

# Chapter 1

“*Black Swan Event*: a completely unforeseen event that has world-altering consequences.

The dynamic that propelled a shy, handicapped girl from a tiny Icelandic fishing village onto the German throne surely qualifies as a Black Swan event. The rest is history. She became Germany’s fierce and enigmatic empress. . .”

— *The Unexpected Empress*, Elaine Hickey.

Fifteen-year-old Erwin looked up at the Maybach Building in the rain and darkness, trying to locate its outlines.

Occasional flashes of lightning revealed it to be a baroque nightmare, covered with curlicues, cherubs, gargoyles, and topped by a unicorn frozen in the act of leaping across its roof.

The street lights were out, as Otto had said.

He’d recalled a bitter fight.

“You’re my best second-story boy,” Otto had said, his jowls and chins bobbing up and down. “You’re a *natural*. Skinny. Wiry. Built like a monkey!”

“That building’s five stories,” Erwin had replied. “I can’t do it.”

“*You ungrateful turd!* I take in orphans like you out of the kindness of my heart! *This* is how you repay me? I should send you back to the streets where I found you!”

“I never climbed that high before!”

“Your father gave his *life* in the Battle of Gravelotte! You disgrace his memory!”

As usual, Erwin had lost that argument.  
The rain temporarily blinding him, he began his climb.  
The building's massive ornamentation made this possible, if difficult, especially under these conditions.  
On the third floor, his hands slipped from a rain-slicked cherub.  
"I'll die tonight!"  
He caught himself and continued to climb.  
By the fifth floor, he clutched a gargoyle, its mouth vomiting water into the pitch black night.  
Erwin reached a ledge and pulled himself up.  
He gingerly stood on the rain-soaked ledge and tested the window in front of him.  
It was unlocked!  
He slowly opened it and slipped into a room that had a crackling fire in a fireplace on the opposite wall — the room's only source of light.  
He tracked puddles onto the parquet floor.  
Packed bookshelves covered the walls, and no door was visible.  
He scanned the titles of the elegant leather-bound books: *Atomic physics, Gravitation, A Critique of Pure Reason*.  
"Find a paper with tiny drawings of birds and animals at the top and printing below," Otto had said.  
*It'll take all night to search those books.*  
He looked at the massive mahogany desk in front of the fireplace.  
*I'll start there.*  
He walked over to the desk and examined the papers lying on it.  
Nothing of interest.  
The top drawer was unlocked.  
He slid it open and examined the papers inside.  
"So they're sending children now," a high-pitched voice crackled.  
Erwin froze.  
Brandishing a pearl-handled revolver, a white-haired man in a burgundy silk smoking jacket confronted him, the flickering fire-light casting eerie shadows that made his face seem to alternately frown and smile.  
*Where did he come from?*  
Erwin raised his hands.

“Lower your hands, son,” the man said. “No tragedy will befall you. Not by my hand, at least. I can’t speak for the others.”

Erwin complied.

“I want you to convey a message to your masters,” the man said, glancing at the fireplace. “Tell them I destroyed the Senusret Memorandum. The only place its secrets reside is in my brain.”

Erwin slowly nodded.

“I know I can’t withstand torture so. . .”

The old man inserted the gun barrel into his mouth and pulled the trigger, showering bookcases with blood and brains.

Erwin backed away, falling over a footstool and hitting his head against the floor.

His ears ringing, he scrambled to his feet and out the window.

He stumbled onto the wet ledge, nearly slipping and falling to his death.

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Erwin made his way back to Sonnenscheinplatz and the Cave, the abandoned warehouse where he and twelve others lived with Otto.

*He can’t blame me!*

Cold comfort; Otto wasn’t the most reasonable man, especially after he’d been drinking.

He’d almost killed little Heinz when he’d told Otto of a drug deal that fell through.

They called him Otto, although he’d gone by several other names, including Ernst, Albrecht, Dürling, and once he’d introduced himself to someone as Baron Manfred von Falkenburg.

Erwin chuckled: It was hard to picture the fat, scar-faced, bald Otto as a baron of anything.

Erwin tried to be stealthy, which was easy to do because the streets were deserted.

He reached Sonnen Straße.

Its steel and glass sun pillar was dingy, dark, and falling apart.

When Professor Dr. Röntgen discovered the rays named for him, they were thought to be healthful — so the City of Berlin erected the pillar to shine like the sun on the plaza and shower it with Röntgen Rays.

People loved cavorting in front of glow-screens, showing off their skeleta.

Radiation burns and deaths ensued.

“Psst!” a voice from an abandoned storefront hissed.

It was Makie Messer, a burly twenty-year-old with fists of stone, wearing his typical elegant but threadbare clothes.

“You had visitors,” he said.

“Me?”

“The ones you live with, I mean.”

“Cops?”

“Strangest cops I ever saw,” Makie said, “Elegant black suits and capes, eagle feathers. Looked like right proper gentlemen, they did.”

Erwin stumbled into the dark warehouse, tripping over something. He found a light switch, turned it on, and gasped.

He had tripped over little Jana’s corpse.

His gaze drifted to the corner of the room, initially unable to make out the dark mass there. Then he realized what he was seeing:

Someone had tied Otto to a chair and cut his throat. Someone had stolen a weapon from Otto’s firearms display.

Erwin gagged and ran to the back, where he and the others slept.

They were all bound and gagged, and their throats had been cut — including his beloved Käthe.

He screamed.

## Chapter 2

“Russians are taught to be proud of their continent-spanning empire — and little else. As individuals, they are taught that they are as worthless as dust. Their word for sky, ‘nyebo’, begins with a negative, so their infinity-concept reaches to the horizon rather than soaring into the heavens.”

— *Meditations on Russia*, Jessup Dormand.

“What a relief!” Kristín Ormsdóttir sighed, looking properly regal in the limousine.

“Huh?” Eddie, her husband, said.

With his chiseled jaw, broad shoulders and well-boned face, the mustachioed aeronaut was recognizable the world over.

“To escape palace intrigue and bickering for a while,” Kristín said.

“Yeah,” Eddie said. “To swap it for *foreign* intrigue and bickering!”

Kristín emphasized, in English, “*To be swined and dined.*”

In brilliant sunlight, the motorcade bumped its way through tree-lined cobblestone streets of Potomac, taking them from the German embassy to the President’s House. The main limousine held the pale, thin, silver-blond and very pregnant twenty-year-old Kristín — better known as Kaiserin Luisa von Epelein, Queen of Prussia and Empress of Germany’s Iron Throne — Eddie, and the German Ambassador to Columbia, Georg von Mises.

She was completing her previous state visit to Columbia, which had been so rudely interrupted by the Franco-German War.

Eddie laughed.

“A nation is like the sea, Your Majesty,” Georg von Mises said. “It’s not wise to turn your back on it for long.”

“God, it’s hot!” she muttered.

“Potomac in summer is a steambath,” Georg said. “I used to send Maria and the children to a wonderful resort in the Virginia mountains for the summer.”

*That’s when you had your trysts with Ann Richards,* Kristín thought.

Two columns of Potomac police on horseback bracketed the cars and carriages.

“At least this car has the new air conditioning technology,” Georg continued. “We’ll equip the entire embassy with it.”

Kristín waved to people who lined the street, some of whom held tiny German flags.

*German tourists everywhere!* she mused, waving at them. *Gotta love them!*

Some spectators wore German naval uniforms — crew of the naval task force that had brought them from Germany.

“Wasting their shore-leave,” Eddie chuckled. “They’re supposed to be getting drunk and brawling.”

Kristín laughed.

“We are the world’s most powerful nation, Your Majesty,” Ambassador von Mises said. “It’s time we acted like it.”

Eddie smiled.

“In my very limited experience,” Kristín replied. “Basically . . . what I get from scanning world leaders, arrogance is a disease. A fatal one. How do you think we defeated France in the war just ended?”

“You used your telepathic powers,” Ambassador von Mises said. “You scanned their finest generals.”

“Absolutely not,” Kristín said.

This surprised Georg and Eddie.

“Napoleon VI dismissed his finest generals,” she said. “Because he was arrogant. As for the people I scanned? They were the hemorrhoid-licking incompetents he appointed in their place.”

“Did you just say what I thought you said?” Eddie laughed.

“Your German is getting much better, honey.”

“And the British Empire?” Kristín continued. “It defeated itself. Or rather, King Henry the Tenth defeated his own empire. Out of pure arrogance.”

Death-marks appeared on the people in the limousine.

“Stop!” she shouted.

Ambassador von Mises tapped on the glass partition and signaled the driver to stop.

The death-marks vanished.

Portly, mustachioed Richard Kent, the man in charge of the Secret Service detail, approached the limousine.

“Something wrong?” he said.

Kristín switched to English and said, “We have received intelligence that attempts will be made on our lives. Somewhere along this route.”

“While you’ve been riding . . . in this *procession*?”

“Her Majesty is *never* out of contact with our Ministry of State Security,” Ambassador von Mises said.

“The report didn’t specify the nature of this threat,” Kristín said.

Richard looked around.

Kristín examined the few spectators on the tree-lined street.

None had death-marks.

“It’ll be further along the route,” she said. “Maybe we should take a different route?”

Richard stepped away from the limousine for a moment.

“What’s he doing?” Eddie said. “Did you scan him?”

“He’s contacting his boss,” Kristín nodded.

“Death-marks?” Georg said. “What . . .”

“She can spot people who are about to die,” Eddie said. “Another one of her unique . . . abilities.”

“That’s also a level-one state secret, Georg,” Kristín said, shutting her eyes.

Richard returned to the limousine and said, “We have to follow the designated route. It was in all the newspapers. People will be expecting us.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Kristín smiled.

“Please, Your Majesty,” Richard whined. “We’ve scouted the route very carefully. Can’t you talk some sense into your wife?”

“How *dare* you?” Eddie snapped. “Her Majesty is a *head of state*. You insult us and the German nation!”

“I apologize,” Richard sighed. “Look, we’ll *prove* the route is safe.”

A death-mark appeared on him.

“You are about to die, sir!” Kristín shouted in English.

Richard shook his head, removed the Iron Throne’s Royal Standard from Kristín’s limousine, and put it on his Secret Service vehicle.

Then, flanked by two police cars, he drove it down the street.

Two blocks away, a bright flash seared Kristín's retina, as the Secret Service vehicle rose into the air, flipped over, and landed on one of the police cars.

Spectators screamed and ran.

A thunderclap rocked their limousine and reverberated in Kristín's chest.

Several horses reared up and dumped their riders on the ground.

"Get us out of here, Karl!" Georg shouted.

Three gunmen burst out of the side buildings and shot the Secret Service agents and police.

Then they spotted Kristín's limousine down the street and ran toward them.

Two other Secret Service cars pulled in front of Kristín's limousine and engaged the unknown assailants.

Kristín's limousine tore down a side street.

"I love the new oil burning engines," the chauffeur, Karl Richter, said. "Smooth power. No waiting to get up a head of steam."

Sporting a gray handlebar mustache, Karl was a balding middle-aged German immigrant who had driven a taxi in Potomac for more than ten years.

"Did you scan the shooters?" Eddie said.

"Oh!" Kristín said, shutting her eyes. "Right!"

"Where to?" Karl said.

"Head for the President's House," Kristín said. "President Binder is watching this on TV and is in shock."

"I'll take side streets," Karl said.

Kristín shut her eyes and said, "Our embassy's security chief is considering sending their squad of rangers to our rescue. But they don't know where we are."

"I'll tell them on the new wireless," Ambassador von Mises said.

"No!" Kristín said. "They're monitoring our frequency."

As gunshots and sirens echoed through the city, they turned left onto Knickerbocker Avenue.

"President Binder thinks we're dead," Kristín said.

"Really?" Von Mises said.

"It looked as though our car stalled and we transferred to a Secret Service vehicle."

A quarter mile later, they turned onto Potomac Mall North.

"One of the gunmen just died," Kristín announced. "Another is former Columbian military."

"So they're Columbian?" Eddie said.

"Criminals and mercenaries," she nodded.



The Potomac Mall was a huge rectangular park with a reflecting pool in the center and dotted with statues of former presidents.

A feeling of unreality crept over Kristín as she watched the mall, comparing the people there going about their ordinary lives with the murder-attempt against her.

People were walking dogs or jogging, and families picnicked.

A crowd milled about in an open-air craft show, and Kristín wished she could browse the art objects like a person.

“The President’s House is coming up on the right,” Karl said, jolting Kristín out of her reverie.

A phalanx of TV cameras and reporters surrounded the President’s House’s North Portico.

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Ambassador von Mises presented his credentials to the Secret Service.

“No statements at this time!” Ambassador von Mises replied to the many shouted questions from the news media.

Secret Service agents formed a protective cordon around Kristín, Eddie, and Georg and whisked them into the building, half-carrying Kristín and her crutches.

“Thank God you’re safe, your Majesty!” President Binder said, offering Kristín a chair.

His wife, Jennifer, hugged Kristín, and then recoiled.

“I apologize, Your Majesty,” she said, sitting in the chair. “It’s a breach of protocol.”

“Nonsense,” Kristín sighed. “It’s nice to be among friends.”

“Where do we go from here?” Eddie said.

“Good question,” Kristín said. “Part of me wants to return to Germany. . . .”

President Binder’s nodded and groaned.

“Part of me feels the show must go on. Tonight’s state dinner will be a somber affair. I should show up, though. You know, today wasn’t the first time someone tried to kill me.”

Jennifer Binder gasped.

“It was on my coronation day,” Kristín muttered. “Someone tried to bomb me and half the Landsrat. I prevented it. *Barely.*”

Eddie hugged her.

The redheaded, ten-year-old First Daughter ran out of a hallway and hugged Kristín.

“Connie!” Kristín said.

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An aide produced a wheelchair for Kristín, and Eddie wheeled her into a conference room where they met two men. One was rotund and white-haired and wore a police uniform. The other was a tall, thin man with white hair and a piercing stare. Frank Asimov. Kristín had met him.

Kristín scanned them both.

The man in the police uniform bowed and kissed Kristín's hand.

"Ed Morris at your service, Your Majesty," he said. "I'm the chief of the Potomac Police Department."

As Frank kissed her hand, she said, "Ah, Mr. Asimov. We meet again."

He was the director of the Columbian Intelligence Agency.

"Your Majesty," he smiled.

They spent the next half hour discussing what they had experienced — without mentioning death-marks.

Afterward, Ed Morris kissed her hand again and left.

"You have a unique ability to acquire information, Your Majesty," Frank smiled, "Have you any recent communiques from your Ministry of State Security?"

"Yes."

Frank tapped on a door, and a twenty-something woman with a steno pad entered the room.

"This is Sylvia," Frank said.

"Everything you're about to hear is classified at the highest level," Frank told her. "President's eyes-only! Meet Her Majesty, Kaiserin Luisa von Epelein."

"Your Majesty," Sylvia said, curtsying.

"OK," Kristín said. "Here are some anonymous tips. The one surviving shooter is named James Fergis."

"Are you taking this down?" Frank said to Sylvia.

She wrote on her steno-pad.

"He's a former ranger in the Columbian military," Kristín continued. "He raped an eight-year-old girl and was sentenced to prison. He escaped from the prison bus. Since then, he has avoided capture and been a killer for hire."

*How can she possibly know this?* Sylvia thought.

"His motive in assassinating you?" Frank said.

"Money. He received an envelope with a hundred thousand dollars and a note. Signed 'A fancier of roses.' It promised a million if he succeeded in killing me."

"What are his plans? Will he make a second attempt?"

“No. He’s laying low in the Imperial Palace Hotel at 17 Agatha Street. Room 214. It’s a roach- and rat-infested dump. ”

Sylvia stared at Kristín in shock.

“Germany has the world’s finest intelligence service,” Frank said, thinking, *and her name is Luisa. Soon we may have telepaths on our payroll.*

“Mr. Fergis thinks the bomb was installed in the street two weeks ago,” Kristín added. “A wire ran from the bomb to a button in a side building. Mr. Fergis pushed the button to detonate it.”

“Two weeks?” Frank said. “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

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As they left the room, they spotted President Binder wrapping up a press conference at the East Portico.

Reporters noticed her and shouted questions.

Kristín stood on her crutches.

“Do you know who tried to kill you?” one said. “And why?”

“I have no idea,” Kristín replied.

“Could it be your nation’s barbaric conquest of France?” another shouted.

“France declared *war* on us and *invaded* us!” she shouted back. “War was the remedy they chose, and we gave them the fullest measure of it.”

“Some people would disagree,” the reporter said.

“Some people think the world is flat!” she snapped. “The facts of the matter are in the public record! I’ll never apologize for defending Germany from unprovoked aggression! Repeating PLB propaganda is not journalism!”

“No further questions!” President Binder said. “We are all grateful that Her Majesty is unharmed.”

