

# THE UNIVERSE IN 3/4 TIME: A NOVEL OF OLD EUROPE

by

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*EXCERPT*

## CHAPTER 2

**I**t seeped from the night: a large, squarish object blocking the path.

Audrey approached this apparition.

She caught her breath:

*A piano.*

A jolt went through her at the sight of the instrument she'd pledged her life to, thrown to the elements like rubbish. The upright stood in front of an imposing *maison de maître* without a single light on, though a gleam spilled over the cobbled walk.

Audrey peered up and down Rue Nova, as if someone had simply mislaid the piano and would reappear soon to recover it. She combed the silhouettes of townhouses, crisp against the city night. Perhaps the perpetrator was even then observing her, wondering what she might do. A chill tingled under her coat at the thought of Nero, trawling nearby, on the lookout for just such merchandise.

She removed a mitten and ran her fingertips over the piano's lid. Then she traced the simple, coffered design on the front panel. Anguish gripped her: the rosewood veneer, in perfect condition, was already buckling in the humidity. *Who would do such a thing?* No instrument could survive these conditions even for an hour—let alone until morning. The piano had been delivered a death sentence. Yet despite this, it stood proud and resolute, as if resigned to its fate.

Audrey opened the fallboard and gaped at the creamy, undamaged keys; the impeccably-matched grains of wood; the inlaid bronze lettering: *A. Náhoda. Malá Strana, Praha*. The make was unknown to her. *Prague*. The Kepler Players had performed many times in that bewitched city. *Náhoda*...An obscure Czech manufacturer, she guessed. What was such a piano doing in Brussels? The keys were not ivory, but of a sort of cellulose used in some early 20<sup>th</sup> century upright pianos. The instrument could have been eighty years old or more.

She opened the lid and released a wisp of mildew. Mold pocked the hammers; mice had gnawed the felts. She was examining the strings and pins when she noticed a curious pattern of dots carved into the wood—a tiny pyramid formed by a line of four dots on the bottom, then three, then two, capped by one dot on the top. Next to this motif someone had scratched a few crude symbols, impossible to decipher.

She closed the lid.

There was something about this piano...an air of nobility; of distant ancestry. Its lines were almost too clean and elegant. There were no candleholders, or any of the frippery typical of the period: nothing to detract from the sublime substance all pianos were created to channel. The upright in Audrey's garret was a harlot in comparison, with porcelain cameos of nymphs cavorting, clawed feet, and curlicues. Some ancestor of her landlady, Madame Vermaelen, had hauled it up to the garret before the Second World War, and no one knew if it would ever make it down again.

Audrey's piano had the voice of a harlot, too.

But this...

She depressed a key: a sound leapt forth, pure and pearly. She played a melody: the hammers rattled in protest, but the tones lingered on the air. Audrey swallowed hard. It had been years since she'd played anything at all besides the study pieces of her students, and even then, they'd been half-hearted demonstrations.

She leaned on the piano, overcome. A tear fell on the lid.

*You must be strong, Audrey.*

The words stung in her memory. They were her foster mother's...an irony, as the woman had possessed so little moral strength herself. Indeed, she'd been unable to muster the courage to tell the child what needed to be said, and had foisted the task on the school principal instead, who'd gamely called the girl into his office.

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“You have very interesting origins, Audrey,” he’d begun. It was a coward’s way of describing the caprice that fate had dealt her. He was looking out the window with his back to her, for even at the age of nine, Audrey Nightingale had possessed that probing, resolute gaze, and he just couldn’t meet it.

She would remember every detail of that office—the dirt trailing on the window; the desiccated plants on the sill; the mustardy walls, and piles of documents stacked against them, brown-edged and fungal—everything except the face of the man himself.

“You were very lucky,” he said, “that the priest at Holy Trinity Church happened to go back to his confessional. No one else would have found you.” And then: “How blessed you were!”, as if most children would have been delighted to start life that way.

Had it really been luck? *Blessed by whom?*

Only later did she learn how close she’d come to the edge of oblivion: that someone had abandoned her in her baby carrier near the confessional on a Sunday evening, just as the parish ladies were locking up the church for the week; that the priest, an amiable tippler, happened to have forgotten a bottle of cognac behind his curtain and gone back to retrieve it. And there she’d been, the infant Audrey. Hungry. Indignant. She’d kicked off her blanket, along with a scrap of paper on which someone had scrawled “Audrey Nightingale”, the only clue to her identity, which had wafted across the floor of the nave and almost been lost.

*No one else would have found you.*

She stayed behind on the day she’d visited the principal—pleaded with the janitor to let her into the gymnasium. “I won’t be long. Please, Bo...” It was what they called him. His real name was too foreign...too difficult to pronounce. “It’s to see my friend” had been her explanation. The melancholy man who pushed his mop around the gym floor knew this friend: a graffiti-covered hulk with all the ivory stripped away: one of Music’s ugly stepchildren, though not completely deserted by her. For the object still had the courage to speak, and speak it did on that mournful day. As Audrey depressed the rough blocks of wood that passed for keys, she could feel a pulse under her fingers—a spark still animating that sorry carcass.

Bo let her play. He crossed his hands on the handle of his mop and rested his chin on them. It was a posture he adopted frequently, at any moment of the day, but now, it was clear that he was listening. There were enough functioning keys for Audrey to pick out a few phrases of Schumann she’d heard on the radio.

“Audrrrrey.” Bo rolled her name with his tropical accent and pointed to the clock.

“Just five more minutes,” Audrey said.

But he switched off the lights. *Viens, ma petite*. A greenish glow seeped in from the corridor. Bo gestured to the door with his mop, though he seemed reluctant to leave. The girl’s strangeness intrigued him. She was so different from the others. And she’d found beauty in the most unlikely place.

Audrey played on, as if the darkness had only encouraged her. The janitor had yet to discover that in fact, the girl embraced the night, with all its heady vastness. He certainly could not have known that just then, as the lights had gone out, she’d seen something that she would never mention to another living soul. It had been so fleeting, after all. Just a trick of illumination—of that greenish glow from the corridor, that might or might not have been a lady in shimmering robes, leaning down from above with a lantern.