

Chapter 1

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

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

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

As she came home from school on a crisp Fall afternoon, seventeen-year-old Kristín Ormsdóttir didn’t feel the universe shift and spawn ten thousand new timelines.

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

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

“They’re waiting for you, honey.”

“*Who’s* waiting for me?”

“Just go. . .”

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

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

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

He smiled at Kristín.

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

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

Kristín was at a loss for words.

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

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

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

Twelve hours in all.

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

Afterward, she'd even dreamed about them.

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

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

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

"I've read English since I was five," Kristín said. "During gym class, I go to the school library and read English stuff. Today, I read *Popular Science*, *London Life*, and. . ."

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

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

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

“When do I leave?” Kristín said.

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

Four ladies appeared at the door.

“Not yet!” the mayor said.

“Who are they?” Kristín said, nervously twirling her blond hair around her right index finger.

“They . . . um . . . will help you pack.”

“I don’t need help!”

“When does she leave?” Ormur said.

“Tomorrow morning,” the mayor said. “Six.”

“*What?*” Kristín and her family exclaimed.

“That’s out of the question!” Viktoria said. “We need at least a week.”

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

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

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

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

“Wait a week and take a steamship,” Viktoria said.

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

“Why don’t we wait two days, then?” Viktoria said.

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

“I have to go, mom, dad,” Kristín said. “It’s what I’ve always wanted.”

With her sand-shod outdoor crutches, Kristín made her way along an arc of beach, as the sea’s gray expanse peered into her soul.

Water-spirits danced across the foam.

The beach snored and shuddered like a sleeping dragon.

Carrying the sublimed essence of Europe and a thousand miles of ocean, the brisk wind whipped her hair, which she brushed from her steel-gray eyes.

Sand stung her face.

Six-foot-tall jagged pillars of black rock protruded from the black sand and gravel like mythical *bergrisi* — rock-giants defending Iceland from invaders.

As a child she’d imagined that.

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

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

I could refuse.

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

Death-marks had sealed her fate.

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

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

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

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

They never lied.

Seeing one on Hekla had broken her heart.

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

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

What else was there to do?

Black and white birds skimmed the molten-lead sea.

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

I have to become like them.

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

She'd heard of these.

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

The gray smoke from its stack made her cough.

A dead-fish stench filled the air, and it drizzled.

A seagull glided overhead.

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

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

Tears lined Víkingur's eyes.

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

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

When the time came, she levered herself onto the seat beside Margret in the limousine's cavernous passenger area and stowed her crutches.

She watched through the car's back window.

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

She shut her eyes and tried to ignore Margret.

She drifted off to sleep.

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

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

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

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

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

Kristín gathered her crutches and hobbled into the hotel lobby.

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

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

"OK."

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

She nodded.

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

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

What is that thing?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Push the button on the wall.”

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

Framed oil paintings of seascapes adorned the walls.

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

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

She’d never been in a hotel before.

The full impact of what had happened finally hit her.

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

The thought terrified her.

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

Shivering, she hobbled inside and slid the door shut.

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

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

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

She awoke with a start and checked her bedside clock.

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

"It's overwhelming!" Kristín said, looking up and down the street. "There are more people on this *one street* than the whole of Fiskihöfn!"

Margret smiled.

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

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

A steam table held assorted foods and condiments.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kristín looked up at him.

He had a kind face.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He motioned for Kristín to join him.

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

The photographers snapped pictures.

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

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

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

The Prime Minister shrugged.

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

Kristín returned to her table.

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

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

“*What?*”

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

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

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

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

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

“Writhing?” Kristín said.

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

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

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