

# An Angel of Glass

Book One

WILLIAM DAWSON

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One  
**Crucible**

New Year's Day, 1903

## Peter

**T**he three men with sledgehammers and bolt-cutters slung against their shoulders are clearly up to no good.

We pass each other in the narrow alleyway.

‘Nice night for a break-in,’ I say, cheekily.

The rear man clips me about the ear.

‘Hey!’ I protest. ‘Most people just say piss off.’

The men don’t break pace. They stamp on through the frozen snow to the wire fence at the end of the alleyway. There’s a goods’ yard submerged in the darkness on the other side, so I’m guessing that they intend to break into the covered railway vans that stand in the sidings there.

‘I hope you find nothing but rudely shaped turnips!’ I shout after them.

The men ignore me and start to clip a hole in the chain-wire fence with their bolt-cutters. Never mind. I have my own break-in to attend tonight, and I’m too excited to care about the mischief of others. This is the first time that I’ve been allowed to tag along with my brother and his mate as they force their way into people’s kitchens and steal the coins from their gas metres. I’m supposed to be keeping a look-out for gendarmes in the street, but that was boring,

so I've slipped around the back of the terrace to watch the interesting bit.

I find the yard gate that Bobby and Grainger have broken through, and press my face against the black kitchen window. It's hard to see much in the darkness, but I can hear the scrap of Grainger's crowbar as he tries to lever open the meter's iron casing.

'Easy Grainger,' says my brother, Bobby. 'Don't go at it so hard. You'll knock the blighted thing off the –'

There's a clanging, clunking crash as the iron gas meter falls off the wall. It rolls once and comes to a rest at Bobby's feet, flat on its dial.

'That weren't my fault,' says Grainger, quickly. 'It must have been booby trapped.'

'Dickface,' says Bobby. 'You're the booby. Here, give me the crowbar.'

Bobby is my hero. When I grow up, I want to be a fleet-footed, light-fingered, always one-step-ahead-of-the-law rogue like Bobby. That's why I'm spying on him now. To pick up tips.

It is ten minutes to midnight on a freezing New Year's Eve. The beer halls of Neustadt are hoarse with brass bands and drunken singing, and the workers of Bergmann's Steel Factory have cleared their warehouse floor for their annual staff dance. Churchgoers are singing psalms in the square outside the cathedral, causing blue electricity to fizz about the cathedral's spire. Whilst far away, in the Eastern Capital, the King-Emperor readies his skinny Imperial arse to perform his yearly miracle, thus proving to the empire that the Eschenbach Family are still beloved by God. Last year he cured a girl of glaucoma. This year, the rumour is that he will send out a moth of smoke to mark every person who blasphemes against the Imperial dynasty.

If the King-Emperor is looking to perform a miracle, we could do with one here, because the break-in isn't going well. Through the window's badly-fitted sash, I glimpse my

brother's shadow steadying the meter with his foot. But as he prepares to smash the crowbar down upon the metal casing, Grainger says, 'Wait. You hear that?'

Bobby raises the crowbar for a second try. 'Police?' he guesses. 'I'll be bleeding kill Pete if he ain't keeping watch.'

'No – something's hissing.'

We all hold our breaths to listen.

'Gas!' says Bobby. 'Grainger, you've split the blasted pipe.'

There's a confused scuffle. A plate smashes to the floor.

'Let's get out of here before it sparks,' says Bobby.

They tumble out of the back door, into the snow-dashed yard. Bobby is not pleased to see me hovering by the window. 'Pete, you prick! You're supposed to be keeping watch.'

'I am,' I protest. 'But there's nobody out there. Look!'

A gendarme's whistle chooses that moment to slice the darkness.

'Except him, of course,' I add, sheepishly.

'Is that for us?' asks Grainger; and Bobby snarls, 'Run, you morons!' The thud of heavy boots comes smashing through the frozen puddles in the alleyway. 'How the pissing hell do you expect me to run with me balled foot?' shouts Grainger. But Bobby just gives me a shove. 'This is your bloody fault, Pete,' he says. He pushes me out of the gate, into the dark avenue of outside toilets beyond. I'm thinking, this isn't fair, I can't get arrested on my first housebreaking. I've been planning to spend my share of the takings watching the barrel jumpers and snake dancers perform on the Variety Stage. I didn't intend to start running about like a deranged clown myself.

'Look, there's a hole in the wire fencing over there,' says Bobby. 'We can cut through the goods yard.'

'And get diced by a passing train?' I ask.

'Shut up, Pete. Do you want to be banged up in gaol at the age of thirteen?' He gives me another shove. I scramble

through the peeled back wire and run out over the criss-crossing iron rails and tar-stained sleepers. Grainger darts off in a different direction, slipping under the couplings of a waiting coal train. There's no sign of the three men who passed this way before us. I try to look in all directions at once, aware that a line of goods wagons could start moving, or a shunting engine could come charging out of the darkness, or a point could snap shut on my ankle. But all I succeed in doing is losing Bobby. One moment my brother is darting between stationary refrigeration vans, the next he has vanished.

'Bobby?' I shout. *'Bobby!'*

He's gone. He probably hasn't realised that he's left me behind. I should have run faster.

They say that, once upon a time, you could pray for a miracle, and sometimes – a mathematician worked out that it was roughly a one in fourteen million chance – your head would light up with a halo, and the world would bend in your favour. I give it a go now – I'm desperate. But my head resolutely refuses to turn into a light bulb. Stupid religion. Still, there's no sign of the gendarme anymore, so perhaps it worked? I look around for a place to hide. The signal box where my Pa works is close by. I make for that.

Pa is clearly busy, because there's a pilot locomotive wheezing to a halt on the Fast Up Line. I briefly think, *that's a bit odd, it's been travelling in the wrong direction* – uphill, instead of back down to the bottom where the pilots wait to help pull heavy trains up the gradient. But perhaps Pa is parking the locomotive to let a train go past. I don't give it much thought. Just as I don't think much of the shadow that I see darting across the trackside point rodding ahead of me. Instead, all I care about is the electric glare of the signal box, as it finally emerges, fracturing through the falling snow.

Nearly there.

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Unfortunately, I don't have much opportunity for relief because the blasted gendarme is back. So much for my prayer. He's panting along a path on the opposite side of the four main lines, looking for a way to cross the tracks. Thank God there's a train approaching – I can hear the hum in the rails beside me. Hopefully it will delay him for a bit. I glance over my shoulder, thinking that perhaps the signal box isn't such a good hiding place after all, not while the gendarme is so close. And I see the locomotive's steel smoke-box emerge from the freezing fog, glowing dimly red in the darkness. A coat of arms rests on the buffer beam. By the light of the locomotive's four headlamps I see two flanking angels draped over a shield of black and white cheques. Very fancy. I recognise the insignia of the Imperial Eschenbachs. There must be a prince or princess on board.

Perhaps the gendarme will stop and salute as the train goes past?

I can always hope.

I dart left, intending to use the cover of the passing train to race off in the direction of an empty goods' shed.

And then it hits me.

The train is on the same line as the pilot locomotive.

And just like that, the fates align, and the scrawny, raggedly-edged boy from Dreieckigland is put on a collision course with the ninth in line to the Imperial Throne.

The rest, as they say, is history.

Or at least a gossip column in *The Daily Herald*.

If this was a fairy tale, the poor boy would immediately fall in love with the princess, and the princess would immediately fall in love with the poor boy. An evil step-mother or king or witch or talking earthworm or giggling cucumber (I've yet to iron out the details of this hypothetical story) would do everything they could to keep the poor boy and the princess apart. But true love would prevail, and the poor boy and the princess would go on to live happily ever after.

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This isn't a fairy story.

No, this is a story about secret conspiracies and high society scandal. It's a story about psychopaths and narcissists, about collapsing empires and military coups, and about petty-angels and underdemons. It is a story about two families who meddled with twisted magics that they did not understand, and who as a result nearly cracked the world.

But above all, this is a story about the one person who tried to rise above the chaos.

This is the story about a very un-fairy-tale princess.

# Sophie

This is a story about me!

Haha, sort of. I'm sure that there'll be other characters in it as well. Maybe even a villain or two? Who knows.

It's not the first story about me. When I'm bored, I sometimes go to the South Library and have a good laugh at all the attempts to write about me in the books there. But this time it will be different. This time I'll have my own voice.

I'm very excited.

So, drum roll please.

I'm on the Imperial train, with my Aunt Felicity, who is actually my first cousin once removed. But calling her First Cousin Once Removed Felicity is a bit of a mouthful, even for us Eschenbachs, so aunt it is. We're stood in the dining-car, where Flick is attempting to do a reverse St Johannes Battle Prayer. I help her draw back-to-front religious symbols in charcoal on the tablecloth, feeling very grown-up that I've been called upon to assist. I try not to let Flick see that I've got black smudges all down the side of my green-patterned frock.

The Duke of Gryce stands ready with a bowl of pig's blood. 'I'm still not sure about this, ma'am,' he says. 'These

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prayers haven't worked properly for centuries – if they ever did. Why do you think this will stop him now?’

Flick puts the finishing touches to an upside-down angel. ‘At this point, Maurice, I'm willing to try anything.’

She runs her finger down a page of Ziegler's *Common Prayers and their Uses*, checking that she has set everything up. The St Johannes Battle Prayer used to be very popular with soldiers, who would perform it before going into battle to try and persuade God to back their side. By reversing it, Flick hopes to – make herself invisible to God perhaps? I don't know. She hasn't taken me into her confidence, and I feel jealous. Something has spooked Flick and Gryce, and I want to help. But Flick is ten years older than me, and sometimes she needs to act as befits the first in line to the throne. Which means that there are things that she cannot tell me, even though I am her best friend.

The exhaust of the train grows louder and slower as we begin to climb. Outside it is snowing, like somebody has gone at the night very aggressively with a hole-puncher. Dark factory chimneys fold past the windows. It won't be long before we reach Neustadt.

Flick picks up a bottle of water that a priest has spat in and sprinkles it over the knives and forks that we are reverse-blessing in the place of the more traditional swords.

‘Even if this prayer works,’ says Gryce, ‘there are still the *others* to worry about.’

Flick gives a tired laugh. She hasn't been sleeping well recently, and sometimes she's so exhausted that she mangles her words. ‘Ha. Yes, well – it's not as if they can make me vanish like Ladislav. Thank God for the protection that comes with the Eschenbach name. Speed is the key, Maurice. If we make our move the moment that we reach the Kaltburg, they won't have time to react. Is Zorana ready in Borgovia?’

‘They all are, ma'am.’

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‘Then tap into the line-side wire the next time we stop and send a telegram ahead. Tell them to await my orders.’ She dips her fingers in the pig’s blood and starts to write down *blessed is a righteous cause*, the five Words that St Johannes heard God speak, backwards on the table cloth. ‘Now – in terms of logistics...’

This conversation is clearly going to take a while, and Flick is looking exhausted.

I go to the kitchen at the end of the carriage to talk to the waiting staff about getting her some supper.

## Peter

I stumble to a halt on the camber of frozen ballast as the carriage lights strafe by. Surely, I am mistaken. But no, the train is definitely on the Fast Up Line, same as the pilot locomotive.

Bloody hell Pete, I think, you should do something. You should wave your arms in the air and shout ‘*Danger!*’ But I don’t. I just stand and watch as the train roars past, storming up the Bank. In an instant, it’s vanished into the fog again. Its red tail lamp hangs on its own in the murk for a moment, and then it too is gone.

The gendarme is oblivious to what is about to happen.

‘Hey!’ he shouts. ‘Stay right where you are, young lad. You’re about to learn a whole new definition of the word *trouble.*’

He begins to cross the tracks.

But I’m running again now. I barely hear the gendarme give a frustrated blast of his whistle. All I can think about is the Imperial train and the pilot locomotive ahead of it. I should have done something to stop them – what kind of *dickface* just stands there and watches? – *please* let the driver see the danger before it’s too late. But already a whistle is

screaming, and as I pelt past the last of the gradient posts, I hear a screeching, concussive *bang*.

Ahead of me, the four main-lines bend to the right, passing beneath a gantry of signals, before they dive under a succession of road bridges. The first carriage I see emerge from the fog is the composite brake coach. It stands just beyond the gantry, still upright on the rails, and I feel a desperate glimmer of hope. Perhaps the driver of the pilot saw the approaching danger and was able to move off in time. Perhaps the accident isn't too bad. But within a few more strides, I see the next carriage, poking out from the train at odd angles. And a few strides beyond that the third coach emerges, twisted right off the tracks. By now, people are screaming. Men in evening suits and ladies in bustled dresses stagger out across the neighbouring lines. Their clothing is torn, and their faces are bleeding. A man is shouting, 'Where is she? Where is she?' whilst among the wreckage piled about the crumpled locomotives, firelight has begun to flicker. Of the second coach, only a shell remains. The carriage behind it has sliced right through the wooden compartments and is now nestled snugly inside it. Footmen in black and white chequered livery have already dived into the mangle of splintered wood, looking for survivors. But gas leaking from the carriage lighting has been ignited by fallen coals from the locomotives' fireboxes, and a growing white hole is eating away at the train. Blue electricity, meanwhile, fizzles around the nearby telegraph posts, as if a thousand people are hard at prayer – which is odd, because as far as I can tell, nobody is praying.

I stagger into the crowd of survivors, as a man in a tail-coat and top hat fights against the broken panels of the middle carriage. 'Get her out!' he shouts. 'Get her out!' Without really thinking, I go to help him. The gendarme forgets about our chase and joins me. Heat from the flames batters against our faces, and lit scraps of horsehair from the seating dance in the air around us. 'My Lord, is it her?'

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shouts a footman, and an elderly lady adds, 'Have you found her, Massingbird? Have you found Felicity?'

The lady that Lord Massingbird is trying to rescue is wedged beneath a carriage bogie. Her face is masked with blood, and her eyes are closed, and her rose dress is so ravaged that I can see her corset. It's impossible to tell if she is alive or dead.

His lordship looks around for a lever. 'If we lift, can you pull?' he shouts at me.

I grab the lady beneath the armpits – and then let go in surprise as static electricity cracks through my hands. I've no idea where it's come from. It is said that priests who pray very hard over several days sometimes develop a charge imbalance. But usually it requires a couple of hundred people chanting together to create this level of static. I briefly wonder if this lady is a saint: one of those blessed people who have heard God speak. But that is ridiculous, because there haven't been any saints for nearly three centuries. I reach forward to touch her again, expecting another shock, but there's no further electrical discharge, so I brace my feet against the broken seating and heave. The gendarme tries to help me. We choke on billowing smoke, twisting the woman roughly one way, then the next, careless of doing her further injury with the fire so close. But blood is smearing across my hands, and more blood is trickling up my forearms, and the lady's eyelids aren't even flickering. 'It's no good,' I shout. 'I think she's gone.'

'She can't be,' the elderly lady cries. 'Oh God, *your highness, your highness* – don't do this to us – please, don't do this to us – *please...*'

And it finally clicks why the woman is surrounded by prayer electricity. She is a princess – an Eschenbach.

One of the few people in the world still touched by God.

# Sophie

I am holding a teacup.

I'm not sure where the teacup has come from. There's no tea service that I can see. No serving maid or lace-cloth table.

Instead there's just a black sky and a hypnotic whirlpool of falling snowflakes. It's rather peaceful.

It is true that I probably shouldn't be lying on my back in the snow. My nanny would have a fit if she saw me. I should get up and find the rest of the tea party. But my body feels very heavy, and my head feels as if it's been stuffed with cotton wool. I decide to lie on the ground a little longer. Hopefully things will start to make sense again in a moment.

Somewhere nearby, I hear shouting.

Oh dear, I think. Has the footman forgotten to refill the sugar bowl again? Flick does hate it when people get sloppy.

I turn my head to look – and, *snap*, the pain whips through my body. I cry out in shock. It suddenly feels as if I've been beaten head to toe with a hot fire-iron. Every rib is in agony. My right arm is bent at a very unnatural angle. My spine feels as if somebody has tried to twist it back-to-front. I've no idea what state my legs are in.

Something unspeakably bad has happened.

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I begin to cry. Not because I'm upset or frightened – I think it's the shock.

I'm shivering as well, even though there is a big fire close by.

This isn't good.

First things first. I can't lie in the snow all night. I'll get a cold. I need to find Flick. She'll know what's happened. I steel myself against the pain and sit up. It's not quite as bad as I'm expecting, and I take comfort from that. I'm hurt, but it's not life threatening. My arm is clearly broken, and my legs still feel numb, but with a bit of effort I can force myself to my feet.

I stand and turn to look at the fire.

It is roaring out of a tideline of debris, lashing the sky with long, orange whips of flame. Twisted metal and the occasional wheel glow dully red amidst the glare. More shattered timber, and broken glass, and crumpled roofing spills across the ground where I'm standing.

It takes me a few moments to work out what I'm staring at.

The train.

The train is *on fire*.

Oh God, I think, Flick. Where's Flick?

I look around frantically, with no idea where to begin searching. My heart is rising in panic.

And that's when I see *him*.

Now, you might say that I was in shock. You might say that I'd just banged my head, so of course I'd be hallucinating things. You might say that I am making this up.

But I swear, hand on heart, this is what I see. He is tall – that's what I notice first. Seven feet tall at least. But stooped. He wears a top hat, squashed and bent, as if he doesn't quite know how to put it on. And his black evening jacket is ragged and scuffed. He looks very much like any victim of a train crash might look. Except...

*Except.*

His face. Oh my God, his face. His face is a grin, all teeth and gum, far too big for any normal human mouth. It pushes his cheeks up to his eyes, and his chin down to his neck. It takes up fully half his head. There is nothing natural about that grin. It is frozen on his face in a single, terrible smile, as he stalks long-legged through the debris. I've never been so petrified by a grin in all my life. It is so horrifying that it takes me a while to notice the other odd details about him. Like the fact that his legs don't burn as he walks through a pocket of flame.

I'm terrified, I'm shaking. I want to cry out, but my voice is gone. I can only watch as this grinning man comes to stand over me.

'Hello chickpea,' he says, cupping my chin with his long fingers. 'Is it you?'

I stare up at his shining teeth, my mind blotted silent with dread.

The Grinning Man cocks his head. 'Ah, no. It must be the other one. Don't look so scared, chickpea. You have nothing to fear from me tonight. I am here for somebody else.' He lets go of my chin and looks up at a nearby telegraph post, which is crackling with a blue corpusant. 'And by the looks of things, they have tried to use a reverse St Johannes Prayer to hide from me. Very clever. I do like ingenuity. What a pity it doesn't work.'

He gives my head a fond pat and then he strides on into the flames. His jacket begins to smoke, and a flame briefly licks across his top hat. But he doesn't catch light. Instead, he pushes apart the broken, smouldering panelling of the nearest carriage, and twists his long body into the burning train.

I just stand there, in the snow, and shake and shake and shake.

Several minutes pass. I keep expecting to hear a voice cry out in horror at the sight of the Grinning Man walking

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out of the flames on the other side of the train. But the only cries are the cries of the injured and the trapped. Nobody else has seen him. Only me.

There's a clatter of shifting debris behind me. I turn quickly, afraid to see a second Grinning Man stalking out of the fog. But it's not an adult. It's a boy. Two boys, in fact. They can't be more than a few years older than me. Their blazers are tatty, and they are wearing flat caps. They inch their way closer to the fire, gazing upon the destruction in awe.

A pair of locals, I guess.

I feel a surge of relief. Human contact. Just what I need right now.

The nearer boy spots me. He runs an appraising eye up and down my body. In his leering gaze I sense another threat, more mundane than the Grinning Man, but no less dangerous.

'Bloody hell, Grainger,' he says. 'Look at them pearls she's wearing.'

## Peter

Apparently, there's a royal physician onboard the train. But since nobody knows if he's alive or dead, that's no help.

We carry Princess Felicity's body to the buttress of a bridge arch, away from the flames. The gendarme tries to resuscitate her, but even I can tell that he's wasting his time. She's clearly dead.

I step back, and let other people crowd into the gap. Ladies sob into their lace handkerchiefs. White-faced gentlemen remove their hats. A liveried servant falls to his knees. It occurs to me that at some point the gendarme is going to remember that he was chasing me. Now, he might decide that the death of first in line to the throne is a more pressing matter to deal with. But then again, he might not. I decide to make myself scarce whilst he's distracted.

I still can't quite believe what has happened. How did my Pa manage to get the signalling so wrong that he crashed the Imperial train? That's a major fuck up, if ever there was one. I wonder if I should go and check on him – after all, he might not have realised what has happened yet. But my father is a buttoned-down man, more used to communicating through the block bell than through actual conversation. I don't tend to have much to do to him.

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I decide to go home instead. I'm more shaken than I care to admit. An army captain is making his way down the train, firing bullets into the heads of those people who are too injured to be rescued before the flames reach them. How messed up is that? I suddenly want my sister, Amy, to make me a cup of tea and tell me that I did everything that I could. Even though I'm not sure that I did. So, I set off along the length of the shattered train, looking for the path back to Leopold Road.

To my surprise I run into Bobby and Grainger.

Or rather, I'm not *completely* surprised. Death and destruction are a magnate to Bobby and Grainger. They have cornered a young girl against the cast-aside roof of one of the carriages. 'Bloody hell,' Bobby is saying. 'Look at them pearls she's wearing.'

Grainger screws up his face in what I think is meant to be an ingratiating smile. 'You alright, lass?' he asked the girl.

The girl blinks back at him. She's about the same age as me, with curling dark ringlets that fail to conceal the huge bruise that's appearing on her forehead. Her green frock is peppered with cinder marks, the sash at her waist has come undone, and she is shivering uncontrollably. She is much more genteel than the kind of person you usually meet around Neustadt. Since my experience of dealing with girls has hitherto consisted mainly of shouting 'You're a slag!' at Lizzy Porter after she snogged both Tom Duckett and Rick Trumper behind the laundry, I hang back.

'Was you in the accident?' asks Grainger.

The girl doesn't reply. She just fingers the teacup that she is holding.

'She's simple,' Bobby declares.

That's our Bobby, always a wellspring of sympathy to those in trouble. He can't see that the girl is traumatised. She keeps looking at the train, as if she's unable to believe what just happened. I wonder if she has family on board.

Finally, she opens her mouth to speak.

‘I – I – saw –’ she stutters. ‘Did you see –?’

She points at the burning carriages.

‘Yeah, it’s a little hard to miss,’ says Bobby. ‘It’s like that time the steam-hammer exploded at Ellenreich’s Steel Factory. Only with fewer men in overalls tutting about boiler pressure. What happened to you – did you bang your head?’

‘I – I don’t –’ says the girl. She frowns. ‘I think I – I think I was having supper. A-and Flick was doing her impression of Gryce trying to convince us that he hadn’t been looking at the map of the Wallulian Districts upside-down, a-and – and –’ She suddenly bursts out laughing. ‘I’ve just remembered. I’d drawn Gryce’s face on the shell of my hard-boiled egg, and Flick said – Flick said something funny... No – no wait, perhaps that was this morning. Oh God, what’s wrong with me?’

‘It’s alright, lass, calm down, you probably *have* just banged your head,’ says Grainger. ‘Here, let me look at it with me magic fingers.’ He gives her a leer – and the girl backs away, tripping over her feet to fall into the upturned cradle of the carriage roof. The teacup smashes to the ground.

I don’t like the way that this is going, so I say, ‘We should take her to the others.’

But Bobby just grabs the girl’s hand and holds it up to the firelight. ‘There’s rings here, Grainger. Look – I think this one’s got a diamond in it.’ The girl tries to pull her hand free, but Bobby twists it suddenly, making her cry out.

‘Bobby, you’re hurting her,’ I exclaim. But Bobby just says, ‘Grainger, get the necklace.’

Grainger gives a shrug. ‘Sorry, sweetheart,’ he says. ‘You wasn’t really my type anyway.’ He calmly unwinds the pearls from about her neck.

‘Bobby don’t!’ I exclaim. ‘Bobby, I’ll – I’ll –’

‘Piss off, Pete,’ says Bobby.

So I throw myself at them.

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We all go crashing into the upturned roof. ‘Pete, you *wanker*,’ shouts Bobby. He lets go of the girl and grabs me in a headlock. The girl skitters away down the roof on her arse. Bobby and I roll through the debris, hitting and kicking each other. ‘Give her them back!’ I cry, but Bobby manages to elbow me in the stomach. I curl up, winded, as he scrambles to his feet. ‘You’re such a loser, Pete! You keep following us around, trying to be clever, but really we just want you to piss off! You should go back to school and let Mr Thompson fuck you up the arse!’ He kicks me in the ribs, then turns to go. ‘Grainger, you coming?’ he asks.

Grainger fingers the pearls that he’s just stolen. ‘After you, Bob. Hey lass, if ever you fancy learning a few tricks to impress your future husband, just ask for Grainger at the Station Pub.’

They clamber off the roof, into the debris-smashed snow.

I roll onto my back and stare up at the sky, blinking back tears. I can’t believe that Bobby, my hero, would steal from the victim of train crash. That’s psychopathic.

But perhaps it’s not so different from stealing our neighbour’s gas money. Theft is just a lot harder when you can see your victim’s face.

I force myself to sit up and look at the girl. I don’t want her to think that the Dray family are all monsters, so I croak, ‘I-I’m sorry. He’s not normally like that. He’s a good brother, really. He looks out for me.’

But the girl seems to have lost interest in Bobby. She doesn’t even appear that bothered about her stolen jewellery. Instead she is staring towards the train again.

‘Did you see him?’ she whispers. ‘Did you see the Grinning Man?’

## Sophie

So that was a mugging.

I know that I should be upset about it, but I can't get over my horror of the Grinning Man. The memory of his clenched teeth and peeled back lips fills my mind like tumour.

The boy who tried to stop the muggers seems more shaken by the theft than me.

'I'm sorry,' he says. 'He's not normally like that. He's a good brother, really.'

That is patently not true. But when I open my mouth to point this out, I find myself saying, 'Did you see him? Did you see the Grinning Man.' It's the only thing that will fit in my head at the moment.

The boy looks confused. Clearly, he didn't see the Grinning Man. I lose interest in him. I wonder who might know what I'm talking about. Flick, I think. Flick knows everything. She'll be able to tell me who the Grinning Man is and what he wants. I get to my feet. I am trying not to think about the mashed carriages and the raging fire. If I survived the crash, then Flick must have done too – right? I mean, I can't imagine it any other way.

I'm vaguely aware of the boy feeling around in his pockets.

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‘Here,’ he says. ‘It won’t cover what Bobby stole, but it’s all I have.’

He presses a couple of tarnished coppers into my hand. I don’t know how to react. It’s a paltry sum, barely enough to buy a ribbon, let alone a necklace. It’s lucky that Mummy has forbidden me from wearing real jewellery until I’m fifteen years old. But even so, this doesn’t come close to covering the fake pearls or the paste ring that were stolen.

Yet it’s clearly all the money that this boy has.

I try to return the coins. ‘You really don’t have to –’ I begin.

But the boy is adamant. ‘I need to do something to balance out me brother’s behaviour.’

Again, I’m at a loss as to what to say. In the end I hold out my right hand. ‘My name is Sophie, as you didn’t ask.’

The boy gives my hand a shake. ‘Peter,’ he says. And I laugh a slightly wild laugh. ‘Well, most people kiss it,’ I tell him, ‘but I suppose that will do.’

The boy blushes. Still, I’m used to that. People are always getting tongue-tied in my presence. I’m an Eschenbach, after all. It’s reassuringly normal after all the terror of the night. I feel a little of my self-confidence return. Whatever the Grinning Man is, he wasn’t interested in me. He was looking for somebody else. I don’t need to fear him. *He* was the aberration. When we reach Kaltburg, I will go to the South Library and look him up. I will find out where he comes from and what he is looking for. And then I will send out people to track him down. Because however scary the Grinning Man is, I am an Eschenbach princess, and I can make the world revolve around me.

But that is for later.

First, I will go and find Flick.

## Peter

The girl, Sophie, shambles off to join her people. I trudge home to Leopold Road along the frozen canals and snowy streets of Neustadt. I go the long way around because I have a lot to think about. Even I cannot defend Bobby's behaviour tonight. He was a monster. And I know that if I keep following Bobby around, I'll become a monster too. Is that what I want? Or can I still choose a different path?

My route home takes me through the dark cones of the coal-pit slag heaps. There, amidst the snow-dusted shale, I come across a scrap-metal shrine belonging to a Workers' Cult. A dozen shivering men have gathered beneath its awning to celebrate the New Year by vowing off drink and promising eternal solidarity with each other. Their prayers are hungry and desperate, but without the channel of an ordained priest, no static electricity sparks. God probably isn't listening. Instead, they have wired up a battery to their shrine, and a more mundane electricity crackles through the frame. One of the men is trying to persuade his companions that they should make a pilgrimage to the sacred city of Hales, where they can pray in the Cathedral of the Saint-King; but his friends are unenthusiastic. They cannot afford the time away from work. I linger a moment

## AN ANGEL OF GLASS

on the edge of the brazier-light, wondering whether to join them. I could do with some comfort right now. But having spent the evening breaking into a railway workers' cottage, I suspect that religion is not for me. I trudge on, past the great drums of the gasometers and into the slums. My thoughts stray to the girl, Sophie. I wonder what her life is like, travelling on the Imperial train, wearing jewellery that could feed a village for a year. And I look down at my threadbare trousers, and my ill-fitting shoes, and I think how shabby I must have looked to her. A panicked sense of claustrophobia closes in around me. Please let there be more to my life than crime and poverty, I beg as I turn into Leopold Road. Please give me some sign that there is more.

But when I push open our front door, all I see is my future coming to a full stop.

The hallway is packed with gendarmes.

They crowd the bottom of the stairs with their black uniforms and their biscuit-tin hats. They have notebooks in their hands, and pistols tucked into their belts. Panic grips me. Oh God, I think, they've heard what Bobby did to Sophie and they've come to arrest him. Or worse, they're investigating the housebreaking, and it's me that they've come to take away. You should run, I think. Run, Pete, *run*. But I don't run. I just stand there, glued to the linoleum floor. Upstairs, my baby sister, Nancy, screams in her cot. In the kitchen, Ma is shouting, 'You can't take him! Please don't take him!'

My sister Amy comes pushing through the crush of black capes and brass-buttoned jackets. 'Pete, thank God you're here,' she says.

'W-what's happened?' I ask.

Amy is looking shaken. 'They're saying that Pa messed up with the signals and crashed a train, Pete. They're saying that he was dangerously incompetent – or – or worse.'

'I don't understand,' I say. 'Pa wouldn't deliberately –'

'Pete, they're arresting him. They're arresting Pa.'