

Prologue

Deep at the heart of the Galaxy is a body without size, without shape and without mass that Man in his educated ignorance has called a "Singularity", and his scientists claim it contains matter equal to a billion, billion of our suns, and yet has no size. It has been named "The Annihilator", and it is said that it spews twin streams of antimatter along its polar axis, ejections which continually crash against the fabric of our Universe and are perpetually and ritually dashed into nothingness.

It exists and yet it does not, simultaneously, and performs its strange dance by day and by night year in year out as we live and work and sleep and dream; it churns, it drains, and it both gives and takes, is large and small, and is not alive.

1 THE LODGE

Arthur Braden looked past the zebra stripe of black and white keys into the orderly geometric rectangle that was the wood-paneled entryway to the lodge; several new guests had just arrived, vacationers, probably, shaking the snow from their coats having come to ski the westward slopes of the Alps under the eye of the chiseled peak of the Matterhorn.

Another beauty of a woman strode confidently past the main party of a half dozen sweated Germans and engaged the desk clerk with a magnetic presence; the pianist had seen odalisque sights here before, even the cold, untouchable icy beauty of certain infamous European actresses, but, he slowly realized, never one like the white-haired woman who now left the desk to ascend the wide, curved stair to the upper level's guest rooms.

She had eschewed the services of the lodge's bagboy, instead her cases were taken by an oddly proportioned fellow with a strange yellowed look to his too-thin, pallid skin; he hefted them with what seemed a deceptive strength.

There was nothing left now but to finish out the night. He had not missed a note--that anyone in the room might have noticed—and easily moved into a pointedly staccato introduction to “Love is Blue”, and like some mythic piper coaxed several couples to move onto the small dance floor.

Braden produced a boxy gold lighter and lit a cigarette, a French *Gitane*, with his left hand while maintaining a few rhythmic triplets with his right, a skill he had acquired from years of slithering through the trenches of this and countless other cocktail establishments all over Europe, Turkey, Egypt and Morocco. His kind's time was coming to an end, he knew; already jukeboxes were marching in like invading robots towards once-sedate lounges all around that Mediterranean pleasure-world, their insistent, amplified beats and recordings of metallicly-toned electronic guitars, with multicolored lights bleating like synchronized aural jewelry as the younger and young and only-acting-young crowds worked their jean-clad hips in rotations that seemed furiously warring.

If only the woman with the white hair had been there, in his heyday, to have seen his concerts, his films, and his television appearances; they could have lived that jet-setting life to the hilt together. Now, with only small royalties from once-popular million-selling music albums and meager earnings from piano engagements, he managed to make ends meet without much effort or complaint. The years of touring under blinding lights amid screaming concertgoers, to a grueling, wearying schedule, had, over time, squeezed out the last drops of a once-insatiable ambition, but he did not miss any of it now.

Now, he merely touched the keys without even seeing them and so pulled invisible strings that made the people dance or sigh or think of making love later in their rooms, him like a benevolent puppeteer who kept whole rooms in motion for hotel managements that were generally quite grateful if not over-generous.

Watching had become a hobby that took almost all his time now. The notes tinkled and trickled out and kept the passing shadows moving late into the night.

Music and murmuring.

The morning came blinding and bright through the unfinished wood blinds of Braden's modest and tight room; the hotel manager had beamed at him when handing over the key, saying “I know you'll be very comfortable”. But really, how could he know that?

The first *Gitane* of the day sent sunbeam-illuminated streamers to the ceiling, then came the shower and the rest. On days like this, cold and windy, he might read an Italian paper outside at a table by the ski lift, or ski a little himself. Technically, his services were not actually required until 7:30 each evening and so he was generally free all day.

Because today was Friday and certainly the hotel would be filled up and busy for the weekend, he spent his usual hour outside but then ducked through the changing rooms towards the sauna rooms. Tomorrow, they would be overflowing with loud and sweaty patrons.

But of the two rooms, one was undergoing repairs and the other was already occupied. Cursing to himself for not coming earlier, he entered anyway, and as the rough cedar door opened and a wash of steam breathed into his face he recognized the figures of the unusual woman of the previous night and her odd companion seated within.

Her ivory mane was swept up in deep, red towel, her dark eyes were closed as if in deep thought or meditation; he immediately endeavored to step lightly and closed the door behind himself slowly and gently. The man that accompanied her, that jaundiced-looking rail-thin fellow with the unusual movements, stared at him unblinking from under half-closed lids.

He ignored the man, seating himself opposite the pair in the small room on a low bench while steam frothed with slow fury from the stone element of the sauna's heater. In a few moments familiar melodies passed through his mind as they usually had done on days before his long-past concert performances; he felt, inexplicably, electrified.

After some immeasurable period of reflection he slowly opened his eyes to gaze at this woman, and whether by wave or electricity or extra-sensory means, she had galvanized his being now. He felt urged to study her, to memorize and then keep her, and he then knew that that feeling was only the same one as the night before grown larger.

He never stared at women publicly, although at the lodge beautiful women were often present in abundance, but this was inarguably something... *different*. Through the blurring haze of billowing steam he now looked full at her, upon her unturned and motionless face.

He saw no nationality there, no race, no color that he

recognized; she appeared as if formed from some glistened alabaster that lived with a pulsing of blood and living tissue; he struggled for a moment to assign words to his impressions, but momentarily stopped.

Her closed eyelids flickered, as if in some deep, cavernous sleep, as if carried away by some private dream of an indescribable bliss. Now sweat was running down his torso and even off the tips of his fingers, and time had become malleable to a degree that he was unaware of how long he'd been sitting there.

He had not looked at the other man to her right, and consciously kept his eyes away from him as he slyly sent them down her chest and over her breasts, and, dumbfounded as to why he had not noticed before, realized then that she was entirely naked but for the towel; her ideal physique suggested no pertinent verbs but delivered evidence of an indisputable fact, and that was her perfection.

Perfection.

He felt as if he were choking on something, not the humid vapors but some deep sense of his own unworthiness as he had studied her. He might have followed her far across the Earth at that moment, or travelled the seas or completed some mythic, Herculean task at her bidding, but in all the time those thoughts occupied she still had not stirred.

He felt so mesmerized by the unearthliness she exuded he blinked quickly and then glanced away, down, and he wiped at the salty sweat and water mixing in his eyes with the rough back of a hand.

Then he saw the pale-ochre-skinned man, who now seemed criss-crossed with what seemed twice as many bluish

veins than he had noticed earlier, staring directly at him with an expression of malice. And why not? Hadn't he been blatantly ogling his female companion with all the *politesse* of some hormone-drenched schoolboy?

Without uttering a word, the glaring man reached directly across the humid space between them and methodically seized Braden's dripping and lowering hand with a grip that seemed gentle at first but then tightened into a sort of bony vice.

Their eyes locked together, and the angry-looking thin man slowly moved their hands out away from their respective benches and towards the round, gray stones that still belched swirling clouds into the damp room.

His eyes seemed to speak, and as he imagined he heard those thoughts he simultaneously felt a dangerous heat radiating against the palm of his hand. The sauna's thermometer must have read 170 degrees Fahrenheit, but those heated gray river-stones were far, far hotter—enough to cook to well-done any flesh held against them.

There was no point in struggling against the inhuman strength that held his hand motionless, he knew it would be hopeless to try; he felt as he had as a child when a doctor held him down for an injection. He could not stop that either, and like some animal in a trap, he had sent his mind somewhere else and remained still.

Those eyes, too, were yellow, with numerous veins of orange and wide, black pupils; they told him without words but in the plainest possible terms to *leave her alone*.

Leave the Marquessa alone.

2 BUTTERFLIES

The piano-player was at his post on schedule that evening as the room slowly filled. A party of Germans was there, and had been occupying the bar since mid-afternoon when the snowfall became a little too heavy for comfortable skiing. Or had they simply wanted to start their Aryan drinking rituals earlier? he wondered.

They were loud, red-faced and full of a belligerent cheer that spilled over like a foamy stein onto the other patrons, who tried their best to stay clear. It had almost become a beer garden, but with the drinking-songs supplied by himself.

Other guests wandered into or through the room as they finished late dinners or walked up from the village *Hagerschitte* further down the mountain. A scent of salmon and potatoes wafted in from the adjoining restaurant and mixed with the odor of unfinished alpine wood paneling and

cigarettes.

He lit another French cigarette and moved through his repertoire, maintaining a tempo and tone that kept the room's mood afloat. Over there a cast-encased leg was propped, some novice skier's vacation memento; across from the grand piano a family of Swedes celebrated a child's ninth birthday; on the row of barstools perched a flock of tittering young women, bent on attracting male attention, their patterned sweaters like so much gaudy plumage.

His hands telegraphed out a Cole Porter medley and then a few well-known Broadway tunes, which seemed to irritate the Germans, who muttered something gruff and turned their backs to him; he retorted with a slow, sinuous and slinky rendition of *Shangri-La*.

No matter what ever happened, when behind the keys he was master of the evening, the great Steinway a tonal control panel that reached soothing fingers into the ears and minds of his listeners.

They may have thought they possessed free will, but Arthur Braden synchronized all the movements in this adult playground like an invisible conductor.

And then she entered the room.

All eyes should have been riveted upon her as his own followed the striking woman as she walked, but as if in some trance they instead continued idly chatting while nursing drinks or smoking.

Their eyes met across the black mirror of the closed piano top; hers, dark and mysterious and as if with some strange power he felt up his spine. He found he continued fingering the keys but could not seem to look away. He was aware of the diaphanous red gown she wore but only in the periphery of his vision; also, of the yellowy thin man who thus far seemed her constant companion.

The song tinkled out to scant applause from the two dozen or so patrons; the Marquessa, as he now understood she was called, gracefully seated herself on a bar stool nearby him alongside the straight edge of the piano.

The yellow man's eyes shot around the room, but hers met his as a few glissando notes drifted up at his fingers' caress.

He had controlled the room all evening, each motion and gesture of the people tied into time with the music, but now he had lost that control utterly as the snowy-tressed woman's voice blossomed out into the air.

"My love must be a kind of blind love; I can't see anyone but you."

How had she known what he would play next—when even he did not know? The song was not even one of his regular selections.

"Are the stars out tonight? I don't know if it's cloudy or bright."

The level of hubbub in the room never wavered, and the party of Germans may have even grown more boisterous, but his full attention was locked into the song and her eyes as she seemed to sing it to him alone.

"You are here, so am I, maybe millions of people go by,

but they all disappear from view.”

The music slowed, reaching its end.

“And I Only Have Eyes For You.”

That voice was hung like crystal in the air, exquisite, exotic and intoxicating; her eyes never left him, and the others in the room, eerily, ignored the performance as if it had been given by some unseen ghost. But he had seen it, and the melody and words had torn at him.

Awake and aware again, he glanced at the yellowish man who seemed suddenly agitated.

Then one of the German men, the largest, ruddy-cheeked and with a garish feathered fedora, broke into some beer-hall song and began thumping his empty mug enthusiastically on the table.

The Marquessa, he noticed, tapped her red nails on the piano near to him as the singing grew louder and some of the others joined in.

A waiter arrived with a drink, an orange liqueur, and presented it to the Marquessa with a slight bow; he gestured over at the singers as if to indicate its origin, and just then the large, red-faced man turned and smiled at her until his eyes disappeared into his bushy brows.

Her companion almost began to tremble with an inner rage, but her tapping nails kept the same steady pace as the German turned back to his party and shouted for the waiter.

Braden suddenly became aware of a low hum, coming from—where? Her fingers tapped out a precise rhythm which seemed, impossibly, to flow out into the body of the

instrument and then back to her fingers and then out again over and over, as if upon each return added to minutely by another small tap.

The sound swelled from an almost imaginary quietness to a resonance that grew into a hum, driven as if a giant violin bow were being dragged across the lowest strings of the grand piano.

He looked at his hands; they were nowhere near the keys; the yellow man watched the woman as if awaiting an order that must come. A woman at the German’s table, perhaps the loud, red-haired man’s wife, touched his sleeve and appeared to whisper a few words; he glared at her, pulled her hand aside and then cruelly slapped her in the face.

Conversations in the room instantly ceased at the whip-crack of the man’s hand, the violent act trapping the attention of the Germans and the young girls and their beaux at the bar; now, all had also become aware of the strange metallic humming that seemed to increase slightly in volume each moment, like some immense, threatening, buzzing beehive of wood and metal.

Then her fingers stopped tapping, and though the others in the room still seemed frozen, she took the entertainer’s arm and together they took a few steps back from the piano.

The piano now vibrated and howled to such a degree that it actually was moving slowly across the floor towards the windows and the German’s table.

Braden had never seen the harp of a grand piano break, but had heard of such rare explosions in repair shops; the tension of the many strings combined, often exceeding twenty tons, was supported by a huge metal plate.

The sheer volume of the explosion shook the building and shattered glass, splintered wood and metal--ejected in all directions faster than the eye could follow. The crimson-clad woman had pulled him towards her at the last moment, and now he was somehow on the floor along with her companion.

As quickly as it happened it was over, the men and women in the room choking in shock disbelief; tables had been overturned and it looked like a small tornado had visited there.

The piano, except for the heavy, wheeled legs, was gone, and he thought inanely about where he might be playing next. As he raised his eyes to survey the newly-redesigned surroundings, he saw one of the Germans vomiting into a red and white checkered tablecloth.

His companion, the ruddy-faced man, had been neatly pinned, like some obscene insect, to a beam by their table, through the skull by a golden shard from the burst heart of the piano.

He turned, gagging, in the chaos and ruin of that room to the woman at his side, but the Marquessa was gone.

3 THE MEETING

By the following evening, a Sunday, the room had been cleared of debris and the damage was largely invisible; the murdering black piano was gone and a jukebox had been brought over from the recreation room to fill in the emptiness.

The song *Venus* by *The Shocking Blue* thudded along, its choppy rhythms and brassy vocalizing filling in the conversational gaps that were once his.

Most of the prior day's patrons had left early that morning, with gushing apologies from Mr. Thorndyke, the weekend manager, driven away by the sheer horror of the unusual accident. The pianist, however, had opted to stay a while longer at his same special room- rate.

Now, as Braden sat in a wide, comfortable chair facing the bright, snowy outdoors and weighing his options, the