

## 2: Léo

When Léo wakes there's a theme running through his head. For a second he can't place it. It could be a dream: an elusive melody, a shape that broadens into something abstract, a fragment of poetry with the sting of a half-remembered association. He rolls over, squeezing his eyes shut as if he can retreat into sleep, but it's no good. It echoes in his brain, exasperating, taunting him. Then, abruptly, he recognises it. The bloody *Bridges of Königsberg*. It mingles with the noise of a door banging and plates clattering in the kitchen below. That must have been what woke him; otherwise he'd have slept late, drowsing uneasily after a night of near-insomnia.

He pulls the bedclothes more tightly round his shoulders, but now he's awake he's cold. The blankets are scratchy and thin, and the pillow feels damp to the touch. Last night the proprietor gave him a confidential smile as he said, 'The Arnauld Suite, sir. I must say, it is an honour,' and the maid looked at him sideways as she showed him the room, expecting him to be impressed by the draperies and the heavy gilt-framed portraits of *grand jeu* masters; but there are clusters of dark spots on the headboard where bedbugs are nesting in the cracks, and the mattress sags in the middle like a

hammock. Every time he turned over in the night it jangled and creaked, and now there's a spring digging into his ribs. At this moment, Chryseis will be spread-eagled under Egyptian cotton sheets, taking up the whole of their bed. She'll still be asleep, golden hair tangled, an errant smudge of eye-black smeared across her temple, while the curtains billow at the open French window and the scent of hot dust and traffic fumes mingles with the roses on the mantelpiece. Sometimes he feels like summer in the city will choke him, but right now, in this mildewed room, he'd give a year's salary to be there, back in his old life. He drags his hands over his face, trying to wipe away the sticky feeling of not having slept properly, and sits up. The theme of the *Bridges of Königsberg* reasserts itself in his head. It's like a stuck record, the move between the melody and the first development of the Eulerian path, then back to that infuriating tune . . . Out of all the games to get into his head, it has to be one he can't stand. He gets out of bed, pulls on his trousers and shirt, and rings for shaving water. 'And coffee,' he adds, as the maid bobs a curtsy and turns to leave. She swings back to him, so eager she almost stumbles, and he notices without caring that they've sent him the prettiest one. 'Coffee first. Make sure it's hot.'

'Yes, sir. Of course, sir. Will there be anything else?'

'No. Thank you.' He sits down next to the window, his back to her. Churlish, but what does it matter? He's not a politician any more.

The coffee, when it arrives, is terrible – half chicory, half-burnt – but at least it's nearly as hot as he likes it, hot enough to warm his hands through the cup. He sips it slowly, watching the sky change colour over the houses opposite. The sun hasn't come up over the mountains yet, and the street outside is still dim, even though it's almost eight o'clock. He should be at home, in his study, halfway through

his second pot, absorbed in one of Dettler's reports; it gives him an uneasy, itchy sensation, to be sitting here with nothing to do. He was buggered if he was going to trudge up the mountain at dawn, as if he were a student; yesterday he deliberately ordered the car for after lunch, but already he's at a loss, shifting in his musty-smelling chair, wondering whether he's hungry enough to ring for breakfast. How is he going to pass the hours? He winces; the question makes him think of Chryseïs, standing there on the balcony staring at him, the evening after his meeting with the Chancellor. 'What am I going to do?' she said, and he almost laughed at her predictability.

'Have another Martini, I imagine,' he said.

She hardly blinked. 'While you're away,' she said. She fished in her glass with a scarlet-lacquered fingernail, drew out the tiny coil of orange peel and flicked it over her shoulder into the street. 'What do you expect me to *do*?'

'I'll still be paying the rent on the flat.'

'You think I should stay here, alone?'

'At least until you find someone better.' It would have been kinder to say *somewhere*, but he wasn't feeling kind. 'You'll be all right.'

'Oh, thank you. I appreciate your concern.' She tilted her head and stared at him, but for once he didn't feel any answering spark, just weariness. 'Jesus Christ, Léo! I can't—'

'I've told you not to say that.'

'Oh, not that again. I'm hardly saying the rosary, am I? What are you going to do, report me to the Register?' She pushed past him, knocking him with her elbow. She'd had her hair freshly marcelled, and a whiff of chemicals caught the back of his throat. 'I can't believe you fucked this up. I thought you were supposed to be the government's golden boy. Didn't the Old Man say you were—'

'Apparently not.'

'You bloody idiot, how could you? You're a coward, that's what it is – now that the Party's in power, you can't stand the pressure – completely *spineless*.' She kicked viciously at the leg of the chaise longue. Liquid slopped out of her Martini glass and splashed on to her dress. 'Shit! This is new.'

'I'll buy you another one.' He crossed the room to the cocktail cabinet and poured himself a whisky. They'd run out of ice, but he didn't ring for more.

'You'd better. And pay the rest of the bill while you're at it.' Her voice cracked. She collapsed on to a chair. 'Oh, look at me, dressed to the nines . . . I thought he was going to promote you – after Minister of Culture I thought, finally, he's going to get something important. I got all ready to *celebrate*.'

'So celebrate.' They stared at each other. Perhaps, if he'd said the right thing, she might have softened; but then, if she'd softened, he couldn't have borne it.

She got up. She drank the last of her Martini in one go, and reached for her wrap. 'Have a lovely holiday, Léo,' she said, and left.

Now he tries to shrug off the memory. Of all the things he's left behind, Chryseïs is the least of his worries. She's better off than he is, yawning and sitting up in bed, pulling on her negligée and ringing for hot chocolate. She'll be fine. And even if she weren't, would he care that much? He turns away from the thought. A month ago, he'd imagined proposing to her: the breathless articles in society papers, the flash of an extravagant diamond on her left hand, the Old Man's congratulations. Now . . .

There's a tap on the door. It makes him jump; when the door opens he's on his feet, and the maid flinches. 'I'm sorry, sir, I thought I heard you say to come in.'

'Of course. Yes. Thank you.' He waits until she's gone before he crosses to the washstand and splashes his face, blowing air out through his mouth until his heartbeat settles

and water soaks his collar. He's not afraid; there's nothing to be afraid of. But sometimes moments catch him off guard: the unexpected knock, the car going too fast as he crosses the road, the glint of metal as a drunkard sways into his path and reaches languidly for a hip flask. Ever since the meeting with the Chancellor. Ever since the Chancellor looked at him with that expression, weighing up how much he was worth. He can still feel the chill of it; as though, halfway through a shooting party, a friend had swung his gun casually to point it into Léo's face. And, a split second behind, the humiliation that he'd been such a bloody fool not to see it coming, to think it was all a friendly, civilised game . . . To have walked into the office a little nervous, of course – like being brought up in front of the Magister Scholarium – but sure that the Old Man would come round, only slightly disconcerted when it was the Chancellor and not the Old Man himself who was sitting behind the desk with Léo's letter in front of him. 'Ah, Léo,' he said. 'Thank you for coming. I trust I haven't interrupted anything?'

'I'm sure Dettler can manage without me for an hour.'

'Well, we must certainly hope so.' He picked up the telephone. 'Tea, please. Yes, two cups. Thank you. Sit down, Léo.'

He sat. The Chancellor folded his hands and bowed his head as if he was about to say a prayer. 'Léo,' he said, at last, 'thank you for your letter. We all admire your passion and your energy, you know that. And it is in a young man's nature to be forthright. So thank you for your honesty.'

'As Minister for Culture, I felt it was only right to ask if I could talk things through with the Prime Minister before the Bill goes to the vote.'

'Naturally. And he was very sorry he couldn't be here today. I know he was very interested in your point of view. He asked me to say that he admires your courage.'

Perhaps it was then that the first misgiving slid coldly down Léo's spine. 'The proposals are quite extreme, Chancellor – all I was suggesting was that we reconsider—'

'He was also rather . . . surprised.' The Chancellor glanced past him at the door. 'Come in. Ah, biscuits! Good girl. Yes, put it down there. On the coffee table.' The secretary began to unload her tea-tray, and the Chancellor gestured to the sofa. 'Léo, please . . .'

Léo got up, crossed to the sofa, and sat down again; but the Chancellor hesitated and walked to the window, gazing out with his hands behind his back. 'What was I saying?'

'You said the Old M— that the Prime Minister was interested in what I wrote.'

'A better phrase would be "taken aback", I think.' He waved a hand at the glinting array of china. 'Please don't stand on ceremony, young man. Help yourself to a cup of tea.'

Léo poured a cup of tea, added lemon, stirred it and raised it to his lips. Then he put the cup and saucer down, conscious of the tension in his wrist. How many times, sitting here with the Old Man, had he heard the tell-tale rattle of porcelain, as other men tried to master their shaking hands? But this was different; *he* was different. It was simple hospitality, surely. Not a test, not an ordeal. When he looked up the Chancellor was smiling at him.

'Ah, Léo, my dear boy. Well, not really a boy – forgive me, the privilege of age . . . How old are you, remind me? Twenty-eight, twenty-nine?'

'Thirty-two.'

'Really? Well, never mind . . .'

He turned to look out of the window, idly tugging at the curtain-cord. 'The point is, Léo,' he said, 'that your letter was rather unfortunate.'

He didn't answer. For a vertiginous, dislocated moment he expected the Chancellor to draw the curtains across, as if someone had died.

'To put it frankly . . . We are disappointed, Léo. You seemed to have such a promising career in front of you. We were confident in your abilities. Here is a young man, we thought, who can help bring the country into a new, prosperous, liberated era, who understands the Party's vision, who will lead the next generation when we are too old to carry the burden any more . . . I thought you shared that dream, Léo.'

The past tense was like a needle, digging deeper and deeper. 'I do, Chancellor – I absolutely share the Party's ideals.'

'And yet your letter suggests that you do not.'

'Only this one particular – this one section of the Bill . . .'

'You find the measures to be – what was your phrase? – "irrational and morally repugnant", in fact.'

'Did I? I don't remember saying repug—'

'Please – feel free – if you would like to refresh your memory.' The Chancellor waved towards the desk. The letter was there, on the blotter, Léo's signature a dark scrawl at the bottom. There was a pause.

Léo swallowed. His mouth had gone very dry. He shook his head. 'I may have been slightly too emphatic, Chancellor. I apologise if I—'

'No, no, dear boy.' The Chancellor flicked his hand at the words. Léo almost saw them dropping to the carpet like dead flies. 'Too late. I regret your impulsivity as much as anyone, but it serves no purpose to dwell on it.' Finally he turned and met Léo's eyes. It was the way Léo's father looked at broken objects in his scrapyards, wondering whether they were worth the space they took up. 'The question is,' he said, 'what do we do with you now?'

'I – what? You mean—'

'We cannot possibly have a cabinet minister who is lukewarm about our policies.' The Chancellor frowned. 'You are an astute politician, Léo, you must understand that.'

'Hardly *lukewarm*.'

‘Please.’ He held up his hand. ‘I am as sorry as you are, believe me. As is the Old Man. But if we cannot trust you . . .’

‘Chancellor, please – I honestly don’t think—’

‘Be quiet.’ The bell of an ambulance clattered past, distantly. Léo’s mouth tasted bitter, but he didn’t trust himself to lift his cup of tea without spilling it. The Chancellor strode to the desk, picked up a piece of paper, and put it down on the low table in front of Léo. A letter. *To whom it may concern . . .* ‘Here is a letter of resignation.’ He put a fountain pen down next to it. ‘Be sensible, Léo. If you read it, you will find that we have made matters easy for you. In recognition of the work you have done for the Party. The Old Man is fond of you, you know. I think you will agree it is an elegant solution.’

He had to blink to make the words come into focus . . . *honoured to have served . . . contribution to the Prime Minister’s vision . . . glorious prosperity, unity and purity . . . but others are better fitted . . . in my heart of hearts, I have always yearned . . .* He looked up. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘I would have thought it was fairly self-explanatory.’

‘You’re saying – you want me to say—’ He stopped, and looked again at the letter. ‘“I am proud to have done my best as Minister for Culture, but it is as a humble student of the *grand jeu* that I long to leave my mark.” What is this?’

The Chancellor sat down opposite him. He poured a cup of tea and tapped the spoon on the gilt edge of the cup with a brittle *ting*. ‘You were the only second-year ever to win a Gold Medal at Montverre, were you not?’

‘You know I was. Is that relevant?’ It sounded more belligerent than he meant it to.

‘You have played a very highly regarded part in the election of this government, Léo. But you were never cut out to be a politician – you repressed your personal wishes for as long as you could, in order to help bring about the greatest political success of this century – but you have never been



able to forget the dream of going back to Montverre to study our national game – and now that the country's future is assured, you finally have the opportunity . . . It is a touching story, the artist returning to his roots, fulfilling his vocation. Who knows, it's possible you will be of use to us there.'

'But I don't—'

The Chancellor put his teacup down. It was a smooth movement, almost casual; and yet it made Léo flinch. 'Either you are being deliberately obtuse,' he said, 'or you are a complete simpleton. Which, until yesterday, I would have sworn you were not.' He sighed. 'I don't know how much more clearly I can put this.'

Léo heard himself say, 'Perhaps in words of one syllable.'

The Chancellor raised his eyebrows. 'You have a very easy choice. Either you sign this letter, tell the papers the same story, and retire to Montverre for as long as we deem it necessary, or the Prime Minister will be forced to deal with you more . . . forcefully.'

'You mean someone will find me in a ditch with my throat cut?' It came out as a joke. But it sat unanswered in the silence, solid and monstrous, until he realised it hadn't been a joke at all. He fumbled to get the cap off the fountain pen and signed the letter without reading the rest of it. His signature was hardly recognisable. Underneath the first copy was another. He paused, without looking up. 'There are two of these.'

'One is for you to keep. For future reference. We'll see about arrangements for Montverre – it'll be a few weeks, I imagine. Your resignation will be formally accepted then. In the meantime, Dettler will carry out your duties.' The Chancellor took a sip of tea. 'It goes without saying that you won't attempt to interfere with the progress of the Bill.'

'I see.' He hesitated. Then he put the lid back on the pen, focusing on his fingers as if only his eyes could tell him what

they were doing. ‘Chancellor . . . please believe that I had no intention—’

The Chancellor got to his feet. ‘I don’t think I need keep you any longer.’

Léo folded the second copy of the letter and put it in his jacket pocket, next to his heart. Then he stood up, too. Somewhere a phone was ringing, a secretary was typing, the business of state was rolling on. It was as if he’d taken his hands off a keyboard and heard the music continue. He straightened his tie. ‘Well . . . thank you, Chancellor. If we don’t see each other again, good luck with government.’

‘Thank *you*, Léo. I hope our paths will cross again, eventually.’ The Chancellor made his way to the desk and sat down, reaching for his address book. ‘Good afternoon, Léo. From now on, if I were you, I would be very, very careful.’

Léo shut the door behind him. The secretary – Sarah – glanced up at him and then quickly down again. He smiled at her, but she kept her head down, scribbling something in a notebook; when he walked past her desk he saw over her shoulder that it was a tangle of meaningless lines, not even shorthand.

He came out onto the landing. Two civil servants climbed the stairs, halfway through a conversation: ‘. . . measures only reflect the times,’ the first said, and broke off to nod at him. Automatically he nodded back; then, with a jolt, he saw that the second, lagging a little behind, was Emile Fallon. It was too late to duck away. Instead he said, ‘Emile, long time no see, how are you? I’m afraid I must dash,’ all in one tight breath.

‘Ah, Minister,’ Emile said, ‘yes, indeed, let’s catch up soon,’ twisting mid-step to give Léo a sliding smile as he passed. There was something worse than straightforward malice in his face: irony, maybe, or – oh God, worst of all – compassion. Clearly news of Léo’s resignation had already spread to the

Ministry for Information. Léo waited for them to disappear through the door opposite, holding his own smile in place as if it was a physical test.

He was alone. Cadaverous portraits of statesmen watched him impassively from the walls. The dark carpet muffled every sound; he might have gone deaf. He leant against the wall; then he slid down into a crouch, his blood singing in his ears, nausea wringing sweat from every pore. His chest hurt. The air made a faint rasping sound as it went in and out of his lungs. He shut his eyes.

Slowly the sickness eased. He pushed himself back to his feet and placed one hand on the wall, fighting for balance. If anyone saw him like this, if the Chancellor emerged or Emile came back . . . He stood up straight, wiped his face on his sleeve and smoothed his hair. Now only his damp collar could give him away, and it was a warm day; he would walk past the girl in the lobby downstairs and she wouldn't look twice. He could pretend that nothing had happened – that, in fact, he had sent in his resignation, explained himself to the Chancellor, and been set free. He almost believed it himself.

But when he got to the half-landing, something made him look back. There on the wallpaper, almost black on the green pattern, was a dark smear: the mark his sweaty hand had left, as he tried not to throw up.

He shaves and puts on his jacket and tie, and orders more coffee. The maid offers him breakfast, but he can't bring himself to accept. By the time he's drunk the coffee the sun has cleared the houses and is shining into the street. Warmth creeps along the floor, reaching out for him. He can't sit here all morning. He walks to the railway station and buys a paperback novel from the bookstall. There's a line of porters waiting for the first train; the third- and second-years must

have gone up last week, a few days apart, and today it's the first-years' turn to flood the town for a night. The train arrives as the bookseller gives Léo his change. He pauses, squeezing the coins in his hand, watching the young men pile excitedly on to the platform. There are a few families, too – bluestocking sisters, proud mamas, mulish younger brothers – who've come along to give their clever boys a good send-off, and get a few days of mountain air while they're at it. They're not allowed up to the school, of course, and they probably won't even be awake to wave goodbye tomorrow when the new scholars slog up the path at dawn. 'Oh – how lovely,' a woman calls to her son, staring across the valley towards Montverre-les-Bains. She points at the Roman bath-house in the distance. 'That must be *it* . . .'

Léo shoves his change into his pocket. He bends his head as he joins the stream of people surging through the ticket office, afraid that someone will recognise him; but they're all too intent on themselves. They have to summon taxis, get trunks loaded, find the grandly named hotels before the sun gets too fierce. No one looks twice at Léo. He ducks into a grimy little café and watches until the square in front of the station is empty again, waiting in the quiet sunshine for the next train. There's a newspaper on the bar, and he catches sight of the headline: *Minister of Culture's Shock Resignation*. But he doesn't reach for it. Dettler showed him a draft a couple of days ago. 'If there are any suggestions you would like to make, Minister?' he said, offering Léo a blue pencil with a funeral director's delicacy. 'It'll be in Monday's paper; that way you'll be safely— that is, you won't be too troubled by the attention.' But Léo waved the pencil away. He didn't care any more what they said about him; and he still doesn't. He drags his eyes away from the paper, sits down at a table in the window and opens the cheap novel he's bought. It's a translation from the English, a detective story: the sort of

thing Chryseïs devours in one go, curled on the chaise longue with a box of chocolate creams. He doesn't know what made him buy it, except that he can't think of any other way to pass the time. But after he's read the first page three times he puts it aside. When the National Heritage Bill goes through, fiction will be taxed to the hilt and foreign fiction will be virtually unaffordable, even for people like him. What was it the Old Man said? *We must find ways to cherish and protect our national game, which – as you know, Léo – is so much more than a game . . .* At the time Léo thought he was right; or, at least, not wrong enough to warrant disagreement. He never disagreed with the Old Man, that was how he rose so high, so quickly. Not until the Culture and Integrity Bill.

He gets up. The waiter, who has been slouching in the shadows doing a crossword, jumps to his feet and says, 'What can I get you, sir?' but Léo is already slipping out of the door. The station clock chimes ten. Only ten! Maybe he'll get the car sent early. He walks up the hill towards the Palais Hotel, but when he gets there the foyer is full of people. A portly woman in a plumed hat is gesturing fiercely at the proprietor. 'His father stayed in the Arnauld Suite thirty years ago,' she says. 'I requested it especially – yes, but *why* hasn't the maid been able to . . .?' Léo turns aside without bothering to listen to the rest. He walks up the street until he reaches the end, a little run-down church and a few ramshackle houses. A path leads up into the forest, climbing steeply, but there's no signpost. It might be a shortcut to the school, or it might be merely a goatherd's track up to the high pastures or Montverre-les-Bains. It's not the road he slogged up on foot as a scholar, at the beginning of every term – the road he'll be driven up this afternoon, while the gradient pushes him back in his seat and the chauffeur winces at every pothole. He can pause here, leaning on a tumbledown wall, without being reminded of anything.

He shuts his eyes. The sun is bright through his eyelids. He wonders whether the Palais does a decent lunch, or whether it'll be the same indigestible mixture of cheese and stodge that they gave him for dinner. 'The best hotel in Montverre, sir,' Dettler's new secretary had said, as she held out his tickets and itinerary the day before yesterday, without meeting his eyes. 'I do hope it will be suitable.' Part of him wants to write a terse note to her, suggesting that if she wants to ingratiate herself with Party officials, he doesn't recommend exposing them to bedbugs and heartburn; but it's not worth it, now he's not a Party official. Anyway, he's spoilt. The first time he stayed in Montverre he didn't even have a hotel room, just a bed in a smelly lean-to that was clearly a scullery for the rest of the year, in a house where the family looked at him without warmth and asked him for extra money for the soap he'd used. Yes, now he remembers – it had been one of his father's clerks who had booked it for him, which meant his father must have given instructions not to spend more than necessary. But he hadn't minded much, even though he had to walk for ten minutes in the pre-dawn chill before he got to the signpost, that first time; he can still remember looking up at it, *Schola Ludi 5½*, and the electric jolt of realising that at last he was really here. He'd got up hours earlier than he needed to, determined to be the first at the school gates, and the stars were still out. The sweep of the galaxy above him was richer and clearer than he'd ever seen. He stood and breathed, glad to be alone, his head full of ambition and the *grand jeu*. He'd left his trunk at the Town Hall the day before to be picked up by the porters, so all he had to carry was a knapsack. He knocked on the signpost for luck, took a deep breath, and set off as if he had a whole range of mountains to climb before dawn.

His pace slackened quickly, and the burn in his calves started to spread upwards. After a while he forgot to look about him and walked in a dream, his head bowed. It nearly made him trip over his own feet when some unconscious impulse made him glance up, and he saw someone on the path in front of him, in the same dark uniform. The first thing he felt was outrage: *he* was going to be the first to Montverre, not this skinny youth standing still in the middle of the track, staring at nothing. The sky was deep blue, now, ripe with the promise of sunrise, and the shapes of things were starting to emerge from the shadows, newly solid. It should have been beautiful, but he wanted to be alone, the first . . .

‘What are you doing?’

The youth looked round. There was something unexpected about his face, something Léo couldn’t put his finger on. ‘Looking,’ he said. The softness of his voice seemed to mock Léo’s rudeness.

‘Looking at what?’

He didn’t answer. Instead he raised his arm, his hand open. Something in the grace of it reminded Léo of the opening gesture of the *grand jeu*: here, it said, is my creation, which you have no choice but to admire.

Léo squinted. ‘I can’t see anything.’ Then he did.

A cobweb. It was huge, a billowing sail of silver, glinting and flickering as the breeze tugged it back and forth, stretching right across the path. Trembling on every intersection were tiny beads of dew: sparkling blue where the light from the sky caught them, dim and star-ridden in the shadows. Léo stared, full of a strange rush of elation and melancholy that was like home-sickness for somewhere he’d never been. It was the feeling he got when he watched a perfect *grand jeu* – and this was as symmetrical and intricate as a game, a perfect classical game. He wanted to have discovered it himself; if this other boy hadn’t been here . . .

He stepped forward – felt the infinitesimal cling of threads on his face – and through. A broken shred of gauze clung to his sleeve.

‘Didn’t you see? You tore right through – there was a spider’s web.’

‘Oh,’ he said, picking the grey strands off his coat. ‘Right. Is that what you were gaping at?’

‘It was beautiful,’ the other scholar said, as if it was an accusation.

Léo shrugged. ‘I have to get going,’ he said, and jerked his chin towards the path that led upwards. ‘I guess I’ll see you around.’

He felt the scholar stare after him. But what else was he supposed to do? The cobweb had been across the whole path; someone would have ripped it down eventually. He refused to let it bother him. He was on his way up to the school, and he was going to be first.

And in the excitement of going through the gates and crossing the famous threshold he almost forgot about that encounter. Then later, when he was trying to find his way from the scholars’ corridor down to the dining hall, Felix had bounded towards him, hand outstretched, and said, all in one breath, ‘Are you new too? I’m Felix Weber, I’m lost, this place is a maze, let’s try this way,’ and they turned down a new passage as a door opened further along. There, heavy-eyed and dishevelled, was the young man he’d met on the path. Automatically Léo’s eyes went to the name above the door. *Aimé Carfax de Courcy*. ‘It’s you,’ he said, stupidly. ‘Hello.’

‘I’m Felix Weber,’ Felix said. ‘We’re going to find something to eat. Are you a first-year too?’

He glanced at Léo, and then nodded. ‘Carfax,’ he said.

‘Carfax de Courcy?’ Léo said, pointing to the neat white-painted lettering. ‘De Courcy, as in, the Lunatic of London Library?’



‘Edmund Dundale de Courcy was my grandfather.’

Léo whistled through his teeth. A perverse bolt of envy went through him. What wouldn't he have given to be here by birthright, not just exam results? He grinned, trying to conceal it. ‘Well, I hope the porters frisked you for matches.’

Carfax looked at him, unsmiling. Without a word he pushed past them both and disappeared round the corner.

‘What's the matter with him?’ Léo said. He'd only been trying to be funny; surely no one should be that sensitive about something that happened decades ago? ‘It was a joke.’

‘Obviously inherited the crazy strain,’ Felix said, and caught his eye. They both started to laugh at the same time, Felix with a high yelping giggle that echoed off the walls.

But it was true, Léo thinks now. Wasn't it? The signs were bloody obvious, even then.

He opens his eyes. The sudden brightness is dazzling; he blinks and wipes away automatic tears. After a moment the bleached wavering shapes settle into houses and trees.

He catches a movement at the edge of his vision. A man moves backwards into a patch of shade; a second later he drops to one knee and fumbles with his shoelaces. But although his head is bent, his eyes keep flicking back to Léo. He stays where he is for an improbably long time before he gets to his feet and lights a cigarette. The smoke drifts along the path, greyish in the sunshine.

A watcher. It shouldn't come as a surprise. But somehow it does, a sick shock of outrage rising in Léo's belly. He wants to shout or throw a stone, as though the man's a vulture he can scare away. He clenches his jaw. Stupid. Childish. Of course they'd send someone to follow him; of course they want to be sure he goes to Montverre. Possibly it's a kind of courtesy to have let him spot the surveillance: or a warning. Do as you're told. Otherwise there are steep cliffs and treacherous paths . . . He holds on to the fury, because he knows that underneath

he's afraid; and when he turns and walks down the path to the village – passing so close he nearly knocks the cigarette to the ground – it's the other man who flinches, and he's glad.

He orders the car for an hour earlier. He has lunch in the hotel restaurant, looking out at the slope of the village, watching the rising trail of steam as the next train puffs into the station and away again. More first-years pour into the streets as he sips bad coffee and brandy. At last the clock chimes, and he pays his bill and makes his way out to the car. The chauffeur has already loaded his suitcases. He gets in and shuts his eyes. The road up the mountain is as steep and bumpy as he remembered. A tune goes round and round in his head, almost but not quite keeping time with the potholes. The *Bridges of Königsberg*, again. He opens his eyes and looks out of the window, trying to distract himself, but the game has taken hold of him and won't go away. The bloody tune, the move into the Eulerian path, the mathematical proof, the sweep of Prussian history . . . It's ungainly, awkward, and he's always hated it. It's the most overrated game ever played. As they drive up the final bend and come within sight of the gates, it reaches a crescendo. The chauffeur gets out of the car and knocks on the porters' door to ask them to open the gates, and Léo gets out too, suddenly desperate for some fresh air. The music sings in his ears. He turns to look back the way they came, down towards the valley, the forest and the scattered waterfalls, the road disappearing out of sight. It's almost the view he had from his cell when he was a scholar. The air is thinner up here and it's hard to breathe.

The gates open. The chauffeur says, 'Excuse me, sir,' and gets back into the driving seat.

The tune pauses, and resumes with a new venom. Léo stays where he is. In a moment he'll turn and smile at the

gatekeeper, allow one of the servants to take him to his quarters, show himself to be charming and humble and achingly enthusiastic about the *grand jeu*. But this is his last moment of freedom, and he wants to make it last.

Then he realises why, out of all the games in the world, it's the *Bridges of Königsberg* that's got stuck in his head. It's not only his subconscious making him a snide present of a game he's always despised. It's because of the theme of the game: the impossible problem, the way it brings you back to the same bridges over and over, the way you never escape.