”

That was when Malachin really began to sweat. Should he jump up and admit that he had planned to kill Lichter? Or brazen it out and hope for the best? He kept trying to distract Fritz, make him skip a point in the sequence. But Fritz was implacable.

Toward the end of the protocol Malachin was breathing hard, his eyes were rolling in his head. Sweat poured through his greasy hair. Suddenly he lost consciousness.

Fritz hesitated, and looked at us again. "Should he go on?" the Kommissar asked.

"Ask him if Lazlo had any reactions like this when he treated him" I said. Fritz shook his head. "No, he says Lazlo was perfectly relaxed right up to when he left," the Kommissar said. "Lazlo mentioned being chilled and a bit numb, but that was all."

I told him to stop the treatment and explained what we had been doing. When Fritz understood, his face changed. He stopped taking needles out of Odie Malachin and gave the last one a vicious twist. Odie yelped and woke up. Fritz said something to the Kommissar, who turned to me. "Fritz wants to know if he was the one who killed Lazlo Lichter."

"No," I said, shaking my head and looking at Fritz. I made a definitive gesture with my hand. "You did not."

But it was obvious that Odie Malachin had been convinced that this was indeed a death point treatment, and that was as good as a confession of attempted murder.

I grabbed his clothes, lifted him half off of the bed, and shook him. "How did you get Lichter into that cage?"

"What cage?" he replied. He was groggy, but again I believed him. In any case, Malachin was too small to even have dragged Lazlo from his bed, much less hoist him into a cage suspended on an iron chain.

It was the last thing Odie Malachin said, as they dragged him away, that I could not get out of my mind.

"What you all don't seem to see," he said "is that Lazlo Lichter was evil. I had to get rid of him. I was not doing this for myself."

In his own mind, this grotesque little man was a white knight.

For Azazel

"Well, thank you," said the Kommissar, shaking my hand. "You have been a great help." He had just returned from booking Odie Malachin.

"What do you mean?" I said. "You sound as if the case is closed!"

"Oh, it is," he said. "We have our killer. At first I did not believe that acupuncture could kill like this, but I have spoken to several experts in the field, including my nephew, and they assure me it is possible."

I could not believe my ears. "No way," I said. "Odie Malachin may have tried his best, but his acupuncture protocol did not kill Lazlo Lichter."

"That is for the State Attorney to decide," he said. "My job is finished."

With that he turned to leave.

"Wait a minute," I said. "What about the knife?"

The Kommissar looked back at me and said "Malachin probably came to

see if his plan had worked, and stabbed him to be sure.” He walked away. I ran after him and grabbed his arm. “Why no blood there in the bed, then?”

He gave a cold look at my hand on his arm. I dropped it.

“Why,” he said, “it should be obvious to a detective of your calibre. Lazlo Lichter was obviously already dead. Corpses do not bleed.” He shook his head and said, as he went through the door, “No, Mr Chan, we have our killer. Leave this in the hands of the authorities. Go back to your herbs.” I stood frozen. It was not so much the injustice, but what the Kommissar had said the moment before. I did not quite have it, but I could sense that the key to the whole case lay just there.

I walked out of the Reichstadhalle in a daze. Werther rushed by on his way somewhere, but stopped to shake my hand. “You did it, Mal. Good job. Branna was right.” He was gone before I could protest.

Vincent the cowboy was sitting on the grass with his back to a tree, rolling a cigarette. A telegram was tucked into his shirt pocket. He gave me a nod. “Hear you are quite the detective, dude. Solved the case in less than a day.” Then he pointed to the telegram. “Took your advice, by the way.” “That’s, um, good,” I said and walked on, my mind packed with thoughts. The Kommissar was right. I was an herbalist, not an investigator. My flight home was set for early the next day. I had a full week of patients waiting. What I *should* do was pack up, sign out, and go. What I *did* do was call the airlines and cancel the flight.

Dagegen ist kein Kraut gewachsen

I got dinner at the Taste of Bavaria place, where I’d first run into Odie Malachin. I didn’t have much appetite. The whole case stunk. The loose ends lay everywhere. But it was as if the police did not care, as if justice had been served already. I paused with a bite half-way to my mouth. Perhaps it had. A long-planned justice.

Branna was walking along the street. I waved and she came over.

“Man of the hour,” she said.

“It’s bullshit.”

“Don’t be modest. I told them you’d be a big help.”

“Branna, Odie Malachin’s death points did not kill Lazlo Lichter.”

“How can you be sure? From what I heard, they sounded pretty deadly.”

“I am sure because I knew that protocol already.”

Her head drew back and her eyebrows lifted. “But how?”

“My grandfather taught me long ago, part of my basic education, he called it, and warned me to keep it secret. But the protocol Malachin taught

Fritz was incomplete. His way would not have hurt a fly: the angles of the needles were all wrong—they should have been pointing against the channel flow—and the time sequence, which is crucial, was completely ignored. No, I could tell as soon as Fritz started needling that this was not what killed Lazlo.”

“So what *did*?”

“I don’t know yet, Branna. But they have the wrong man.” I pushed my plate away. “I need to talk to Sophie, about her locket.”

Branna stared at me in astonishment. “I just left Sophie, and she was very upset.”

“Again? About what?”

“Her locket. It is lost.”

It was my turn to be surprised.

Branna said “Sophie said that locket was very rare; in fact she said it was irreplaceable, since she got it from a dear friend who is now dead.”

“That friend was not, perhaps, named Roselle?”

“Who?”

“Never mind. Let’s go find Sophie.”

A new friend

On the way Branna said she had to collect her train tickets. I went on but bumped into Alfred Götze.

“Don’t tell me how brilliant I was,” I said.

“I will not, Mr Chan. In fact, I now think it very unlikely that Odie Malachin killed Herr Lichter.”

“Why? You were pretty convinced before.”

He shrugged. “Something is not right,” he said. “I can feel it and I think you do too.”

I still had my doubts about him, so I countered with a question. “You said you gave Lazlo his usual tonic drink before the acupuncture treatment, Alfred. What was in that drink?”

He frowned and looked at me. “Pure ginseng. Korean Red. Why?”

“Who made it?”

“I did, with my own hands, just like every night.”

For a moment we walked along in silence. Then, next to St George’s fountain, he put his hand on my arm and stopped me. “Mr Chan, I think you are in danger.”

Startled, I said “Why?”

“Think for a moment,” he said. “If Odie Malachin did not kill Herr

Lichter, someone else did. After an arrest, they will relax. But if you keep

on asking questions...”

Was it a threat? I searched his face. It looked as if Alfred was actually concerned for my safety. I shook his hand.

“Thank you, Alfred. And call me Mal.”

“All right, Mal. Is there anything I can do to help?”

Sophie's interrogation

After leaving Alfred, I thought about the Kommissar's rush to close the case. I wondered if he realised that Lazlo Lichter was the man responsible for his beloved niece's death. If he knew, would that knowledge cloud his judgment? I stumbled on a cobblestone. What if he sensed a deeper plan running here, but was afraid of what he would find? Could *that* be driving his actions?

When Sophie opened the door she was wearing a bright yellow sundress and a frown.

“Do you have my locket?”

I pushed past her to the window, then turned to face her. “The police have it, Sophie. It was found in Lazlo's room.” Her eyes shifted away from mine.

Werther stepped out of the bathroom. “Mal! My uncle told me you were off the case.”

“Odie Malachin did not do it, Werther.” My mind raced. What was he doing here? Were he and Sophie...

Werther became serious. “Don't underestimate my uncle, Mal. If you interfere any more he'll arrest you.”

I turned away, took off my jacket and laid it on the bed.

His face changed, dark and ugly. “It has not escaped his notice that you are the one who found the body, Mal; always a person of interest.” He turned to Sophie. “You convince him.” He slammed the door as he left. I looked at her. The evening sun coming through the window lit up her dress but her face was pale.

“So you and Werther are lovers?”

“No!” She was outraged by the suggestion. “That would be...” she paused.

“Last year, when it all happened, we were both grieving; there were tears... he is like a brother to me. He even calls me by her name sometimes.”

“So that little tiff you two had when we left the banquet, it's not that he was jealous?” That interchange had been niggling at me, something about it.

“No. It was guilt, more than anything, I think. Guilt that he could not

protect his sister when she needed it.”

“So how did your locket end up in Lazlo’s room, Sophie?”

She paced for a moment, mangling her fingers together, then sat down.

“When I left your room, Mal, I walked. I found myself in front of his door.”

She closed her eyes and sighed. “I know. You’re going to say I wanted to revel in Lazlo’s humiliation at the Reichsstadthalle.” Her eyes opened and looked straight into mine. “And it’s true. When I got there, though, his door was open. Just a crack, but I could see that someone was moving around inside. So I gave the door a little push, and it creaked, and whoever it was jerked it open and hit me.”

“What did the person look like?”

Sophie hesitated “I... I only got a glimpse. He was big, dark... I don’t know.”

I was silent. I had asked Alfred to find out about the Korean man who had threatened Lichter at Zur Höll. *He* had the size to get Lazlo into that cage. Sophie’s description fitted.

“My locket must have fallen off then.”

“You mean you weren’t mugged on the street.”

She colored. “I did not want to say I was outside Lazlo’s room.”

“I think you were *in* Lazlo’s room, Sophie. And I think you know exactly who it was that hit you.”

She stood up again and paced, wringing her hands. “Oh Mal, I am so afraid. If I say anything he’ll kill me, just like he did Lazlo.”

“Who?”

“That Korean man. I don’t know his name.”

“Tell me what happened. In detail.”

She looked at me. “You think I had some part in this, don’t you? I know! You think I planned this?” Her hands were straight down at her sides now, in fists.

“I think it was no coincidence that you point to the cage at the torture museum one day, and not long after, a corpse appears in it. Time to come clean, Sophie. Tell me.”

She sat down and buried her face in her hands. When she looked up her face was wet.

“I thought I meant something to you, Mal.”

I stood up and slapped the wall, hard. She flinched. “The hell with it!” I exclaimed. “This is no good, it is getting us nowhere. If you want me to help I have to know everything, right now. What happened in that room? How did Lazlo’s body get into the cage? Tell me, Sophie!”

Her face changed. “Ok, Mal. But I am putting my life in your hands.” She took a breath. “As I said, I saw someone in Lazlo’s room. I pushed the

door open and saw the Korean guy standing over Lazlo in the bed. He turned, I tried to run, but he caught me. He hit me.” She sobbed. “I spoke quickly to him. I was afraid he would kill me for seeing him there. I said I wanted Lazlo dead too.” She stopped and looked at me. “And it was true, Mal. I know. But I would not have killed Lazlo. I just wanted him to suffer for what he did to us, to me and to Roselle.”

“Go on.”

“When I told the Korean that, he hesitated. I could see he was drunk. I told him killing Lazlo was not enough, he had to be shamed, humiliated. Then I thought of the cage, Mal. I said if he put Lazlo’s body in the cage, then we would be accomplices. I would be as guilty as he was.” She shrugged. “Stupid, I know, but it seemed to make sense to him.”

One thing still puzzled me. “Why did you go to Werther’s room after that? Why not just go back to your own room?”

“I don’t know, I couldn’t be alone, it was too... but then when I got there, I realised how guilty it all made me look, so I... fudged a few things.” She looked at me.

I nodded. What she had told me was at least partly the truth, and close to what I had imagined.

“So what are you going to do?” she asked. “Are you going to find the Korean? Are you going to tell the police... about me?”

I stood, picked up my jacket, and moved toward the door.

“Mal, he’ll kill me! Just like he killed Lazlo!”

“He did not kill Lazlo,” I said, my hand on the doorknob.

“What!? What do you mean?”

“Lazlo was already dead.”



Chapter 7

The hammer of Shaitan

Out on the street, dark clouds had gathered and a wind was rising. I looked back up at her window. A curtain twitched. I had reached the square and was passing in front of the town hall when Alfred approached me in a brisk walk.

“You asked me,” he said, “to find out about the Korean man. His name was Kim Doo Han. He ...”

I stopped him. “Was?”

“Yes. He is dead. The police were gathering those who had left the Kongress. When they approached him at the Ansbach station, he threw himself in front of a train.”

“Why? And what was his problem with Lazlo?”

“The police are questioning his girlfriend. She said that he was the disciple of a revered Korean teacher. He’d been offended by the prominence of our lineage.”

I told him about seeing Kim and his girlfriend fighting outside the banquet. Alfred looked grave. “I knew his girlfriend had a private tutoring session with Herr Lichter. That could have been the tipping point, I imagine.”

A private tutoring session. I too could imagine. No wonder Kim was furious. And that was the night Lazlo was killed.

So Kim Doo Han was dead. The police would be happy: suicide as confession was much better than Odie Malachin, even if neither of them was the real killer. Sophie could rest easy, too.

Just at that moment Alfred gave a shout. Something struck my head, there was a crash, and I blacked out. It must have been only moments, but when I came to I saw Alfred lying flat and still next to me, fragments of smashed stone around us. My head throbbed. The back of his head was wet. I grabbed his wrist; he had no pulse.

I looked up. Whoever had dropped this from the top of the tower was gone.

Raindrops splattered on the cobblestones.

People were rushing toward us. I saw a green and tan uniform in the distance. If I was going to catch whoever did this, I could not be locked in questioning for hours. I had to go. With a last look at poor Alfred, I slipped around the corner.

Ist doch ein Kraut gewachsen

Still shaking, I made my way back to my room at the Eisenhut.

I stopped when I saw its weirdly shaped sign. Perhaps it was the result of the blow, but my mind was working strangely, fuzzy, illogical. What had Werther commented when he first brought me here? *Eisenhut* meant iron helmet. But it looked to me more like a monk's cowl. A vision of Lazlo's pallid lips suddenly appeared in my mind's eye.

Like leaves settling to the bottom of a cup of tea, things fell into place in my head. I now had a good idea of what had happened, and who, and why. I set my lips. Alfred, and Lazlo too, would get their justice. But there were still a few things to clear up.

When I found Fritz he was packing, about to catch a ride home with a friend. The friend translated for me.

"Do you remember when I asked you whether Lazlo had any severe reaction to the acupuncture protocol and you said he felt chilled. Can you tell me more?"

He paused and thought. "Herr Lichter said he felt chilled, as if he was coming down with a bad cold. 'Like ice water in my veins.' Those were his words. Oh yes, and his hands were numb, he said. 'Like I am wearing gloves.' But otherwise he seemed fine. Relaxed, as I said."

Classic, I thought. I said a brief prayer of thanks to grandfather and went to look for the Kommissar.

Even though it was late and almost dark, I found him still at the police station.

The Kommissar came to the door of his office. Inside, I could see a seated figure.

“Mr Chan,” he said with a resigned look.

“Can I have a word?”

“I am very busy,” he said, indicating his office.

“Do we have to speak out in the hall like this?”

“You have two minutes.”

There was no choice. “I know how Lazlo Lichter died,” I said, “and I have a good idea of who did it. The first—and key—fact was what you told me, that there was no blood from the stabbing. Lazlo was dead before that, so no blood. The second key fact was from Fritz.”

“Who? Oh, the acupuncture student.” His tone was bored.

“He told me that Lichter had felt chilled, and numb. ‘Like ice water in my veins’ he told me Lazlo said, and ‘I feel like I’ve got gloves on.’ These are classic symptoms.”

“Of what?”

“They are the symptoms of aconite poisoning, as my grandfather taught me very well.” I said. “At first I suspected Alfred. He said he had given Lazlo a tonic drink.”

“Alfred Götze is dead, thanks to you.”

True, I thought with regret. “The target was me,” I said. “But I do think that it was that drink that killed Lazlo.”

“What are you saying, then?” the Kommissar asked. “If Herr Götze gave him the drink, and it was the drink that killed him, well then Herr Götze must be the murderer. My nephew Werther has the same theory.” His eyes shifted toward the person in his office. “He tells me that Herr Götze had the opportunity, he had the motive...”

“What motive?”

“Werther says that Herr Götze wanted to take over Herr Lichter’s school. The only thing standing in his way was Herr Lichter. With him gone...”

I noticed that the person in his office was no longer in the chair.

“No,” I said. “I considered that. But Alfred idolized Lazlo. Ambition was not enough motive for murder in this case. And Alfred truly did not know Lazlo was dead when I met him in the morning. No, it was someone else who had come to the room that night, prepared to poison Lazlo’s tonic drink, someone with a stronger motive for murder.”

“Like what?” he said.

“Like the suicide of a sister,” I replied. “A little sister, vulnerable, preyed upon by the charming Lazlo Licht...”

“Are you saying my nephew Werther?” With shock in his face, the Kommissar turned toward the office, and realised it was empty. Concern

replaced the shock as he went in and checked his drawer.

"My revolver is missing," I heard him say behind me.

But I was already running.

La Torre

I'd realized in a flash what was going to happen. Sophie was the key. She'd fallen in with Werther's need for a substitute sister, even to the point of identifying with her. *He even calls me by her name sometimes*, Sophie had said. Now Werther was cornered he'd want them to go out together, and I didn't mean on a date.

I caught up to them halfway up the tower. The stairs were already narrow and steep. In the shadows ahead I spied Werther dragging Sophie, urging her on with the revolver. When he saw me he pointed and fired. I leapt back, but a lightbulb exploded and splinters cut my face.

"Mal!" Sophie cried.

"Hurry, Rose" Werther said. They were at the narrow ladder opening that led to the tower-top platform. She went up first, prompted by the muzzle of the revolver. He fired another shot at me then scrambled up the ladder. He had to use both hands to reach up and drag himself through. That gave me a chance at his legs. He squirmed the gun back down through the hole, but I knocked it out of his hand and it went clattering down the long series of steps. He kicked at my head and pulled himself up. Lightning silhouetted his form in the frame of the opening.

"Now, Roselle. We'll jump together this time," I heard him say as I pulled myself up behind him. Thunder shook the tower.

"Mal! Help!" She was struggling as Werther dragged her toward the edge, her hand caught in his iron grip. Wind-driven rain lashed us.

"Werther! Stop!" I yelled.

He turned an agonized face toward me, and pulled Sophie to the edge.

He leapt. I grabbed her hand.

And felt her wet fingers slip out of mine.

A scream receded away from me. It went on and on and... stopped.

I looked down at my empty hand, disbelieving.

I'd lost her.

Then a lightning flash showed thin fingers gripping the guard rail. I ran to them and grabbed Sophie's wrists. I looked down at her upraised face.

"Please consider *me* as an alternative to suicide," I said, pulling her up.

"That's Humperdinck's line," she gasped, as she scrambled over the edge.

She held me in a death grip, shivering, but said in a shaky voice, "Try to keep your identities straight, sailor. You're the Man in Black, remember?"



Chapter 8

Harvest at the Red Fortress

I'd been worried about Branna and went to Werther's room to look for her. He could have done anything to her as he began to crack. But the door to his room opened and there she was, unharmed. She did not know what had happened. When I told her, she lay on the chaise lounge and turned toward the bow window, covering her face with her black hair as she sobbed.

I pried the rest of the details from Sophie. She thought Werther was simply going to make Lazlo suffer terribly in revenge for his sister's suicide, she had no idea he planned a murder.

"I was identifying so much with Roselle at that stage. So when he said *finished* the night of the banquet... you remember? I had to go see for myself. It would be like seeing justice being done to my own murderer. Then the Korean guy was there..." She shivered. "I know. I really thought he'd killed Lazlo, and so did he, drunk as he was. When he woke up the next morning and realized what he'd done, he must have panicked and ran. Then when he saw the police..." She shook her head. "I am sorry for him, now." She touched her face; the bruises were fading.

Odie Malachin was being deported as a suspicious person, and looked the part.

How much the Kommissar had known, and when he had learned it, I still wondered. It appeared to me that he had subconsciously tried to end the investigation before he had to face the clear fact of his nephew's involvement. He seemed to be in denial.

"I'd recommend going home now, Mr Chan," he said. "Werther's father is a man of power and he loved his son. There could be trouble for you. Of course, nothing would come of it, but all the same... perhaps do not come back for a while."

His face looked old. "You brought us a bloody harvest after all," he said, and turned away.

Vincent the cowboy appeared with a fine-looking woman on his arm.

"Mal, meet my girlfriend." I shook her hand and she smiled warmly.

"Vinnie told me the telegram was your idea," she said. "So I have to thank you. When he sent me the airline ticket I jumped on the first plane."

"We're off to Italy," he said. "Far away from the family. Give us a chance to find out how we *really* feel about each other."

Sophie was leaving too. "I'm moving back to the States," she said. "Get a little peace and quiet someplace less violent than Rothenburg ob der Tauber."

Then she looked at me with a strange gleam in her eye. "Oh, and Mal," she said.

"Yes?"

"I told you a lie."

"You did?" I tried to sound surprised.

"Yes." She poked her finger in my ribs and twisted lightly. "My father is alive. You want to meet him?"