



VANGO

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Toby Alone

Toby and the Secrets of the Tree

Vango, Book 1: Between Sky and Earth

VANGO

BOOK 2

A PRINCE WITHOUT A KINGDOM

By Timothée de Fombelle

Translated by Sarah Ardizzone



WALKER
BOOKS

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

** Italics denote real historical figures*

BORIS PETROVITCH ANTONOV murderous Soviet agent tasked with killing Vango

EMILIE ATLAS teenage girl who secretly prowls the rooftops of Paris; resistance name Marie; aka “the Cat”

LIEUTENANT AUGUSTIN AVIGNON Boulard’s ambitious second-in-command

ETHEL B.H. Scottish heiress and orphan; in love with Vango; lives with her brother Paul at Everland Castle, Inverness

PAUL B.H. Ethel’s older brother; Scottish heir and orphan; RAF pilot who fights in the Spanish Civil War and for the French Resistance

DOCTOR BASILIO the doctor on the island of Salina; hopes to see Mademoiselle again

NINA BIENVENUE cabaret singer who achieved fame at La Lune Rousse in Montmartre, Paris

SUPERINTENDENT AUGUSTE BOULARD eminent police detective at the Quai des Orfèvres (Criminal Investigations Police HQ, Paris)

MADAME MARIE-ANTOINETTE BOULARD Boulard’s mother

GIOVANNI CAFARELLO murderous pirate who left Salina for New York with a stolen fortune; aka Gio

CAESAR mysterious resistance leader for the Paradise Network

DORGELES Voloy Viktor’s right-hand man and a thug

MADAME BLANCHE DUSSAC concierge for the Paris apartment block where Boulard lives; friend of Marie-Antoinette Boulard

COMMANDER/DOKTOR HUGO ECKENER commander of the Graf Zeppelin; friend of Vango; member of Project Violette

MOTHER ELISABETH superior at the Abbey of La Blanche on the island of Noirmoutier off the coast of western France

DOCTOR ESQUIROL Max Grund's personal doctor; member of Project Violette

CASIMIR FERMINI proprietor of La Belle Etoile restaurant in Paris

MAX GRUND chief representative of the Gestapo in German-occupied Paris

HEINRICH KUBIS chief steward of the Graf Zeppelin

CAPTAIN ERNST LEHMANN captain of the Graf Zeppelin; Hugo Eckener's second-in-command

MADEMOISELLE Vango's childhood nurse; aka *Tioten'ka*; aka "the Bird-seller"

WERNER MANN German World War I fighter pilot; member of Project Violette

BROTHER MARCO cook at the invisible monastery on the island of Arkudah

MARY housekeeper at Everland Castle; guardian of Ethel and Paul

INSPECTOR BAPTISTE MOUCHET Superintendent Avignon's assistant at the Quai des Orfèvres (Criminal Investigations Police HQ, Paris)

NICHOLAS son of Peter the gardener at Everland Castle; Ethel's ally

ANDREI IVANOVITCH OULANOV violin player from Moscow studying in Paris; blackmailed into spying for Boris Petrovitch Antonov

IVAN IVANOVITCH OULANOV father of Andrei the violin player; lives in Moscow

KONSTANTIN & ZOYA IVANOVITCH OULANOV younger siblings of Andrei the violin player; they live in Moscow

JOSEPH JACQUES PUPPET former soldier turned boxer from the Ivory Coast; now a barber based in Monaco; member of Project Violette; aka J. J. Puppet

INSPECTOR ANDRÉ RÉMI deaf inspector who works in the archives at the Quai des Orfèvres (Criminal Investigations Police HQ, Paris)

SIMON the bell-ringer at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris

JOSEPH STALIN despotic ruler of the Soviet Union

SVETLANA STALIN eight-year-old daughter of Stalin; aka Setanka; aka Setanotchka

STELLA Vango's mother

GIUSEPPINA TROISI Pippo Troisi's abandoned wife; aka Pina

PIPPO TROISI once a farmer from the island of Salina, now an 'asylum seeker from marriage' at the invisible monastery on the island Arkudah

VANGO washed up on the island of Salina as a child. Now a young man searching for his identity; aka Evangelisto; aka "the Bird"

BARTOLOMEO VIAGGI pirate from the island of Salina; killed by Giovanni Cafarello

LAURA VIAGGI daughter of the late Bartolomeo Viaggi; from the island of Salina

VOLOY VIKTOR nefarious arms dealer; aka Vincent Valpa; aka Madame Victoria; also goes by many other names

VLADTHEVULTURE soviet agent; rival of Boris Petrovitch Antonov

WEEPING WILLOW Vango's father

PADRE ZEFIRO leader of the secret monastery of Arkudah; mentor of Vango; member of Project Violette

1918. At the age of three, Vango is washed up on

a beach in the Aeolian Islands in Sicily, with Mademoiselle, his nurse, who claims to know nothing about their past. He grows up on the island of Salina, sheltered from the world, among the birds and climbing the cliffs.

At the age of ten, he discovers the invisible monastery, which Padre Zefiro founded in order to protect a few dozen monks from the mafias that were after them. Vango is accepted by the community, and lives between his island and the monastery. But, four years later, when he announces to Zefiro that he wants to become a monk, the padre sends him away to find out about the world before making a final commitment.

So Vango spends the year of 1929 as a crew member of the Graf Zeppelin airship, by the side of Commander Hugo Eckener. On board he meets an orphan called Ethel, who is travelling with her brother. But Vango is being pursued by unknown forces who want him dead, and three weeks after meeting Ethel, he is forced to leave her.

A few years later, just as he is about to become a priest at the foot of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, Vango is accused of a crime he hasn't committed. The senseless witch hunt continues and Superintendent Boulard and his men join the ranks of those already pursuing him. From now on, Vango leads the life of a

fugitive across Europe, as he tries to discover why such hatred follows him.

Padre Zefiro has now left his monastery and is fighting against the arms-dealer Voloy Viktor in order to keep the promise he made to three friends, twenty years earlier, in the trenches of Verdun.

In the middle of this whirlwind, Vango finally learns about his dramatic arrival in Sicily as a child: his parents were killed in their boat, off-shore from the islands, by three men, led by one Cafarello. Vango and his nurse escaped. Cafarello betrayed his co-pirates, sunk the boat, and disappeared with the lion's share of the mysterious treasure that was on board.

Vango sets off again into the unknown to find Cafarello and uncover the great secret of his life.

“But my heart is like a precious piano — double-locked, and the key lost.”

Anton Tchekhov

PART ONE

NEW YORK,
MAY—DECEMBER 1936

AN ENCOUNTER IN THE SKY: VANGO AND ETHEL

Lakehurst, New Jersey, USA, 1st September 1929

The rectangle of crumpled corn was their hideout.

They were lying next to one another, draped in the gold of the crop. All around them, fields stretched as far as the eye could see, proud and tall beneath the sun. The airship on the ground was just visible, a few kilometres off, like a shimmer of silver in the grass.

She was twelve perhaps, and he fourteen. She had run after him through the corn, which had closed up again behind them.

“Go away!” he had called out.

She had followed, without the faintest idea of where he was heading. Now they were huddled on the ground, face to face, and she was crying.

“Are we hiding? Why do we have to hide?”

Vango put two fingers to Ethel’s lips.

“Shhh... He’s here. He’s following me.”

Not even the ears of grain rustled. Complete silence, except for a sustained summer note, a deep note you might call the sound of the sun. Vango had a crazed look in his eyes.

“Tell me what’s going on,” Ethel whispered.

The parched earth soaked up the traces of her tears.

“There’s nobody here. I don’t feel I recognize you any more, Vango. What is the matter?”

Ethel had only known Vango for three weeks, but it seemed to her as

if their meeting was the beginning of everything and that in her entire life she had never really known anybody else. Three weeks had been like a small eternity together. Hadn't they travelled all the way around the world?

They had even forgotten about the other passengers on board the Graf Zeppelin, the crowds that gathered at each stop-off, the newspapers reporting on the great airship's adventure, the magnesium flashes from the cameras falling over them like a shower of white rain.

In their hearts, it had been just the two of them flying: from New York to Germany, and then non-stop to Japan. After five days let loose in Tokyo, they had crossed the Pacific in three days, flown over the bay of San Francisco at sunset as part of a flotilla of small aircraft, been given a standing ovation in Los Angeles and Chicago, and finally landed at Lakehurst near New York.

Enough for at least one lifetime. Or perhaps for two lives joining together?

"Please," she whispered, "tell me what you're frightened of. Then I can help you."

Once again he put his hand over Ethel's mouth. He had just heard a clicking sound, like a weapon being loaded.

"He's here."

"Who?"

Ethel rolled over onto her back.

Vango wasn't the same person any more.

Three weeks earlier, they had been strangers. They had met in the skies above New York, on the first night of their voyage. Ethel wished she could be back there, reliving it all, second by second, beginning with the first words, "Don't you ever speak?"

She had said nothing, of course, which had been her response to every question for the past five years. She was leaning against the window,

holding a glass of water. They were one hundred metres above the tallest skyscrapers. The vertical night sparkled below them. She wasn't interested in the person who was talking to her.

"I was watching you with your brother," he had remarked. "You never say anything. But he's very good at looking after you."

He had turned his head to discover a pair of green eyes staring at him.

All the other passengers were asleep. She had left her cabin in search of a glass of water and had found this boy, sitting in the semi-darkness, in the small kitchen of the airship. He was peeling potatoes. She supposed he was working as a kitchen hand.

And then, as she had headed for the door to return to her cabin, she had heard him say, "If you like, I'm here. If you can't sleep, my name's Vango."

These peculiar words had stopped Ethel in her tracks. She had repeated them to herself, before wondering, And if I can sleep, will he still be called Vango?

Against her better judgement, she had glanced at him. She saw that he was peeling his potatoes as if they were precious stones, with eight perfect facets. Above all, she saw that he bore no resemblance to anything or anyone she had ever met before. She had walked out of the room. The Zeppelin was already some distance from the coast. Manhattan was just a shiny memory in the sky.

When Ethel returned to the kitchen shortly afterwards, Vango had admitted, "Like you, I've said very few words in my life. It's your silence that's making me so chatty."

It was her smile that betrayed her. She had sat down on a crate, as if she hadn't seen him. He was singing something in a language she didn't recognize.

Vango could no longer recall what he had said to pass the time.

But he hadn't stopped talking until morning. Perhaps he had begun with the potato he was holding between his fingers. Boiled, sautéed, roasted, grated, stewed: the humble potato always astounded him. Sometimes, he would even cook it in a ball of clay, which he would smash afterwards with a stone, as if it were an egg. From the potato, he would no doubt have gone on to talk about eggs, then chickens, then everything that lives in the farmyard, or that lends its scent to the vegetable garden or the spice shop, or that falls from the fruit trees with the sound of autumn. He had talked about chestnuts exploding, and the sizzle of mushrooms in the frying pan. She was listening. He had got her to smell the jar of vanilla pods, and he had heard the first sound to pass her lips as her face approached the jar to sniff it: like the sigh of a child turning over in their sleep.

They had even looked at one another for a second in silence. She seemed surprised.

Vango had carried on. Later, he had noticed the small bundle of vanilla pods bringing tears to the girl's eyes; even the acrid smell of yeast on the chopping board seemed to make memories rise up for her. He watched her beginning to thaw.

The next day, as they passed the thirty-fifth meridian, Ethel had uttered her first word, "Whale."

And sure enough, below them was a drifting white island, which not even the pilots of the Zeppelin had spotted. A white island that turned grey when it rose up out of the foam.

After that word came the word "toast", then the word "Vango", and then other words too: sounds that filled the eyes and mouth. This lasted for nearly two weeks. Ethel could feel life returning, the way a blind person recovers their sight. Her brother Paul, sitting at the table with the other guests, had watched her getting better before his eyes. He hadn't heard the deep timbre of her voice since the death of their parents.

But just before leaving Japan, on the twenty-first of August, she had seen something crack in Vango's gaze. What had happened that evening of their world tour?

Ethel suddenly remembered that all dreams have to come to an end.

Now, here they were, lying in their den of corn and sunshine. They should have felt so close, the two of them, on this particular morning, now that they were far away from the others at last. But instead she noticed the way Vango's hand was trembling as she valiantly brought hers close to it.

"The balloon's about to depart. You must go," whispered Vango.

"But what about you?"

"I'll catch you up."

"I'm staying here with you."

"Go."

She stood up. Vango tugged her back down again.

"Stay low and walk as far as the last row of corn, over there. Then run to the Zeppelin."

Something fell to the ground, behind Vango.

"What's that?" Ethel wanted to know.

Vango picked it up and tucked it inside his belt, in the small of his back. It was a revolver.

"You're losing your mind," said Ethel.

Vango wished that were the case. He wished that he had made everything up. That the invisible enemy who had tried to kill him three times in one week had never existed, and that Ethel's hair could sweep away the shadows lying in ambush all around him.

Ethel let go of his hands.

"You made me a promise," she added, after taking a few steps, "Will you remember?"

He nodded, his eyes no longer able to focus.

She vanished into the corn.

After she had been walking for ten minutes, with her matted hair stuck to her cheeks and eyes, Ethel heard two gunshots being fired in the distance behind her. She turned around. The pool of gold lay still, as if at low tide. Ethel could no longer tell where she had set out from, or where the sound had come from.

The blaring of the airship's horn was summoning her. Ethel turned full circle, unable to decide what to do; then, remembering Vango's pleading look, she carried on walking towards the Zeppelin.

Commander Eckener's booming voice was making the kitchen window vibrate.

"Where's my Piccolo? What have you done with him?"

Otto Manz, the chef, shrugged, causing all his chins to disappear into his collar.

"He was here at midnight making a sauce for me. Try this!"

Otto held out a steaming wooden spoon, which Hugo Eckener pushed aside.

"I'm not here to discuss your sauces! I'm asking you where Vango is."

The kitchen was at the front of the airship. The canvas giant tugged at its mooring ropes, preparing to leave America. In its hull, ten of Christopher Columbus's sailing ships could have been lined up end to end.

A pilot officer appeared at the door.

"We're also missing two passengers."

"Who?" bellowed Eckener.

"My little sister, Ethel," announced a twenty-year-old man, who had entered behind the officer.

"This isn't a holiday camp! This is the first round-the-world trip by air! And we're running an hour late. Where are these kids?"

"Over there!" exclaimed the cook, looking out of the window.

Ethel had just cleared a path through the crowd surrounding the balloon. Her brother, Paul, rushed towards the window. She was alone.

"Get her on board!" ordered the commander.

They reached out to haul her up; the steps had already been taken in. Paul greeted her on the threshold.

"Where were you?"

Ethel thrust her fists into her pockets. She was staring at her brother. She sensed that she was teetering on a narrow causeway. She could either dive back into the silence she had inhabited before Vango, or she could set out alone on a new journey.

Paul sensed his sister's vertigo, and he watched her with trepidation as if she were a cat on a glass roof.

"I went for a walk," said Ethel.

Eckener appeared next to them.

"What about Vango?"

"I don't know," answered Ethel. "I'm not Vango's keeper. Isn't he here?"

"No, he's not here!" boomed the commander. "Nor will he ever be again. We're leaving."

"You're not going to set off without Vango?" remonstrated the cook.

"He's fired. That's it. We're off..."

Eckener's voice faltered. Ethel looked away. The orders rebounded all the way to the flight deck. Otto Manz collapsed against the partition.

"Vango? You can't be serious?"

"Don't I look serious?" roared Eckener, his eyebrows sticking up.

"At least try this sauce for me," pleaded the cook, still with the wooden spoon in his hand.

But before the taste of truffles could reverse destiny, Eckener had disappeared.

Suddenly, the voice of Kubis, the headwaiter, could be heard calling out, "There he is!"

Ethel bounded into the corridor and made for the dining room; pushing aside the travellers who were gathered at the window, she scanned the airfield that was filled with soldiers and onlookers.

"There he is!" declared Kubis again, from the neighbouring window.

And sure enough Ethel could see, beyond the crowd, a man, running and waving his arms.

"It's Mr Antonov!"

Boris Petrovitch Antonov had also been missing from the roll-call.

"He's wounded."

The Russian had wrapped a scarf around his knee and he was limping.

This time, the white wooden staircase was put back in place for him to embark. The latecomer explained that he had tripped on a foxhole while stepping back to take a photo.

His eyes were fixed on Ethel.

Boris Antonov had small wire-framed glasses and a waxen complexion. He was travelling with Doctor Kakline, a Russian scientist and Moscow's official representative for escorting the Zeppelin over the Soviet Union. Two weeks earlier, Eckener had decided to bypass the north of Moscow, where tens of thousands of people waited to no avail. Doctor Kakline had demonstrated his Siberian temper, but it took more than that to make Hugo Eckener change his mind.

Kakline was now busy dealing with Antonov. But he didn't even glance at the bloodstained bandage on his compatriot's knee. Instead, he was grilling him with a barrage of hushed questions. Kakline seemed to be satisfied with the outcome of Antonov's adventure. "Da, da, da..." he kept saying, pinching Antonov's cheeks as if he were a good soldier.

The passengers felt the surge of take-off. This was always the most emotional moment, as the flying ship pulled away from the shouts of the

crowd and slowly rose to silent heights in the air.

Old Eckener was in his wooden chair on the starboard side, near the flight deck windows. His blue eyes were tinged with sadness. He was thinking about Vango, the fourteen-year-old boy who had just spent nearly a year on board the Graf Zeppelin. From very early on, he had imagined a mysterious destiny for the person he called Piccolo. But he couldn't help becoming attached to him. From the outset, he had dreaded the day when Vango would disappear.

Eckener was gazing down at the corn. The balloon had already risen two hundred metres. The hive of activity in the hangars at Lakehurst had been left behind, and only the crop fields were in view now. But when he saw, down below, in the soft mist and expanse of yellow, a boy running through the ears of corn, Eckener rediscovered his smile. He stowed that sight in his memory, along with all the others: the Sahara hurling itself into the ocean from the cliff-tops, the grid formation of the gardens at Hokkaido in Japan, the full moon over the dark forests of Siberia. Each moment was a miracle. It was as if the harvesting had been forgotten about, in order to make it possible for a young man to cut a furrow through the corn as he ran beneath the balloon.

Ethel was in her cabin. Her hands against the glass, she leant into the window, without ever taking her eyes off that tiny dot moving across the field below her. The crazy racing of the blue dot was slowly losing ground against the shadow of the balloon. Her heart pounding, Ethel leant even further so as not to let him out of her sight.

"Vango," she whispered.

At exactly the same moment, behind the partition wall, Doctor Kakline dropped his champagne glass.

The crystal shattered against the corner of a table, making Comrade Antonov stand up.

"Are you quite sure about that?" muttered Kakline, pushing the window slightly ajar.

"Why?" inquired Boris Antonov.

"I'm the one asking the questions here," insisted Kakline, as he glared at the floor.

"I... I didn't have time to go right up to the body," stammered Boris. "But—"

"What d'you mean?"

"But I saw him fall."

"You didn't check?"

"The Zeppelin was about to take off without me..."

The blue dot disappeared. Kakline gritted his teeth.

"You idiot."

Exhausted, his legs having taken a thrashing from his race across the field, Vango stopped. He bent over and clasped his knees, unable to catch his breath. The purring of the engines was becoming fainter now. Slowly, Vango stood up. His eyes were fixed on the horizon until complete silence was restored.

I THE CORPSE IN THE BLUE COMET

Lakehurst, New Jersey, seven years later, May 1936

Rusty warehouses had been erected where the cornfields used to be, but Vango still recognized the black earth between his fingers. He crouched down at exactly the spot where he had watched Ethel disappear all those years ago.

It was here that his life on the run had begun.

Seven years later, he still didn't know what his enemies looked like.

Day hadn't broken yet. Vango had arrived in New York by boat the evening before, on a third class ticket. He had made for Lakehurst, where the Hindenburg, the new flying monster from the house of Zeppelin, was due to land for the first time.

Vango wanted to have a word with Hugo Eckener.

There are some people whose diaries are advertised in block capitals at newspaper kiosks. To find out where they are, all you have to do is listen to the newspaper sellers in the street calling out: "Eckener in New York with his Hindenburg! Buy *The Post*!"

On their way back from Sicily, Vango and Ethel had travelled to France before boarding a boat to cross the Channel at Le Havre.

When they had docked at Southampton, she had made her way back to Scotland. And Vango had set off for America.

Ethel couldn't understand why he was deserting her on the quayside, when they had already been lost to each other for such a long time. He couldn't even tell her what he planned to do. This time, he hadn't made any promises. She was shivering in the cold. He had stood there, saying nothing, with the rain streaming through his hair. Ethel walked away. The ship's horn had announced the end of the stopover.

No goodbyes. Always the same scene being played out. He would never forget that look in Ethel's eyes, beneath her hood: a sort of threat. She hadn't made any promises either.

Night was clinging on in the west. The airship wouldn't arrive until after midday. The air still felt cool and, in the distance, the landing field was empty. Vango lay down under a few lingering stars.

Through the window of a corrugated iron shack, a man dressed in black was spying on him.

Silent seagulls circled above Vango. On the bridge of the trans-Atlantic liner *Normandy*, approaching the coast, small squadrons of gulls had been watching over him, as they would have followed a ploughman or a trawling fisherman. Now they had found him again, despite the gloom, in the midst of these hangars far from the sea. Five or six gulls pretending to be nocturnal birds. Vango fell asleep, hypnotised by the flapping of white wings.

The man in black, clad in a bandit's coat, waited a while before emerging from his hideout. He approached the boy and leant over his sleeping face. Concerned, the birds kept a close eye on things. The man glanced up at the circle they made in the night sky, then untied Vango's shoes. He put them in his poacher's pockets and headed off.

When daylight woke him, Vango sensed thunder in the offing and through his half-open eyes, he glimpsed a stormy sky. But on heaving himself up with his elbows, he discovered that his shoes had disappeared. He searched the grass around him. Checking his belt, he could feel the cloth-roll he was looking for, containing the precious stones. So his old shoes were the only things that had been stolen. Nothing else.

He tipped his head back to get the measure of the storm. A rumbling sound was coming from the grey sky, streaked with glints of mercury. But this particular sky was powered by four enormous engines and carried more than a hundred passengers: it was the Hindenburg airship arriving from Europe.

Vango stood up, feeling dazzled. When he had travelled on board the Graf Zeppelin with Ethel, back in 1929, he could never have imagined that one day Commander Eckener would succeed in making an infinitely bigger and heavier airship rise up into the skies; complete with a smoking room, a revolving door and even an aluminium baby-grand piano covered in yellow leather. But Eckener's dreams could make mountains fly.

Vango started to sprint barefoot towards the landing field.

The crowd was packed in tightly around the barriers. Ranks of curious people kept arriving. As he passed between them, Vango missed the sense of genuine exultation he had noticed on previous occasions. Something seemed to have tarnished the crazy, childish joy he had always witnessed towards the Zeppelin. There was a surprising silence all around him, making the orders being given to the airmen – who were preparing to grab hold of the balloon's mooring ropes – ring out even more loudly.

Vango knew what had changed.

A few weeks earlier, there had been a lot of talk about the

propaganda dropped over Germany from the new Hindenburg balloon. Every province was showered with leaflets depicting Hitler, while loudspeakers blared Nazi songs: this terrifying spectacle had sullied the airship's image, even in America. And now, despite the spray from the crossing, the circle around the swastika on the Zeppelin's flank glistened the colour of blood.

The balloon had come to a stop. The footbridge was brought out from its underbelly. Vango recognized Captain Lehmann, posted at the entrance to greet those about to disembark the airship. When they appeared at the top of the steps, the passengers cast victorious eyes over the crowd. There wasn't a single crease in their white shirts, or a hair out of place, and their shoes glistened. Still, they looked different from the rest of humanity, as if they had returned from another world.

Such was the magic spell cast by this flying machine.

Vango decided to let the passengers disperse before approaching Hugo Eckener.

A blonde woman was making her way down the steps. She was flanked by two young men, who looked like hotel bellboys, carrying her suitcases and furs. Vango stared at her. At a thousand dollars a ticket, it was rare to travel onboard the Zeppelin with staff. Usually, they would follow separately in the hold of a cargo ship, accompanying the budgerigar cage and the twelve suitcases of clothes.

Another passenger quickly stole the blonde's top billing, attracting the photographers' attention. His name was on everyone's lips. He was a famous singer returning from a European tour. His lips were fixed in a publicity-shot smile. Vango was carried along by the crowd without even realizing it. Caught up in the whirlwind of journalists and curious bystanders, he felt

himself almost being lifted off the ground. There was a police cordon to protect the star, but the scrum trampled the cordon and threatened to turn violent.

Vango bobbed along like a cork in this human tide. In the middle of the fighting that had broken out, a face rose up and immediately disappeared again.

Stunned, Vango just had time to recognize it. He tried to elbow his way against the current. The face was perfectly etched in his memory.

The man had trimmed his moustache into fangs, while sideburns hid part of his cheeks, and he wore a brown trilby over his eyes. But it was him.

Zefiro.

Vango had spotted his friend, Padre Zefiro, abbot of the invisible monastery on the island of Arkudah, who, some months earlier, had mysteriously abandoned his monks, without giving any indication of his whereabouts.

“Padre!” whispered Vango.

He received two blows to the head and slid to the ground.

Meanwhile, over to the west, in Indiana, an engineer called John W. Chamberlain, emancipator of housewives, had just finished building the first fully automatic washing machine, which relied on a force known as the centrifuge. And it was this same centrifugal force that sent Vango spinning slowly in an outwards direction until he rolled on the grass, whiter than a sheet.

On opening his eyes, he spotted a coat disappearing behind a car. Vango recognized the trilby and went after it.

Zefiro... He couldn't let him disappear again.

Chevrolet buses were filling up with passengers as Vango drew nearer. He saw Zefiro chasing a handsome, purple open-top

car before jumping on board one of the buses. Vango climbed into the next one. The convoy was slowed by the flow of pedestrians. Horns tooted and the yellow buses lurched over the bumpy grass, before rediscovering the delights of tarmac.

The man sitting next to Vango on the bus eyed his neighbour's shoeless feet suspiciously. He kept his hands tightly pressed against his pockets, for fear of having his fob-watch stolen. The last thing the passenger could have imagined was that Vango, the barefoot beggar, had sewn into his belt a pouch of rubies valuable enough to buy up all the shoe-factories on the east coast.

The journey didn't take long. At quarter past seven that morning, the yellow Chevrolets pulled up in front of Lakehurst station. A few passengers got out. Spotting the trilby and the coat among them, Vango set off on their trail. The purple car was parked under the station clock.

Zefiro quickened his step and examined it. It was empty. He entered the ticket hall, inspected the waiting room and headed out onto the platform. Whistles shrilled across the station. The Blue Comet was on platform one. It pulled out, shrouded in steam.

It was a magnificent blue train – as handsome as a toy, with pale yellow lacquered windows. Vango made it onto the platform just in time to see the padre board the moving train. Pushing aside the stationmaster who was blocking his way, Vango began to sprint barefoot. Two other railway workers crossed the tracks in a bid to stop him.

“You shouldn't attempt to board a moving train, sir!”

The last carriage was a long way ahead of him, and layers of smoke prevented him from seeing where the platform ended. Vango put on a final spurt and jumped onto the back buffer of the

locomotive. Just in time. The platform had disappeared beneath his feet.

At that very instant, the gleaming purple car exploded under the clock. The explosion was so powerful that it shattered all the windows in the station.

Vango clung onto the train, leaving behind him the racket of shouts and whistle blows. All he could see was black smoke rising up beyond the platforms.

Vango didn't understand what was going on. From the age of fourteen, there had always been dangers and dramas trailing in his wake. The world exploded when he passed by. Ashes were all he left behind.

One night, on the ocean liner to America, he had recently spent three hours in the rain, on the deserted bridge, his arms outstretched to the sky, hoping to wash away this curse. Two old ladies had scooped him up the next morning. They were Danish travelling companions, and they scolded him before lending him their cabin for the whole day so he could warm up.

"You silly boy! How irresponsible of you!"

They made him drink tea until he was full to bursting and they rubbed mustard poultices into his back.

"Were you out of your mind?"

Being on the receiving end of someone else's anger had never done Vango so much good.

The Blue Comet was a luxurious train offering a high-speed connection to New York. After its hour of glory, the Great Depression of 1929 had restricted its timetable. But this morning, all the seats were taken. Vango made his way through the

carriages, one after another. He was wearing a grey velvet cap and had taken off his jacket, which he carried over one arm. There was nothing remarkable about him, provided you didn't look at his feet.

Nobody on board had noticed the explosion. The passengers were reading quietly or else dozing, propped against the windows.

Vango was looking for Padre Zefiro. The last time he had seen him on the main concourse, at Gare d'Austerlitz in Paris, the padre hadn't even recognized him. From that day on, there had been no further sightings of Zefiro: he was reported missing, believed dead.

Close by, in the front carriage, a lady was lounging on a first class seat. She had exclusive use of the two end compartments, and had stationed an armed guard in the corridor. Even the ticket inspector had received a wad of dollars to guarantee that she wouldn't be disturbed. She wore an angora fur over one shoulder and, from time to time, she rubbed her ear sensuously against it.

It was the blonde with bell boys. She had left them in the adjacent compartment, along with the men in suits who acted as her bodyguards. On the seat opposite her, two other burly fellows in matching uniforms were waiting, hats on knees.

"I'm away for two weeks," she complained, "and no progress has been made?"

Neither of the men responded.

"Answer me, Dorgeles!"

No reply came from the man called Dorgeles, but his enormous neighbour opened his mouth.

The blonde made a violent 'Sssssshhh!' noise. This in turn made the fur on her shoulder ripple, and out of it leapt two blue eyes. It was a cat. The woman slowly lowered her head again, so that it would go back to sleep.

Dorgeles knew what the person hidden beneath this feminine disguise was capable of. He knew how urgent it was to placate the man behind the make-up: Voloy Viktor.

"We'll find him for you, Madame Victoria. We know he's after you. He'll come to us."

The blonde waved her hand, as if Dorgeles's voice still risked waking the cat.

"I can't sleep for a single second," she hissed. "I know that Zefiro is following me. I can smell him."

"Trust us. We're here to protect you."

"Can you smell it, Dorgeles? The stench of sulphur?"

She was hallucinating.

"You've got to trust us. You're putting yourself in danger by changing the timetable so often."

"Surely you can smell it, Dorgeles?"

It had never been part of the plan for Voloy Viktor to travel on board the Zeppelin. Nor on this train, for that matter. Suspicious to the point of being obsessive, he had suddenly demanded that his big purple car pull up in front of the station in order for him to catch the Blue Comet.

"I could smell him," whined Madame Victoria, "I could smell him behind me. He's always there. Zefiro is after my skin."

"There was nothing to worry about in the car. He even missed you at the Plaza Hotel, back in May."

The blonde pointed a blue painted nail at Dorgeles.

"You're the one who missed him at the Plaza! YOU!"

The cat snarled. Dorgeles stared at the floor. He was recalling the evening in New York, when he had been trussed up and bundled into the boot of his own car before he'd had a chance to clock what was happening.

Next to him, in the train compartment, big Bob Almond, from Chicago, who hadn't been recruited for the quality of his conversation, was starting to butcher his hat.

"You can rejoin the others," Dorgeles told him.

Bob stood up and banged his head on the ceiling. Then he made a small polite bow, hitting his neck against the luggage rack as he drew himself up to his full height.

When he had finally made it out of the compartment, Madame Victoria rolled her eyes.

"I wouldn't even hire him to scrape the muck off my hunting boots. How do you select your primates?"

They were both silent for a few minutes. Madame Victoria leant against the window. Her eyes flitted over the countryside. How could anyone have recognized, in this swooning lady, the madness of Voloy Viktor, arms-dealer and murderer?

"I have some news that will interest you," Dorgeles said softly, in a bid to regain lost ground.

Madame Victoria didn't respond.

"Some news as of yesterday evening," Dorgeles went on. "Did you know that Zefiro's sidekick, the one we photographed him with, has been identified..."

"His name is Vango Romano," sighed Madame Victoria wearily, as she rummaged in her make-up bag. "Don't you have anything new to tell me, Dorgeles?"

"He arrived into New York last night, by boat."

This time, there was a flicker of curiosity on Madame Victoria's face. She looked at herself in a little mirror edged with mother-of-pearl.

"How do you know that?"

"I've got one of my men stationed in customs at the port."

Madame Victoria snapped the mirror shut. She produced a square of leather from her blouse and took out two photos, which she held up against one another.

“Now at last you’re saying something interesting. I’ve always thought we’d get to the old one via the young one.”

Dorgeles didn’t even allow himself a satisfied smile.

He was only too familiar with his boss’s mood swings.

“Show this photo to each of our men.”

Dorgeles nodded and settled comfortably into the back of his seat.

“Now!” roared Madame Victoria. “Show them now! I want that little...”

Dorgeles grabbed the photo, stood up and left the compartment.

Vango only had one carriage left to check. One last chance to find Zefiro. Suddenly, the shadow of the ticket inspector loomed before him. Vango pushed open the door to his right and disappeared inside before he was spotted. He found himself in the first class lavatory. A curtain had been drawn across the window. It was almost pitch black. Vango turned the lock. With his ear pressed to the door, he waited for the inspector to head off.

When he tried to take a step backwards, he nearly trod on something bulky and limp on the floor. He bent down in the gloom and put his hand out. Using his fist to stifle his cry, he pinned himself against the wall, tugging the curtain clean off its rail.

There, curled up in front of him, between the basin and the lavatory, was a lifeless body, almost naked, lying face down.