

THE POLICEMAN OF SECRETS

By Andrew Melvin

Chapter One

Mr. Snow's intruder on that strange winter's evening had been described as the policeman of secrets. All but three of those who had named him as such were now dead. But protecting secrets was indeed his calling, as would soon become apparent in the adventures that were to follow.

In fact, the uninvited guest—discovered sleeping in some comfort beside a roaring fire, a half-finished glass of Solomon Snow's best port by his feet—preferred to call himself a *confidential investigator*. When he found himself in the company of fine ladies, as he often did, he became a *gentleman adventurer*.

That last description suited him well, especially when one considered his appearance.

When first sighted, moaning softly in his sleep as Solomon stood amazed in the center of the parlor above his shuttered bookshop, he was clad in a long black coat of uncertain material. It was well worn and fell to the tops of mud-splashed boots styled in a fashion popular many years before. His dark trousers had a sharp tear along one leg that was spotted with blood, and Solomon was surprised to see what could only be a flute, glinting in the firelight, tucked into a sheath fixed to the broken seam of one boot.

Solomon's eyes rose, taking in one hand clad in a dirty tan glove and the other missing its smallest finger. The stranger wore a pale ivory-colored shirt of an eastern design that had clearly suited him for some

time, and a dark red scarf surrounded his throat.

Above the crimson was a face that was perhaps on the rugged side of handsome, framed by long, unkempt black hair. The complexion was that of someone who spent most of his life outdoors, and an old scar almost surrounding his left eye stood out harshly against the skin.

All in all, a surprising person to be found in one's home on a January night. But Solomon felt no fear, only a great curiosity. It would be a rare thief who would take time to light a substantial fire in the grate and then rest when he could have easily skulked away.

Solomon softly kicked a shard of ice from his sodden boots. In an instant, the man rose, moving from a seemingly disturbed sleep to full wakefulness and pulling a wicked-looking knife from his sleeve. Solomon could not fail to notice a skein of new blood along the blade.

"Wait," he began, a treacherous tremor in his voice. "I—"

"Ah, Mr. Snow, you have returned," said the man pleasantly, halting his apparently imminent attack. His speech came in a deep tone with a strange, neutral accent. Solomon did not take him for a foreigner, but he was clearly well travelled. He stared back hard, his sharp blue eyes seeming to bore into Solomon's very soul.

The shopkeeper must have passed inspection, for the intruder quickly tucked the blade back into its hiding place.

"Sir, how do you know me?" said Solomon. "What are you doing in my private quarters? The

shop is closed. If you are looking for —”

“I’m afraid I made use of your hospitality.” The traveler turned, an expansive wave taking in the fire and the chair he had pulled as close to the flames as possible. Solomon noticed a wet red stain along one of its arms where the fellow had been resting, but he kept his peace. “I have been quite busy this long day,” the man went on, “and your parlor was so inviting. I fear I could not help myself.”

“Please, take your leisure.” The words sounded absurd; Solomon should have been forcing this stranger onto the street, but anxiety and confusion took hold and ran away with his speech. He lifted his copper eye patch—his only affectation—and habitually rubbed the ruined socket beneath. “I have been out at dinner and I...” He tailed off, feeling ridiculously out of place in his own home.

The man smiled at Solomon’s uncertain expression. “An introduction is in order. Of course, of course. I would never be so crass as to intrude into a fellow’s home in dead of night. Oh, actually, I would...” He laughed, a long, cheerful, warm sound. Solomon was silent, helpless in surprise and growing ever warmer as his coat, the flames, and his unstoppable embarrassment at catching a complete stranger asleep in his room blanketed him in heat.

He stepped smartly back towards the door as his uninvited guest bounded to the window, yanking back the heavy curtain to glance outside. It was still snowing hard. The street would be almost impassable by dawn if it continued, and the bookshop could be facing troubling times were the bitter winter to last much longer. Trade at the ramshackle premises

beneath the two men's feet was always uncertain, but nothing was more guaranteed to keep customers at home than cruel conditions.

"All empty," the intruder said cheerfully, replacing the curtain and smoothing its creases carefully, as if it were his own. "Nobody about. Very wise."

Glancing around as if noticing his surroundings for the first time, he went on: "Now, where were we? Ah, yes, who am I? Why am I making a nuisance of myself in a kind gentleman's quarters, when he should be settling himself down to an undoubtedly well-earned night's rest in what, if I may say so, is a particularly comfortable room?"

"Well, I..."

"No need to fret, my friend. You have caught me, and while on another occasion I might have forced my way out, with great violence delivered in a devil-may-care fashion, tonight I am simply too tired.

"Besides, I must ask for your help."

Solomon removed his sodden coat and hat, hanging them on the antique iron stand he had discovered when his spending could be a little more boisterous. Determined to regain a semblance of control, he moved about the room, switching on his lamps. The gentle sound of escaping steam came from each wall sconce as the parlor grew brighter.

The stranger moved towards the fire, happily lifting the tails of his coat and warming his rear before the flames. Scattered drops of crimson marked his route.

"My name is Balthazar," he said, "and you have nothing to fear from me, my friend. I am, let us say, a

collector of rare books.” He emphasized the word. “My inquiries regarding a certain volume have led me – where else – but to the fine shop of Mr. Solomon Snow.”

He gestured, taking in Solomon’s parlor, which seemed increasingly meager the more he considered it. The furniture was threadbare and slight and far from welcoming; it was simply a rarely-used refuge from the world of commerce, and its owner felt ashamed with the poverty of his surroundings. What little money he had was devoted to his trade, and it had never been his wont to waste coins on luxury or frippery. Books were infinitely more important and interesting.

Solomon pulled up his second-best chair and sat. Trading was his forte; the man Balthazar might know of housebreaking and mystery, but the bookseller considered himself a master of business. “If I can sell you a particular item, I would be delighted.”

“Yes, yes, I’m sure you could. If I looked to purchase a much sought-after tome there would be nobody else I would turn to than Solomon Snow. Your reputation is impeccable.” He paused, and those piercing eyes seemed to weigh his host’s character again. “But I am not looking to *buy*. Instead I simply must... *acquire*... Lenksham’s *Theories of Mortality*. My investigations tell me you have it.”

In Solomon’s excited haste to conduct business, he failed to attach any significance to the use of *acquire*. “I did have it,” he said. “The cover was slightly foxed, but a client was willing to settle for its less-than-perfect condition and it left my hands this very day.” He could not resist a trace of pride in his

voice—the proceeds of the sale, safe in a purse in his waistcoat pocket, would clear several nagging debts. “But this is irrelevant; the sale is complete. I’m afraid my customers prefer to remain anonymous but if you were still determined, I could pass your card to the lady who took the Lenksham and ask her man to call on you.”

“Ah. If I was an ordinary customer, that would be an excellent notion. I would expect no less. But, my friend, I am an *extraordinary* customer, and time is of the essence more than you can imag—”

Balthazar stopped short and cocked an ear towards the door leading to the stairs. Solomon was about to speak when he was waved to silence.

Visibly tensing, the other man said quietly: “It seems they are off their game a little tonight. What a pity.”

Questions were about to pour forth, but Solomon was pulled from his chair and forced towards the fire. He was too confused to resist and watched as the stranger stood in the center of the room, facing the door. He looked ready to spring from the floorboards.

There was a catch, a disturbance in the air. The faintest sounds of movement came from downstairs. Solomon had heard no glass breaking or damage caused, yet somebody was in his shop. He made to investigate, but Balthazar gestured for him to remain still then he unbuttoned his tattered coat. A small smile in the firelight revealed a glint of a golden tooth.

The stairs creaked softly beneath the soles of more than one pair of feet. Again Solomon prepared to speak, but the stranger’s expression brooked no

argument.

The parlor door quickly opened, and figures rose from the darkness of the stairwell. The first two the bookseller recognized: street toughs often seen at hostelrys close by. Their clothes were hard and heavy, their expressions cold and brutal. They stepped forward, eyes flicking around the shadowy room then settling on Balthazar and Solomon.

Behind them, almost hidden by their hulking frames, were two more shapes. Both wore costly boots and hooded travelling coats in darkest green that brushed the floor.

The larger of the two removed his hood first, revealing the face of a badly scarred man with a bullet head sitting atop a thick body.

The other was a woman, judging by the rich black hair that shrouded a pale countenance and then fell down the front of the coat. A delicate, long-fingered hand with nails painted in deepest purple rose to pull back the hood, and the gesture uncovered a beautiful, well-bred woman in her early thirties, with piercing dark eyes and full lips. Her expression was one of amusement, but there was harshness in it, and those eyes seemed to search through the gloom like those of a fox after its prey.

Balthazar was unmoved by the new arrivals. He gestured as if welcoming them in, and focused on the better-dressed pair. "Mr. Crowe, good to see you once again. And you have brought Elizabeta with you. Charmed as always."

He gave the woman a half-bow, but never took his eyes from them. "Are you here to talk, or shall we simply begin our business once again? I am a little

tired, so you will excuse me if am slightly below my best. As, indeed, you seem to be. Crowe, I could hear you picking the locks of my good friend's shop while we were deep in the most fascinating discussion. You are certainly not the adversaries I remember."

The figure he had named as Elizabeta spoke English with a cultured German accent, her tone condescending and sharp. "Give us the information we want, Balthazar, and we shall all go about our business this cold night hale and hearty. You know the price of delay."

That thin hand rose again and she pointed towards his wounded arm and leg, but he did not glance down to the blood trickling into an expanding pool beneath his feet. Her face tilted to one side, as if in curiosity at his plight. The two brutes stood, unmoving and clearly waiting for a command, as she continued. "We know you seek the Lenksham. Your last contact was good enough to tell Mr. Crowe of your success so far, and your plans for the future—what little there remains of it—before he found our questioning a little too vigorous."

The man Crowe laughed, the rumbling bass sound echoing around the room. "He could talk, that one. Talk and talk and talk. Anything to stop the pain." He smiled, and there was a long pause. "It's stopped now, though. No more pain. No more man."

He rocked with sudden crazed delight, then quickly stilled. Balthazar flinched, and Solomon saw his knuckles whiten, but he remained silent.

Stepping towards a corner away from her companions, Elizabeta went on: "So, Count, what shall it be? A charming conversation packed with

witticisms and gossip, as enjoyed by the civilized society of which you were once a part?

“Or shall Crowe and our two friends simply pull you apart like a rotten chop, as we did your talkative friend?”

There was an explosion of violence, terrifying in such a small room. Balthazar leapt forward, his hands rushing inside his coat. In the second it took to reach the street thugs, his left held a cruel metal spike and his right a pistol. As the brutes reached for their own weapons, the spike took one full in the throat. He dropped to the floor, gagging on his flooding blood. Not pausing for a second, Balthazar flicked a catch with his thumb and a bullet caught the other tough in the eye. He had no time to utter a sound before he fell dead.

The gun’s roar stunned all in the parlor, but Crowe recovered quickly and used the momentary delay to draw two daggers from his belt, both dripping in an oily black liquid. He stepped back, waiting for Balthazar to cross the bodies of the hired thugs.

Instead, the count jumped sideways, towards the open space before the window, and Solomon heard a ratcheting from the ornate pistol as it reloaded mechanically.

Crowe and the woman ran for him, her outstretched arm knocking Solomon down in her haste.

Balthazar moved to fire again. Crowe was too swift, and closed before the count could ready himself. A giant fist knocked the gun away, but Balthazar pulled a short sword from inside his

voluminous coat and managed to take a fighting stance, dodging one of Crowe's blades. The other rose towards his chest but Balthazar moved frantically, and the point pierced a curtain instead.

As Solomon recovered his footing, the woman drew her own pair of blades, waiting for an opportunity.

Balthazar slipped, his boot caught in the folds of cloth around the window, and dropped to one knee, breathing hard. Crowe loomed over him, both daggers poised.

Elizabeta shouted in a voice high with adrenalin, "Wait! You have a chance now, Count, and one chance only. Tell us what you know, here, in comfort, or we shall be forced to take you before Doctor Flair. He has such *machines*, such magnificent *devices*." She savored the words. "I'm sure he remembers your screams from your last visit as well as you do."

Balthazar made to rise, but was clearly suffering the cumulative effects of his wounds and exertions. Crowe required no effort to push him down with a dagger hilt. He turned to his partner, who sighed at Balthazar's silence. She nodded with finality, and Crowe pulled his blades back, aiming for the fallen man's spine and a paralyzing blow.

Suddenly, as if a switch had been turned, the instincts of battle that he had tried so hard to forget returned to Solomon in a flood. Forcing muscles that had been idle too long into rapid, fluid movements, he grabbed the heavy coat stand and shoved it bodily into Crowe and Elizabeta. He pressed on, and its toppling weight caught the woman hard, knocking her to the floorboards. She and Solomon briefly

caught each other's gaze, and he gasped, unnerved by the ferocity in her stare.

Crowe jumped back, but the distraction was all Balthazar needed. He rose to his feet, grabbing his discarded sword as he came, and ran his opponent through the chest, momentum forcing the big man back until he was pinned to the wall.

"Solomon!" Balthazar shouted. "We must get out! Now, sir!"

He left the blade where it was and moved away from the stunned Elizabeta, who was starting to rouse herself. "Explanations will come soon, believe me," he said to Solomon. Panting, he turned to check the room, looking for any mislaid items. "For now, we should escape. You are caught in something you cannot understand, and if you stay your situation will become most unpleasant."

The woman shoved the coat stand away from her legs and stood, a little unsteadily. Groggy yet unafraid, she stretched an unsteady arm to one of her fallen daggers. The room smelled thickly of gunpowder and blood.

Balthazar retrieved his pistol then grabbed Solomon's arm. "Take what you need, but we must away before her friends arrive. They are on their way, and in force, have no doubt."

The bookseller was too confused and frightened to argue. He glanced at Elizabeta, who seemed unsure of her surroundings and had only now noticed her companion hanging lifeless on the wall. She showed no sign of attacking, but something in those deep eyes persuaded him to keep his distance.

Solomon snatched up his travelling case, pulled

his fallen coat from the floor, and followed the fleeing form of Balthazar down the stairs. From behind he heard the sound of paper rustling, and surmised that the dazed woman preferred to rifle his belongings rather than pursue the fight.

Balthazar yanked open the door from the hallway to the street and rushed outside. Solomon was close behind, his head full of questions, when the other man turned. His ruddy complexion was dark in the moonlight as he said, his voice quick with excitement, "I thank you for your assistance. I am sorry you are caught in this bloody affair, but it cannot be helped. I will tell you what I can, but for now we must leave your shop to our enemies while we may."

The count stepped into the darkness away from the street lamps and towards the river road. Solomon felt little option but to follow. The sound of many horses being ridden very fast came from perhaps only a street away. Nothing friendly would be approaching that quickly, he knew.

He turned but once and saw in the firelight at his parlor window a beautiful pale face amid black hair. It was watching them, unmoving. Then it seemed to nod once in recognition, and was gone.

Chapter Two

As he moved through drifts turned yellow by the moon, Balthazar's gait revealed the extent of the injuries he had sustained both before and during the mayhem in the parlor. His left leg trailed the other and he favored his right arm, occasionally rubbing it to ease the pain. Solomon saw blood shining black against the lamplight. It was clear the count could not remain upright much longer.

"Staying here is not an alternative, my friend," said Balthazar, his breath clouding in the frozen air. "Elizabeta and her late friends are agents of the Arcanum, and such people are to be feared. They and their foul leaders are the secret force that runs this nation, and others too, I suspect. I am their foe, and have paid the penalty. But now" — he paused to take a thin breath — "you are involved in our game, and for that I am sorry.

"So much must remain secret for the present, but I can tell you a book you passed on is of vital importance and I must have it, *whatever* the price."

Full of questions as the pair strode away, keeping to the shadows all the while, Solomon could not help whispering, "That woman, Elizabeta. She spoke of... torture."

"Yes, a dear friend of mine was aware of your prominence in the book trade, and he told me that if anybody would have a copy of the Lenksham, it would be you. So here I am. The poor man probably thought they would stop their attack and leave him, so that they could subject you to the same and he could live in peace."

He looked about, but there was no sign yet of any pursuers. "He didn't know the Arcanum like I do. Now they are aware of you and your activities. I would suspect your shop is being looted from beam to base as we speak. What a night!"

Balthazar's breathing was becoming more difficult, Solomon noted, and the count's sweat-streaked face was growing white as he went on, "Sorry, old boy. I mean to cause you no more harm, but many lives depend on my success. You must take me to the client who has this book."

"But why? Why is it so important? I have not read it but from what I know, it's a very tedious treatise on life's trials and how one should make the most of each day. Nothing of any interest."

"Trust me when I say that it is far more important than you can imagine. There is much to it that is hidden, and much we shall enjoy discovering together. If you stay with me, I expect there will be danger, violence, and more such excitement. I might also be able to provide great wealth and books of a quality and character you cannot fathom. What say you?"

Mr. Snow was about to reply when the count collapsed.

Solomon's club, the Athenaeum, was an expense he could ill afford. But it was convenient for the theatre and an invaluable source of clients. His regimental service and a few collectibles sold to the right people at the right price also earned him a little flexibility regarding the late payment of his subscriptions.

On this mysterious evening, it seemed the only

place to turn for discreet assistance. Its respectful staff saw little, heard less, and said nothing.

Holding Balthazar up with one arm, Solomon flagged down what appeared to be the neighborhood's solitary hansom cab. The driver, wrapped up well against the cold, was grateful for any fare on such an unforgiving night and was happy to help him push Balthazar into the carriage, where the count fell onto the worn velvet seat beside a comforting brazier of burning charcoal.

"Too much ale, I fear," Solomon said by way of explanation for the bloodstained man's unconscious state. The cabbie said nothing, so Solomon directed him to a street near the Athenaeum. Uncertain though he was about the night's events, the bookseller knew it would be good practice to ensure that few people knew of their exact destination. Cabbies and their ilk were wont to chatter, and it would not take long for the mysterious group Balthazar named the Arcanum to pick up their trail.

The count remained helpless throughout the journey, while Solomon did what little he could to stem the bleeding from the other man's several wounds. The streets were empty, the usual evening promenaders clearly favoring warmer surroundings. He heard nothing from the cabbie on his perch and sat listening to the pleasing sound of the carriage wheels through the drifts.

Soon the vehicle pulled to a halt, and the driver helped carry Balthazar to the street. "Alrigh' guv'nor? This the place?" he asked. "Ain' nuthin' open, tho'." He gestured around at the shops with blackened windows and houses sealed against the night.

Solomon thrust a handful of coins at him. "Yes, this is excellent. I shall be able to lead my friend home from here. No need for you to help any more. The walk might sober him up before his wife greets us. She has such a temper."

"Ah, my wife, she's the same. Nummer o' times I caught' it when I been 'ome late!"

Laughing quietly and shaking his head in sympathy at the unconscious man's marital plight, the driver climbed back to his seat. With a cheery wave he rode off, leaving the two men in silence.

Solomon waited until the vehicle was out of sight, then started half-dragging, half-carrying his strange companion towards the club. Hampered by the weather, their progress was slow. So it was some time before they managed to traverse the three streets and Solomon saw a welcoming firelight glow from a window beside the porticoed entrance.

Holding Balthazar against the cold wall, he rapped hard on the door, breathing hard from his exertions and sweating furiously inside his layers of clothing.

The door opened and he was pleased to see Maltravers, one of the oldest and most trustworthy retainers. The two men had served together through many a battle, and Maltravers continued to regard Solomon as his commanding officer. He was one of the few that recalled the bookseller's former rank.

Maltravers cast a gimlet eye over the two new arrivals and took in their bedraggled, exhausted appearance at such a late hour with barely a flicker. It was his manner to speak in a breathless rush, as if running out of time to talk: "Good evening, Captain

Solomon, forget something when you came earlier, back for a nightcap?"

"No, no. My friend and I were attacked by street toughs, and he has been gravely wounded. He needs your help, old friend, and your skill with a needle."

"Of course, sir, happy to oblige, happens to the hardest of us, streets not safe, come in, sir, come in."

The club was not as well appointed as some Solomon had been fortunate enough to visit for dinner with clients, but it was comfortable enough, with welcoming lounges and a respectable chef. Its members were of an artistic and creative bent and conversations were convivial and largely free of the business talk he found so tiresome. It had an excellent library that he had helped stock, but one of its main attractions, and the reason it seemed an obvious sanctuary this night, was its comfortable and private wing of bedrooms. The two men would not be the first visitors too tired or insensible to find their way home.

Solomon knew that with servants like Maltravers to watch over them, they might be able to bide their time while he considered his suddenly changed circumstances and whether he should cut himself free of the mysterious Count Balthazar.

Once Balthazar was sufficiently stripped and installed in one of the beds, Solomon sat while the retainer fussed around the bedroom, lighting candles and drawing the curtains. As Maltravers stoked the room's small fire, the bookseller studied the sleeping figure. It seemed he had been slashed in both the arm and leg and beaten around the chest, the vivid color of the bruises indicating that the injuries were fairly

recent. A host of scars were scattered across his torso, some clearly burns and others from blades. His body had been ill used over many years judging by the extent and age of several of the marks.

Maltravers inspected the bleeding and more serious wounds. He turned to Solomon, smiling. "It's been a while since I stitched our brave boys up, Captain, but I reckon I haven't lost my touch. I'll never be a surgeon, but still know a thing or two, you rest, I'll fetch my old kit. There are a few gentlemen here tonight, Mr. Smith, young Cofton, but I don't reckon we'll be disturbed."

Solomon was grateful for a few moments' relaxation by the fire, and it was not long before his former sergeant was busy stitching the count's wounds with the contents of a battlefield medical box that was dusty with neglect.

Solomon watched in grim fascination, uncertain of his next step but determined to learn more about the man who had caused so much disruption to a postwar life that had been, up to then, steady and comfortable if unadventurous.

To pass the time and avoid the ad hoc surgery, he rummaged through Balthazar's belongings, which were scattered around the bed. On closer inspection, he saw that the man's clothes were once of very good quality but had been allowed to run to seed through heavy use. The battered boots had travelled many miles through difficult country, and the flute shining incongruously from one was spotted with rust and what he supposed was long-dried blood.

Balthazar's long coat concealed numerous surprises, including a pocket crossbow strapped to

the lining alongside four quarrels (all pockmarked and worn) and a thin dagger of Italian workmanship. In one pocket was a leather pouch holding a fair-sized fistful of coins and notes from Britain, France, Germany, and other countries Solomon struggled to ascertain.

Another pocket held an antique brass compass that was sweat-stained and dirty, and the last, deep inside the lining, was bursting with papers. Spreading them on the floor, Solomon saw they were from many different sources. Aged parchment scored with deep black ink; broken silk sheets covered in a shaky hand; scraps and fragments of vellum with half-finished sentences that wandered over the page. He struggled to study them in the room's poor light, anxious that reading for too long with his one eye would cause another of the brain fevers that could render him helpless. Glancing at a few sheets, he made out book titles, London street names, and much more he did not understand. Some was written in French and more in Latin, and a few remnants were of such an age that he feared his touch would ruin them.

Maltravers stood up, his medical skills apparently put to good use. He wiped his brow with bloodstained hands and said, "I've done what I can, he weren't hurt too bad, we saw worse, eh? I reckon a night or two o' rest an' he'll be right."

"I'm very grateful, Sergeant. He is a relative stranger to me, but I know he would be thankful to have met such a skillful surgeon."

The servant laughed at the title his former captain had granted him and Solomon pressed a note into his hands before he could reply. "I'm sure I can rely on

your discretion if my companion and I were to stay here until he is rested. There may well be some people inquiring after him or us, and it would be better if our presence here remained private.”

Maltravers pushed the money into a pocket and gave a perfect salute before opening the door to leave. “I’ll see you’re not disturbed, and I’ll make sure chef lets you have some of his finest until you can’t eat no more.”

Locking the door behind him, Solomon fell into the room’s sole chair and was asleep before he could spend a moment wondering about the surprising turn his life had taken, and where this unknown adventurer might lead him next.

Having ordered her reinforcements to search the shop and surrounding area, Elizabeta set about poring over the parlor of the suddenly-brave Solomon Snow. The little intelligence she had gained about him told her he was a poor businessman whose only wealth was his reputation as a dealer who paid a fair price for books of all kinds. Had she known of his eagerness to join a fray in support of a total stranger, she would have killed him as soon as saw him. But now was too late for such regret.

Instead, she busied herself in the chaotic jumble of clutter that made up his quarters. Clearly Snow spent little time here, if the unkempt bedroom and disarray in the parlor were any clues. There were few signs of wealth, although she quickly pocketed a fistful of notes poorly hidden in a dresser drawer. The space around the fire was the only comfortable area of this upper floor, and it was also home to the one

notable item among the bric-a-brac of a life turned sour.

Snow's favorite chair was placed just *so* before a small painting that stood alone on the wall. Peering closer, Elizabeta saw that it showed him smartly dressed and before he lost his eye and gained the neat moustache he currently wore (with some panache, she admitted to herself). He had his arm around the shoulder of a petite woman in a drab white dress. The artist had a meager amount of skill—doubtless the best the couple could afford—but he had made a fair fist of capturing Solomon's likeness. The bookseller in the painting was a sturdy man with soft brown eyes, and if he had since gained the weight of too many dinners at his club, he still had the sort of firm physique and keen looks that would stand out in a crowd. The woman, on the other hand, suffered from the pale and drawn face of the consumptive, even though the artist had done his best to tactfully add some warmth to those fragile features. Elizabeta instantly despised her for the fragility that had presumably led her to the grave; Solomon bore no wedding ring or other jeweler, Elizabeta had observed, and there were no feminine touches in this meager home.

The frame of the painting showed signs of being much moved, she saw; probably taken off the wall by a widower giving his dead wife another loving gaze. It was easy for Elizabeta to lift it free and, after the briefest glance at Solomon's face and those gentle eyes, she hurled it into the fire.

There was a cough behind her, and she turned to see one of her agents. *Killian, is it?* She rarely troubled

herself with their names.

“Ma’am, you were right,” the man said. “One of the Audiophon Receivers we left in the street did record something. The others heard nothing, but one...”

He raised a finger, and another agent entered with the Receiver in both hands. Made of polished tin and the size and shape of a hatbox, it was dominated by a grille of wires around its circumference. The top contained a series of brass and silver dials and switches, and a small flap that allowed access to the clockwork mechanism that powered it. Elizabeta had little idea how it operated but she knew of its reputation and its value at times like this.

“Well, get on with it,” she ordered, watching the flames lick hungrily over the remainder of Solomon’s painting. His miserable wife’s face was the last section to burn, she noted.

The agent turned a dial, and the room filled with the sound of howling wind, reproduced in the most approximate fashion by the needle bouncing and clattering over a wax cylinder spinning slowly within the Receiver.

The man said: “As you ordered, Crowe switched on the Receiver as soon as you arrived, ma’am, so there is a great deal of, well, *nothing* happening in the street. But then—” He stopped as distant thumps and bangs echoed in the parlor. *That was Crowe and those two dregs being killed*, thought Elizabeta. There was more noise of the empty street. Then clattering and Balthazar’s voice, very rough and broken thanks to the recording mechanism but still understandable: “Staying here is not an alternative, my friend.”

After a few hours of sleep filled with dark dreams of the violence in his rooms and a pale woman's face peering from his window, Solomon awoke before dawn.

The streets outside had settled into stillness and there was no sound from the rest of the club. Balthazar was sleeping hard but Solomon fancied that the count's wounds already appeared less severe than they had during the drama of the night.

He passed the time trying to make sense of Balthazar's papers, but the mixture of languages, handwriting, and fragmented notes made it a difficult task. More than once his poor sight forced him to sit with his eyes closed, waiting for the headaches that plagued him to subside. He was in such a condition when he heard Balthazar suddenly speak for the first time since he collapsed: "How did you lose your eye?"

The count was sitting up in bed, looking refreshed and more vigorous than Solomon had yet seen him. He showed no sign of any discomfort at all.

Solomon was startled. "You were sore wounded just a few hours ago. How can you be so recovered?"

"It will take a lot more than that to keep me down, believe me. I've been at this game a long time and learnt a few things to make sure I stay hale and hearty." He gestured at Solomon's surprised face. "The eye?"

There was a long pause, and then Solomon replied, "The Crimea. I was in Intelligence when I was needed at the front. Hitchin—the Honorable Rupert, perhaps you have heard of him—had caught

a ball in the belly and was sent home, so they wanted another... *spy*, I suppose you would say. I was good with languages. Codes and such like. That's what I'd been doing before the war; interpreting, when I wasn't busy in my shop. So I went up to the lines, but never reached them. I was still at the rear when I camped overnight with the baggage train. They were a good bunch of fellows, but prone to drink too much. I was asleep when one of them, drunk as a judge, slipped on his way back from headquarters. He dropped a torch that rolled into an ammunition store. There was an explosion as if the devil himself was coming to kill us. When I came round, one eye was gone. I was lucky; four men were not, and the surgeon said it was a miracle I wasn't with them."

It was an old lie that he had told often enough to sound wholly convincing. He added, "There was no glory in my war. Now I cannot read for more than a few moments without suffering the worst headaches. You cannot imagine the pain."

Balthazar smiled ruefully. "Trust me, I have suffered my share. Yet you keep a bookshop, a man who cannot read."

"It is all I know." The words sounded pitiful to Solomon, so he added, "I am good at trade, prices, the dealing. I know what books will sell, even if I cannot enjoy them myself."

"The sources that led me to you say your establishment is doing well."

"Sometimes. People do love reading. I've never known a time when they were so obsessed with books." At this Balthazar smiled, almost to himself. Solomon failed to grasp his reason, and continued.

"My prices are fair, and I have a certain amount of knowledge that customers find helpful. I'd like to return there, once all this... business is over."

"Ah, yes. Let me partake of a little breakfast and you shall learn more about this 'business'."

Maltravers came at Solomon's summons and they settled to bread, the finest French preserves, and thick salted meats that built a thirst quenched by several pots of tea. Neither spoke, occupied with their own thoughts. Then Solomon waited, watching the lifeless, icy street as the count dressed.

When Solomon turned finally, Balthazar was clad as he was when they first met, with his belongings tucked into his coat's numerous pockets. His glove and scarf were in the appointed places and his boot-holstered flute shone in the cool sunlight. The bed was made, and besides the scant remains of breakfast there was no trace he had ever been in the room at all.

"Come," the count said. "Let us adjourn." He waved a hand at the room, and then pointed at the ceiling. "As pleasant as this has been, I prefer to talk somewhere a little more private. Rooftops are often empty, I find, and it would be nice to see the sun while we talk of some dark business."

Under Solomon's direction, they headed for the stairs which filled the center of the club. Despite the count's obvious caution, it was impossible to traverse the four floors without encountering a servant starting their day's work. Solomon allayed any curiosity about the two men being outside the rooms that were usually frequented by members by telling each worker that his friend was viewing the accommodation before he considered applying for

membership. The closer they were to the roof and rooms solely occupied by servants and stores, the weaker it sounded, but the ex-captain's reputation held firm and nobody impeded their progress.

Soon they were at the door that led to the attic and, as Solomon knew from conversations with Maltravers, a small balcony used by servant girls to discreetly air members' soiled bedding.

He pushed the door open, filled with curiosity about what the count had to say, and they stepped out.

All of central London lay beneath them, the growing noise of countless streets rising up to their lofty perch. To their left, the spires of Westminster, just visible above the palatial homes around the Athenaeum, shone brightly. To the east, the sun was dawning over buildings that gradually lowered towards the grim rookeries that were makeshift homes to so many of the nation's poor. Far below, an orange-seller called out for custom. Her voice, high and powerful, carried above the din of pedestrians, hansom cabs, carts, and more.

Solomon was still taking in the view, the broad expanse of so much life all around them, when Balthazar spoke: "We are at war."

"Oh? What do you mean?"

"The secret kind. The best kind. A war of shadows and mysteries. Not your sort, not cavalry charges, the thin red line. Not that at all. This is a fight for information, and for the truth."

Solomon was mystified. "I have heard nothing about—"

"—Of course not. But let me shed a little light into

your darkness. The Arcanum, of your new and dreadful acquaintance, control the lives of *millions*. They rose to power with guile and treachery and now almost the whole population is under their sway. They force people to work longer and harder than ever before, in conditions that nobody would bear if their minds were intact. They can crush resistance when they want, or create support for any strategy they wish, no matter how misguided. The Arcanum's leaders have already made great fortunes, and their agents have enjoyed all the rewards you might expect: power, money, sex, and more."

"How, exactly?"

"Books, my friend. Words. Everything you—or the general populace, sorry, forgot about your poor eyes—everything they read is written, published, and distributed by the Arcanum and their pawns. Through those books, and papers, pamphlets, and whatnot, they have reduced the masses to a state of slavery, even though their victims don't know it."

"Oh, come now."

"It is the truth, I give you my word. They have been at work since Napoleon fell, and have become very, very good at their business. Their agents are also *extremely* skilled at keeping their work secret, so very few people know what has really happened to their country. They have become rich and almost unstoppable, but that is still not enough for them."

"I don't believe it. I'm sorry, Count—if that's what you really are—but you must be weak from your wounds. Perhaps you took a blow to the head. I've heard no mention of any such war, no people turned into slaves. Nothing."

“You don’t have to believe me. But know this: if you return to your home, you will be tortured and killed before an hour is out. You have my gratitude, sir, for your handiwork against Elizabeta and her friends. They had injured me earlier last night, and I don’t know how much longer I could have lasted.

“But some of the books you deal in are essential to the group trying to stop the Arcanum, and it is my mission to seize them.”

“What books? What group?”

“The society of which I am proud to be a member, old boy.” Smiling, he pressed a hand to his chest in a rough approximation of somebody about to swear allegiance. “The Workshop of Light.”

Although he was unafraid despite the count’s warning, Solomon had no desire to leave for home with so many questions unanswered. He buttoned his jacket as a wind sent flurries from the club’s roof, and rubbed his hands against the cold.

He listened in part interest, part bewilderment as Balthazar explained the history of the Arcanum, something he called the Subjugation Assembly, and how his Workshop of Light was working to, he said, “turn the world the right way up again”.

According to Balthazar, the foundations of his so-called secret war were laid at the close of the struggle against Napoleon, as the victorious nations picked over the spoils of fallen France. “The powers-that-were looked around, saw the damage done by this jumped-up soldier and his followers, and said, ‘Never again.’ There are no records, of course, but we know that some of the highest in the lands met—in Rotterdam, of all places—to work on ways of holding

on to power and keeping the rest of us down. You can imagine the sort of thing: no revolutions, no more people tackling the old order. I expect they had some clue of all the problems coming their way in the thirties and forties. I was caught up in it myself in '48. The Berlin demonstrations. Dirty business, left a few hundred dead.

"Anyway, these conspirators called themselves the Arcanum."

"What did they create? There must have been something or I wouldn't be in this situation."

"Quite right. It wasn't *what* they came up with, but *whom*. Fellow by the name of Boismoir. French. A printer, writer, thinker, that sort of cove. Very clever—a lot of them are from my experience, the French. After a few years Boismoir told the crowned heads and their lackeys of a way they could keep all their palaces, their land, their wealth, and so on. All without firing a shot."

"Oh?" The chill was forcing its way into Solomon's bones and he looked longingly towards the door back into the club. But Balthazar showed little sign of leaving, only moving closer to Solomon as he continued in a voice barely above a whisper. From the street below, they heard a wagon driver cursing a recalcitrant animal.

"Boismoir spent most of his life studying ancient languages, old books, mysteries," said the count. "Probably not the most amusing guest at a party, I would think. He said he and a few friends with similar skills would create books that would leave the reader weak and confused. Open to suggestions." He leaned forward for emphasis. "*Controllable*. He called

it the Subjugation Assembly.”

Solomon laughed. “Who has heard of such a thing? Books that mesmerize? I’ve never seen the like. I’m sure nobody in my profession has.”

“It matters not. I will show you proof, but trust me when I say that every, *every* book sold in the last 10 years or so has this language in it, a code to keep people obedient. It is a combination of markings, words, images, inks, paper. You may not notice it at first, but it works its magic as you continue. Within a few weeks you will do anything the books tell you.”

Through the door behind them, they could hear the sound of a woman whistling tunelessly. A maid, no doubt on her way to her quarters on this uppermost floor. The count began rummaging through his voluminous coat, searching for something as he said: “Every book has at least one basic message: *read more*. The more people read, the more they fall under the Arcanum’s spell.”

In the club, the girl’s whistle was suddenly cut short.

Instantly, the count pulled a thin metal hook from his coat, hefting its weight experimentally as he glanced over the balcony edge.

Solomon said: “No, I don’t believe any of this. I don’t know what I’m involved in, but I’ve had quite enough, thank you.”

Balthazar pushed the hook between the two handles of the door leading into the club. The gap was tight and the hook stuck fast, to his evident satisfaction.

Solomon was about to ask a question when, through the door’s glass, he saw the body of a young

maid dressed in the Athenaeum uniform drop to the floor. Behind her was the woman Elizabeta, who wiped the bloody blade of a stiletto on a white silk handkerchief. The stain was obscenely dark in the shards of morning sun through the panes.

Elizabeta smiled thinly as she spotted Solomon.

Balthazar grabbed his arm. "They've found us, I'm afraid. Took a little longer than I expected. Perhaps she's a little dazed by your attack, eh?"

In the corridor, the killer turned to somebody out of sight, signaling them forward.

Pulling Solomon to the balcony's edge, Balthazar cried out, "Well then, shall we?"

With barely a moment's hesitation, he leapt over the railing and out of sight. Solomon jumped forward just in time to see the tails of the count's coat on the balcony of the room below and to the right. There was a *crack* behind him and he turned to see a burly man in a coachman's long coat, its rich leather dyed deepest green, smash bodily into the door held shut by Balthazar's hook. Wood split and the glass shattered but the frame held firm. Solomon spotted Elizabeta ordering another charge then he climbed unsteadily onto the wall abutting the balcony.

From his new perch below, Balthazar turned and waved Solomon down then pulled a pistol from his coat.

The bookseller gingerly clambered onto the railing. The wind was growing fierce, and his jacket billowed around him as he peered nervously down at his target. To jump seemed suicidal—even in his prime he was never as energetic as Balthazar was now—but to stay, and face the unknown peril of the

Arcanum?

The door gave way at last, and the man skidded onto the balcony, reaching desperately for Solomon, who braced himself and then slipped off the ledge.

As he fell, there was a shot from below, and Solomon felt a ball narrowly flick up past his head and into the green coat. Arms outstretched, he clattered into the railings of the new balcony and would have plunged to his doom had not the count used his free hand to hold him onto the iron bars.

"Pull me up, pull me up!" cried Solomon. With quick, easy movements, Balthazar maneuvered him to safety, but gave him no time to catch his breath. "Let us away, my friend. Lots to do. Can't be sitting here now, can we?"

Pulling the other man to his feet, he ran to the end of the short balcony to plan his next move. Shots struck the stonework around them but the angle was awkward and none found their target. From nearby windows came cries of surprise and curiosity but Balthazar ignored every sound as he scoured the skyline, estimating and plotting. Solomon kept watch towards the Athenaeum, ducking back as he saw the Arcanum agent joined by a man in a similar long coat. Both were readying weapons. He spotted Elizabetha behind them, clearly urging her two minions to follow their quarry down to the neighboring building. They were reluctant to make such a leap, and he felt a shred of sympathy.

"I have it, Solomon," said the count suddenly. "What time is it? Around eight? And we are in Piccadilly? Excellent. We may be just in time."

"For what?"

Balthazar pressed on. “Can’t go down—bound to be a few of the devils on the street. Upwards and onwards, that’s the key. Follow me! As soon as we’re safe you will know everything.”

Checking that his companion was behind him, the count kicked at the door from the balcony that led into the Athenaeum’s neighbor. One blow was enough, and the pair plunged in to a room lined with aged cupboards full of yellowing books. A patina of dust coated every surface and a strong smell of mildew hit their nostrils.

Solomon instinctively paused to check the books, but Balthazar pulled him on to the room’s only other door. They heard a crash, then movement on the balcony. The count pushed Solomon to one side as he drew his pistol. Pointing it to the wall, he moved the barrel towards the right, seemingly in parallel with a pair of footsteps rushing to the door they had kicked through.

As another explosion of noise came from outside, there was a brief shadow in the doorway. Balthazar fired, sending a ball into the head of the first Arcanum man. The body collapsed into the room, blood spattering across the floor, as the second agent, close behind, pulled his own weapon from his greatcoat and fired blindly.

Solomon needed no prompting to yank open the nearby door and jump out into a darkened corridor leading left and right. He saw the count backing quickly from the room, pistol leveled, and heard a fresh burst of energy from the balcony as the enemy’s reinforcements undoubtedly arrived.

“Come on!” he cried, pulling at Balthazar’s jacket

and shoving the door closed once the other man was through. They leapt aside as bullets punched into the wood and on into the corridor's back wall. There were no signs of any inhabitants, but dim light from a dirt-smearred end window revealed the edge of a flight of steps leading up.

They ran for the upper floor as the door behind them burst open. Dodging into the shadows, they avoided two bullets before reaching the upper floor. Boxes of neglected paperwork littered the floor and a door hung limply from a broken hinge. Through it, they could feel the day's chill.

Balthazar pushed it open and they found themselves on the flat roof. Directly in front was the top of the Athenaeum, the two buildings divided only by a low wall that Elizabeta and four more agents were in the process of climbing. The group spotted their prey as they found their footing, and the woman hissed an order to send them all forward.

Running back so that the small storeroom provided some cover, Balthazar was almost breathless but grinned wildly. "More fun than running a bookshop, eh?"

He tugged his watch from his waistcoat and checked the time. "Well, if she's on schedule, we may live to fight another day. If not, then... *Ha!*"

Solomon was about to speak when he heard a powerful motor drawing near from the direction of Westminster. Behind them came the sound of boot heels, and Balthazar dragged him to his feet. "No time to waste!"

The engine noise grew louder still, a constant mechanical *thump-thump* that soon drowned out all

other sounds and seemed to be in parallel with them as they ran directly away from the gunmen. A shot whipped through Solomon's jacket, nicking his elbow painfully, but he quickly followed the count to the building's edge.

From below, rising majestically, came the enormous balloon of an airship. Solomon gasped, but Balthazar seemed to fully expect it. The ship's red silk shroud was vivid in the sunlight, drawing steadily nearer as the vessel's peak reached the roof level. She had clearly just set sail and would accelerate to her cruising height and speed once clear of the crowded streets.

Balthazar snatched a glance back to their pursuers. They were gaining quickly, grim faces set and determined. Calculating and estimating, he stared at the silk that was now a few feet below. With each passing second, it was rising faster and pulling further away from them into the clear sky.

"With me, Solomon!" He grabbed the bookseller's arm and leapt off the roof, striking the ship with tremendous force. The two men immediately began sliding down towards oblivion, and both frantically grabbed at the ropes and chains that crisscrossed the red surface.

Solomon, his heart threatening to burst from his chest, managed to grasp a nearby rope. But his companion misjudged his handhold and suddenly dropped. Solomon desperately reached out and caught Balthazar's collar. "I have you!" he cried, the words lost in the pounding from the rotors.

His fall halted for an instant, the count took a firm grip on a massive chain that ran vertically towards

the gondola some twenty feet underneath them. He laughed, but the sound was forced. His face momentarily betrayed his fright.

“Down, down, my friend,” he managed. “Man was not meant to fly. Well, not outside.”

As the pair cautiously began a slow climb hand over hand to the gondola, with the wind threatening to pull them to their deaths with every movement, Solomon looked back to the rooftop. Four men and a woman were now standing and watching the airship drift higher. Seemingly unwilling to fire at such a monstrous and explosive store of gas, the men talked animatedly amongst themselves then began holstering their weapons and walking off.

The last to leave was Elizabeta. Before she slipped from view, Solomon wondered: was that a smile on her face?

Chapter Three

The next few minutes passed in a blur for Solomon as he followed Balthazar down to the gondola. His travelling coat saved him from a freezing death but the ferocious cold was numbing his fingers and it was clear neither man would survive for much longer if they could not reach shelter.

Holding their rope and chain tightly, they swung their legs down to the narrow iron sill running below the gondola's many windows. The movement brought startled cries from the crew—seemingly the vessel's only occupants—and several sailors rushed to the glass.

Balthazar was unfazed, pulling one hand from his chain in a brief salutation. He mouthed words at the amazed crewmen, but Solomon heard nothing over the rotors. The exertion of holding on was draining the remainder of his strength, and he knew he had only moments left.

The pain was etched on his face, and a sailor overcame his surprise long enough to yank open a window. "In yer come, mate! Let's be 'aving yer!"

Joined by a shipmate, he dragged Solomon inside and onto the gondola floor, followed shortly afterwards by a grateful Balthazar. A circle of sailors full of questions massed around them, but they were silenced by the arrival of their captain. "*What in the name of all that's holy is going on?*" he roared. "Get back to your posts! Now!"

Balthazar used the interruption to stagger to his feet, gathering himself and painting his face with his friendliest expression. "Good morning, Captain!

Damned pleased to see you, I must say. Damned pleased indeed."

It took a matter of moments for the count to spin the captain and his crew a web of lies about their unorthodox arrival on the ship. Solomon was already used to being surprised by his strange new friend, but even he was taken aback by the man's flexible attitude to the truth and his ability to conjure a wholly believable tale from thin air.

Within minutes the sailors were convinced that they should divert from their usual course—to Mayfair to collect that morning's passengers. Instead they would deposit Messrs. Jakeson and Portnoy, proud ex-airship men fleeing a group of soldiers following an exchange of words concerning the Queen's honor, on a rooftop in the far-off environs of Whitechapel.

Solomon sat in silence, collecting his thoughts as he watched the city's mass unfurling hundreds of feet below. Balthazar swaggered over, clutching mugs of steaming hot tea from the crew's galley. He said, "Quite a morning, Mister Portnoy, eh?"

"Not the way I usually start the day, no, Mister Jakeson."

Balthazar's voice dropped as a sailor passed them on his way to the engine room. "Captain Thomas is a decent sort. Said he knew us for military men as soon as we jumped aboard." He winked. "I know you did your bit out east, but I was never lucky enough to follow the colors myself. Always too busy in one desperate scrape or another in some place I'd rather forget."

He followed Solomon's gaze, watching the sun-washed spires of central London, the boats anchored along the Thames, and the airships traveling the north-south route across the river. From this height, it was difficult to make out individual people, but they could imagine the myriad activities going on beneath them.

The count said quietly: "All this will change, you know, if the Arcanum triumph."

"Oh? How?"

"They have a grand plan that they have worked on for years, and I fear it is about to come into effect. If it works, there will be nothing left but nations of automatons, unthinking and unknowing. No creativity, no *spark*." He paused, then brightened. "But now you have joined our happy band, we are bound to stop them."

Solomon snorted. "I don't know what you have dragged me into, but I think I would rather go back to my shop. Secret societies? Women who kill poor serving girls? Chases across rooftops? It might be your life, apparently, but it's not mine."

"Sorry, but it is too late. We needed the Lenksham, and I heard that you had it. I had hoped to retrieve it from your shop, a quick in-and-out-and-on-my-way, but one of Elizabeta's men found me a few streets away. He came off worse but cut me up pretty badly, which is how you caught me unawares spilling my blood all over your floor. The Arcanum know the book's importance, and their man must have told dear Elizabeta where I was heading before he died."

"But I didn't have the Lenksham. I'd already sold it to Rose Kilmartin that day —"

“—And nobody knew that but you two. Hence everybody’s dramatic arrival. But I suspect the Arcanum will soon discover Miss Kilmartin, and all will not go well for her.”

“We have to warn her, get to her somehow!” Solomon looked around, as if willing the ship to land that instant.

“All in hand, Mister Snow. The good captain will take us to a corner I know in the East End. A few diversions, a few random streets to hide our trail in case the enemy catches up with our new crewmates, and we shall be on our way to save the dear lady.” In an aside almost to himself, he added: “Or the book, at least.”

Soon, they felt the airship begin to slowly descend, and they gathered their few belongings as the crew carried out the numerous complex tasks necessary for landing.

Balthazar was checking his weapons and said to Solomon, “We will need some help before we go much further. The Arcanum have eyes everywhere, and I fear we are now two of the most sought-after people in London.” Solomon’s concern was immediately obvious, but Balthazar said, “No need to fret. All we need is a cripple.”

It was soon clear that the east of London, a place of dank rookeries and abandoned hovels, was more Solomon’s territory than Balthazar’s. Frequent book deals had given him a fair knowledge of the area’s alleys and byways while the count knew only his destination: the Blind Widow pub “next to a bridge, can’t remember which”.

Solomon found himself in the unaccustomed role

of leader, telling the less experienced visitor a little of the neighborhood's characters and places. As always, the locals' mood was dark; they had no time for strangers and there was many an unwelcoming glance as the two men trod through the fetid slurry coating the busy streets. Initially, Balthazar stopped frequently to wipe a particularly disgusting piece of ordure from his feet, but soon accepted the squalor and the overwhelming stink: a stew of factories, ironworks, and, of course, the Thames.

Elsewhere in the city, the noonday sun would be shining fiercely, but here its rays failed to penetrate the murk from a thousand chimneys belching out black clouds of fumes. Despite the winter chill, the tumbledown buildings they passed were warmed from fires within. Glassmaking, smelting, and more; this was the artisans' quarter, and the noise of machines made walls shake and floors tremble. The din, Solomon knew from nocturnal visits with his few roistering friends, was unceasing. The *thump* could be felt at any hour as countless ironworks tried to meet the government's seemingly unending demand for metal of all kinds.

Despite his previous journeys to clients and fellow booksellers, he was quickly lost in the tumult and prepared to admit defeat. He started as a prostitute uncurled herself from a corner lamppost, its glass long shattered and its gas vent stolen. Her face was a mass of welts and boils and her black-toothed smile was a badly-painted smear. "Oi, darlings, lookin' for comp'ny?"

Balthazar gave a deep bow that drew cackles from two passing washerwomen, their arms laden

with filthy sheets. "Not today, dear lady. I am sure you could provide company of the first order, and ordinarily you and I would soon be making love of the wildest kind in what, I'm sure, is your charming hideaway not yards from this fair corner. But my friend and I are in earnest. We're looking for the Blind Widow – do you know it?"

She paused, her eyes calculating. The count flicked a coin from his jacket, and she pocketed it eagerly. "You be lookin' fer the cripple, eh? Yer, I knows it. Come on."

Keeping a watch for any signs of pursuit, the two men accompanied the woman into a maze of alleys. Both tried to memorize each junction and change of direction but had to give up within minutes. The woman hurried around street-corner toughs, rushed through crossroads lined with manure and squeezed her way past carts being pulled by mangy horses along lanes barely wide enough for two men to stand abreast.

Solomon had thoroughly lost track of time when she stopped and pointed: "There yer go. The Blind Widow."

As Balthazar pressed more money into her outstretched, dirt-streaked palm, Solomon took a good look at the inn. It lay deep in the shadows cast by what he guessed was Blackfriars Bridge and the railway station nearby. Its sign hung loose, blowing fitfully in the strengthening wind that mercifully disrupted the choking smoke blanketing the area. For a brief moment, sun pierced the gloom, striking the prostitute and making her dark red dress glow the color of rubies. Then it was gone.

However, the more Solomon looked, the more attractive their destination seemed. The glass in each closed window was intact, the stout door fitted its frame, and strong gates blocked alleys to either side of it. Security, it appeared, was important for this building's owner, if not for his neighbors.

Balthazar dismissed the woman with a "Charmed, I'm sure," then waved Solomon on. "Let me do the talking, and you will learn a lot about the way the world really works."

Checking the street for danger once more, he pushed open the heavy door and they stood in the entrance. The interior was dismal. Candlelit walls of a nondescript color surrounded a main area occupied by a handful of tables, ancient chairs, and a bar running almost the length of the building. The few occupants broke from their whispered conversations to regard the newcomers with sullen glances.

"Delightful, simply delightful," said Balthazar cheerfully, leading Solomon to an empty table and righting a fallen chair for him. The murmurs resumed around them but Solomon caught an occasional stolen look from one of the seasoned drinkers. He returned each gaze defiantly.

A serving girl materialized from the darkness behind the bar. Her beer-stained white blouse and deep blue skirt did little to hide the buxom figure within, and she drew admiring stares. "What'll it be, gents?"

"Make it two of your best beers, my dear," said Balthazar. "None of the dregs you're serving this lot, eh?"

"No dregs here. Apart from you two."

She winked playfully, and the count patted her full rump as she turned to go. "My," he said, "you're a cheeky little morsel, aren't you?"

She was about to reply when a cry of "Hey now!" was roared from the bar. Solomon and Balthazar watched as the voice's owner appeared, his limping gait betraying the presence of a false leg made of bronze and iron that was just visible below his heavy leather trousers. He was, Solomon estimated, less than five feet tall, with salt-and-pepper hair which stood arrayed in all directions around his small head. The man's face was harsh, a vivid scar running down from his forehead to his neck. His substitute leg evidently caused him great pain, and every movement appeared difficult.

"Hands off the girl, scoundrel," he said to the count. His voice was stern but Solomon caught a twinkle in his blue eyes.

"Well you can't blame me, cripple, can you?" Balthazar replied. "She's a real sweetmeat and no mistake."

"She's also my wife."

"Ah."

Solomon tensed, ready for violence, but the two men embraced and laughed heartily. The girl shook her head and sauntered off, dismissing ribald comments from the regulars with a heard-it-all tone.

"Good to see you again, Count," said the small man, pulling up a chair. "Been a long time."

"That it has. You were unmarried the last time we met, while I've been busy with our mutual friends. You know the sort of thing—research in some foreign land, a little derring-do here and there, too much

killing everywhere.”

The other man’s voice dropped. “They are growing stronger all the time. There is something important planned. I fear the Workshop is short of time.”

“Yes, my friend Solomon and I have discovered that for ourselves. Elizabeta is hard on our tail.” He raised his arms so the man could see his latest wounds. “Solomon here is not yet one of us and does not know the full sad saga of the Arcanum and their mischief. But I trust him completely – after all, if he returns home he will surely be tortured and killed.”

“Balthazar is right,” said the crippled man as he patted Solomon’s arm sympathetically. “You might not know everything about us and our work, but you know enough to be of interest to them. Believe me, they would make you pay dearly before the end.” He tapped his ruined leg. “If it wasn’t for Balthazar getting me out of places unmentionable, their Doctor Flair might have finished his ‘experiments’.”

The girl, whose name was Jenny, was about to return with a tray of drinks, but her husband waved her towards the rear of the inn then gestured for Solomon and Balthazar to follow. Chatting cheerfully to the other customers as he stumbled noisily along, he took the two men through a dank curtain behind the bar.

Given the inn’s tumbledown state, it was a surprisingly comfortable and well-furnished sitting room. Jenny spread the drinks onto a mahogany table as the men settled into their seats. Her husband nodded to her and she returned to the bar. His thin hands fidgeted with a rusted fitting on his metal knee

as he stared at his guests. "So, Balthazar, what brings you here apart from my wife's well-deserved reputation as one of the most beautiful women in London?"

"We need your help, Barbarossa."

There was no reply. From the bar came a raucous laugh and the sound of blows. Barbarossa ignored it; a typical afternoon's business.

The count went on: "I've only been back in England a few days. I spent a month in Persia, following the trail of one of al-Morash's books—ever read them? Very poor. Anyway, the Arcanum has agents there too, but I was able to bring the book back here without too much bloodshed. I have only begun studying it, yet I was able to decipher part of its coded text. It mentioned Lenksham's *Theories of Mortality*, and if we can put the two books together we should learn a lot about how to stop the Assembly. Or weaken its power, at least."

"This is where your man Solomon comes in?"

"Quite. A few discreet inquiries and his name came up. But he sold the Lenksham a few days ago. I'm afraid Elizabeta and the rest will be searching the home of its unlucky new owner, who I expect will soon be discussing the matter with Doctor Flair." He paused as a flood of dark memories rushed into his mind. He shook his head to clear them, not noticing the way Barbarossa flinched as he recalled his own suffering. "We need to get into the lady's house and I'm afraid our faces are now too well known for much wandering of the streets. We need your old magic. I trust you are still doing work for people keen to lay low."

Barbarossa thought hard and the joyful sound of Jenny's laughter reached them.

"It's not like the old days, Balthazar," the one-legged man said. "I've got a good life here. Lovely wife, decent living. I don't need to go up against the Arcanum again." He tapped his leg, which echoed dully. "They've taken enough."

Balthazar nodded, then rose to leave with Solomon following him. "Ah, well, can't be helped."

Before taking his leave he cast an eye back towards Barbarossa. "Jenny really is a pretty little thing. How long do you think she would last if the Arcanum found this place? Do you think your extra locks, good as they are, will keep them out for long? You will not be able to stop them *ruining* her to get to us."

"You bastard."

"I've been called worse. But at least I'm still alive to be insulted."

After a brief pause, Barbarossa made up his mind. "I knew it was all over as soon as I saw you in the Widow. Come on then."

He stepped towards a seemingly plain section of wooden paneling. Pulling a walking stick from the corner, he prodded some hidden run of the grain. There was a *click* as part of the wall slid back and he proceeded into a darkened area beyond. Lighting a small table lamp revealed walls lined with costumes of all kinds, hanging neatly at a convenient height for a short man, and shelves holding bottles, boxes, cases, and bags, many worn with age. Before them were an empty desk, two wooden chairs, and a mirror.

Barbarossa signed for Solomon to sit at the glass.

“We’ll start with you, shall we? Give you a whole new face. Just the thing to let you stay out and about. Our friend won’t mind waiting while I do you up a treat.”

“Not at all,” said the count, pulling out his flute and playing an Irish lament as Barbarossa set to work emptying cases onto the desk. Within a few minutes, an extensive make-up kit was ready.

After seeming to consider various options, the small man began applying layers of color and shadow. As his nimble fingers altered Solomon’s appearance he said: “Bet you wish you’d never met Balthazar, eh? I was just the same, mind, when he came across me back in my theatrical days. Back when I had my legs.” He looked ruefully over at the count, who was playing a second mournful tune and apparently oblivious. “S’pose he hasn’t told you much. Not one for the big conversations, Balthazar. Now me, on the other hand...”

It was more than an hour before he finished making up Solomon’s face, including removing his unique brass patch and filling the damaged socket behind it with a replacement eye cast from porcelain. This he followed with the fitting of a long black wig that made Solomon look more youthful and less respectable. Meanwhile the bookseller discovered more about the Arcanum and its terrible mission.

The group was formed, Barbarossa said, at the instigation of King William, the “Sailor King”, who was keen to quell any burgeoning plans for the kind of revolutions that routinely affected Europe. Working in the utmost secrecy, members of the Royal

Society improved the techniques pioneered by the Frenchman Boismoir: eventually, if the correct series of words were printed in the correct order, using specially-chosen inks, papers, and designs, they could control the readers' thoughts.

Solomon was clearly doubtful, so Barbarossa added, "Anybody can write something that might make people think a certain way—newspapers do it all the time, whenever they try to whip up some campaign. Or take the Bible. Millions of people do exactly what it tells them to. But our good queen's papa wanted something guaranteed to work. Hence, the Arcanum."

An essential part of the plot, he said, was making everybody read, all the time. "You know, that was why so many schools were opened and they made education compulsory. They sent their agents, all dolled up like churchmen, workers' welfare groups, and such like, to every factory, inn, and meeting-place. 'Pick up a book', they told everyone. 'You'll be better off.' They might be ruthless bastards, the Arcanum, but they're good at their jobs: young and old alike start reading like mad. Then all that must be done is making sure everything read by these millions of new book-lovers contains the correct sequence of words, telling them that they should read more and more."

Once they were hooked, Barbarossa explained, the Arcanum could tell them whatever they wanted, altering the whole addicted population's behavior by publishing a new book with a different hidden code of control.

"And that's just what they've been doing, for

these past six years or so.”

This, Solomon finally admitted, bore the ring of truth. Even his small backstreet shop had enjoyed a steady flow of custom. While he would never become rich, he did seem to earn more than he ever imagined he would when he returned from the Crimea maimed and ready to resume his former life.

Barbarossa put a few finishing touches to the makeup. “When you take time to study one of the Arcanum’s books, you’ll understand.”

Chapter Four

“Well? Have you found *anything*? Anything at all?”

Elizabetha strode through the house in a fury, her expression sending a chill through the host of Arcanum agents following her from room to room.

“Nothing of any note, Madam,” said one of them, a wan-looking man named Fleesh, who had been raised to the position of her aide thanks to Crowe’s death at that hateful bookshop. “Our men keep looking, but there is no sign of the book.”

“It must be here, dolt! You’ll find it, tonight, if you know what’s good for you. It reveals too many of our secrets, and I want it. Now.”

They re-entered the parlor, where the roaring fire illuminated the corpse of the former Rose Kilmartin, lover of literature and patron of Mr. Snow. Elizabetha paused her tirade long enough to give the body a ferocious kick, then strode to one of the windows that dominated the room. Another night’s snowfall had begun, she saw. *Good. Keeps the slaves off the streets.*

The agents dispersed, beginning what she was sure would be another futile search. *God, this house is enormous.* Her inquiries, some with a blade—or worse—at the old woman’s throat, had confirmed that the accursed volume had not left Kilmartin’s home following its delivery from the bookshop. But the hag had shown indecent temerity by dying before revealing its precise location.

Elizabetha began to pace, her feet sending up flurries of papers torn from Kilmartin’s shelves. No clues as to the whereabouts of a key weapon the Workshop of Light had hunted for the past year or

more. Elizabeta and a handful of others in her refined circle knew of the danger posed by scientist-author Richard Lenksham and the discoveries he had so carefully penned. Now, despite several hours of vigorous questioning, Elizabeta had failed to drag sufficient information from Snow's client. *Who was to know her heart was so weak? Must I do everything?*

Her agents (each one a fool, she fervently believed) had found little of note. A handful of first editions from before the Arcanum's rise to power, and a few especially good pieces that she had purloined for her own already extensive library. But not the one key book both sides in this damned war were seeking—one to use it, the other to destroy it before it brought down all they had worked for.

The moonlight sparkled on her carriage, parked outside in the sort of carelessly palatial street that had become so familiar to her since she became the Arcanum's chief investigator. The driver was tending to the horses, and nearby two more agents meant to be keeping watch were smoking and exchanging a few quiet words. Elizabeta's eyes narrowed as she made a mental note to give them to the Subjugation Assembly. *No room for laziness here. Balthazar and his friends are close to breaking our secrets, and I am given nothing but fools and old women who die at the first kiss of the knife.*

"I must away," she told Fleesh. "Find the book before the Workshop does or your children will become orphans."

As she passed the fireplace, on a whim she unsheathed her rapier and used it to flick a cloud of embers and ash onto the dead woman's face. The

flesh soon gave off a satisfying burning smell that sent Elizabetha off with a spring in her step.

From the corner of an adjoining street, two figures cloaked in shadow watched the carriage leave.

Solomon, staring at the extravagant house and the figures visible through the windows, said: "Balthazar, you really think we can get into Rose's secret library and escape with this book? She trusted me enough to show me the entrance, but what's to say she hasn't told our enemies?"

As he had done so many times before, the count was formulating a plan, judging distances, his strength, and the hundred other things that could spell the difference between success and death. He slapped Solomon on the back, and said: "If she had, they would be long gone. As they are still here, it will certainly be exciting, eh?"

Quickly checking the various pockets, harnesses, and accoutrements in his voluminous coat, he gestured for Solomon to follow. The approach he favored led them through a large garden beside the Kilmartin mansion and, using its border of trees as cover, they were able to take their first close look at the two guards at the main door. Clad in the now familiar coachmen's coats and high boots, the men were too engrossed in a conversation to keep watch. Behind them, the door was open.

Passing a pistol to Solomon, Balthazar whispered, "Have that, just in case things must turn... wet. But I do prefer the blade at times like this."

He pulled his own sword and its blade reflected moonlight into his grim expression. Solomon drew a

dagger, concerned at how much his hands were shaking. It had been a day or more since he had been able to settle his nerves in his usual fashion, and now he was suffering. If the count noticed, he said nothing.

Exchanging a nod, they slowly pushed their way through the trees closest to the doorway. With his eye on the sky, Balthazar waited for a cloud to cover the moon. There was the briefest moment of darkness then the two men charged for the door, their boots crunching a tattoo.

The guards were tired and slow to react and turned far too late. Balthazar's sword took one full in the heart but Solomon's man was able to draw a pistol as the dagger pierced his chest. He let out a low, final moan and Solomon grabbed him under the arms before he crashed to the ground and dropped or fired the gun.

The count tilted his head towards the deeper shadows beside the porch, and they pulled the two bodies out of sight. Solomon pocketed his victim's pistol then they stepped into the doorway, listening. From the upper floors came heavy footfalls and crashes as men turned over furniture and hacked away at boards.

Balthazar indicated that they should stay to the edges of the hallway and away from the danger of creaking timbers, and then Solomon pointed him left, towards the kitchen.

They entered the room to discover the body of an elderly cook lying face down, her back torn by a stab wound. All was in disarray with cupboard doors opened and crockery and utensils strewn throughout. Solomon went to the oven, where the cook must have

been making a meal when the Arcanum had arrived to torture her mistress. The flame had died but Solomon touched the ironwork gingerly before pulling open the main door.

As Balthazar kept watch, Solomon fumbled in the dark of the stove until his hands alighted on his goal: a sturdy lead box still warm to the touch. Pulling it free, he tugged off the lid to reveal a long iron key wrapped in cloth. Tucking it inside his coat, he whispered, "Follow me."

Seeing that the hallway was clear, he led he count into the parlor, where he came across the body of his former client. Her face was badly disfigured by burning embers and the bruises and marks covering her body were testament to the misery of her final hours. He made for Rose's face, seeking to close her eyes and then cover her with a cloth, but Balthazar grasped his arm. "No time," he murmured. "Sorry."

Solomon shook himself then made for the fireplace. With a final check for any Arcanum agents—the sound of their disturbance continued from the upper floor—he inserted the iron key into a narrow lock hidden in the blackened mantel. It turned easily, and Balthazar gasped as a small slab in the rear wall lifted smoothly and the grate slid backwards into the exposed area. Where it had lain was now an open space, the room's gas lamps revealing a staircase into some secret lower level. The whole process took only a few moments and the explorer in Balthazar was impressed with both its silent efficiency and the cost of installing such a device.

Pulling the key free, Solomon headed down the staircase. Once the count was behind him, a lever

simultaneously returned the fireplace to its original appearance and ignited a lamp above the lowest step. It illuminated a small room lined from floor to ceiling with crowded bookcases. Some of their spines were darkened with heavy use, others pale and unloved. After only the briefest glance at the nearest titles, Balthazar estimated their value as a small fortune.

"Not bad, my friend, not bad at all," he said. The stone ceiling shielded any of the noise above, but he kept his voice low regardless. "The poor devil upstairs really did trust you."

"We did a lot of business over the years," Solomon replied, moving to the shelves in the furthest, darkest corner. "When I returned from the war my situation was... difficult. I had seen and done far too many things I wanted to forget but could not, and I had little mind for my business either. My wife had died... My wounds made reading almost impossible, but Rose came to me on one of my blackest days and convinced me to take up what I had once enjoyed. I owe her so much."

Balthazar was taking a closer look at the wide collection surrounding them. "If you helped her put this together, I think she owed you a whole lot more. She has the first edition of Greenshaw's *Lives*, a 1700 *Panoply* by Youngman..."

"She also has the Lenksham that means so much to you." Solomon carefully withdrew a book from the lowest shelf.

Balthazar turned in delight, tucking the slim volume into his coat without a glance. "I shall reveal its secrets at the right time. Now, let's away before I start adding a few of these to one of my libraries."

The two men quickly ascended the staircase and as Solomon readied the key Balthazar drew his blade. There was a faint judder when the lock was turned, then they were standing before the cooling fireplace.

Instantly, a shot filled the parlor and Solomon felt a ball whistle past his head into the stonework and ricochet. An Arcanum agent, his pallor yellow in the firelight, stood in the doorway with a revolving pistol leveled at them.

“Hold fast, *gentlemen*,” he said, then he turned his head to call to a comrade.

It was all the opportunity the count needed. His knife was in the man’s neck before Solomon was able to react. The agent dropped hard, and Solomon was pulling his own gun free as a second opponent stepped into the hall, staring at his fallen friend. Instinctively he made for a weapon and Solomon’s shot took him in the chest, flinging him backwards.

The silence was broken only by Solomon’s hurried breathing. The count caught his eye and gave a brief approving smile.

“Now, let us have a look at this accursed thing.”

Balthazar checked that they were not being watched, then carefully opened the book. It was not an impressive sight, given the effort so many had gone through to find it. Six inches tall and four wide, its cover was devoid of any particular color and worn with use. Along the spine in faded gold was the solitary word *Lenksham* and on the face *Theories of Mortality*, some of the engraved letters indistinct or mottled.

As Balthazar thumbed quickly through the pages,

Solomon looked at their surroundings and took the rare opportunity to relax. They were aboard the *Empress of India*, a grandly-named steamship that ferried travelers between east and west London and from south to north, as occasion demanded. Its captain—a harried old salt by the name of Plunkett—was a closet fan of romantic fiction, and over the years an appreciable amount of Solomon’s stock had found its way into the captain’s locker, where it would be read by gas lamp late at night with little chance of discovery by his crew. The contents of Solomon’s shop had eased many a cold night for the sailor, who had little fondness for going ashore, and he was happy to shelter the two men below decks for as long as they needed.

The iron of the walls gave off a cool reflection as the lamp overhead swung to and fro in the current. The pounding of the engine behind them echoed around the hull.

Balthazar closed the book, seemingly satisfied, then passed it to his companion. “I am but a gentleman adventurer,” he said, “but you are undoubtedly an expert in such things. Take a look and tell me what you see.”

Solomon weighed it in his hands, tilting the cover to catch the moving light then flicking through the pages. “I’d say it was calfskin. The binding is very good, very well done. The paper is undoubtedly Italian. An expensive blend that nobody uses any more. The ink is from northern India—you can tell by the fading here and the coloring there. But as to why you and our *friends* are so keen to have it, I don’t know. Lenksham was no great author.”

“No, dear Solomon. Richard Lenksham was a *genius*. A genius of the first order, and this book is his masterpiece.”

“Oh, ’tis nothing but—”

“—This is the final piece in a jigsaw that, once complete, will bring an end to the Arcanum and their Subjugation Assembly, and free this nation from a hidden tyranny.”

Balthazar looked around once more. The parlor door remained secure and there were no sounds from the few crew still aboard at this late hour.

“The Arcanum publishes book after book, week after week,” the count said. “Through one false company or another, it owns all the printing presses in Britain, if not Europe. Every book appears normal, and they are sold at giveaway prices so that they fly from the shelves. But when they are read, that is when their terrible secrets are revealed. Each page is marked with the Subjugation Assembly: odd letters, strange inks, and other eldritch arts that combine to drive men mad. The more you read, the more you obey whatever message is hidden in the text. Within the first few pages is always written *Read more books*. But the second message, repeated throughout, could be *Work harder*, or *Obey your masters*, or *Join the army*. *Report all opposition*, that’s a very common one.”

“I’ve never seen such a thing.”

“You admitted yourself that you have read little since your war injuries.” He gestured towards Solomon’s eye socket. “It matters not whether you have seen the Assembly. What matters is that almost everybody in this country *has*, and now, though they know it not, they follow the hidden commands of a

secret society that means only ill for all of us.”

“And this book?”

“Is one of a few, a vital few, which contains a way of breaking this hold over people. We in the Workshop of Light are not so bohemian that we say *nobody* should be in charge of society. Heavens no; that is the right order of things – nobody wants chaos, after all. But those on the lower rungs of life’s ladder should at least know their own minds, not be led like puppets by a devious handful of those on top. Fair’s fair.”

The count flicked through a few pages then paused to run a narrow finger over one section. He said, “Here are a few lines that might loosen the Arcanum’s grip. We simply have to get them into people’s hands before it’s too late.”

“‘Too late’? For what?”

“I have been meeting all kinds of characters who might have a scrap of information. I’ve crossed this country and others several times, only to find another of my friends lost to the Arcanum’s control. But those of my sources still with their faculties told me that our enemies have decided that they have spent too long in the shadows. They will use this power, this Assembly, to seize the Empire for themselves.”

“But how?”

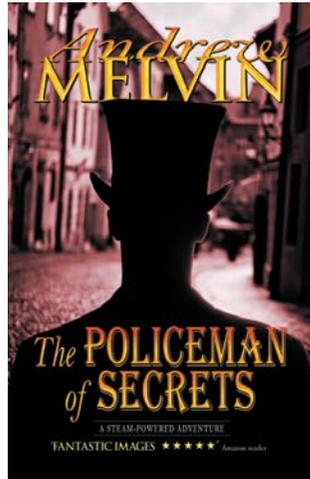
Balthazar tucked the book into one of his many pockets and stood, a man of action once more. “That is what we have to find out.”

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