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September 1860
London, England

Gunter Rohlenheim, consumed in his melancholy, wandered through the dreary gray mist, idly counting shoe-worn cobblestones in the street. He knew he had become the laughingstock of Prince Otto von Bismarck's Prussian Secret Service. Why else would old Otto have sentenced him to the doldrums of London, he thought, where nothing more than afternoon tea happened. Nothing had changed since the last time he was here, ten years past. This last assignment, a dreadful two years, had amounted to nothing more than monotonous searching. There were no revelations to be uncovered. The British held no secrets. They were open, honest, forthright, and painfully boring people. Cotton and tobacco shipments from America and the occasional deal for a small cache of firearms were the only activities from the ports. The English were neutral, and they wished to remain neutral, it seemed. They did not even care about the turmoil in Europe or the unrest in the rest of the world. They were the quintessential turtle tucked safely in its shell — do not bother us and we will not bother you.

"Insignificant," Gunter mumbled as he shuffled toward his boardinghouse. It was the only word that came to mind. No one cared about what happened here. Not even Bismarck. Gunter knew how old Otto wanted weapons and technology information, but there were no new weapons here. Even machinery improvements and technology advancements seemed mired in an ultra-conservative quagmire. Progress, it seemed, was nothing more than a collection of perverse thoughts sequestered in dark alleys and sealed away in closed closets and dank basements. Engineers' ideas remained stagnant on desks, slowly decaying in the bureaucracy like the forgotten muse of lonely dead poets. Even the tall ships in port were the traditional sailing vessels, absent of steam-powered screws or ironclad prows.

"Beer?" A voice startled Gunter. He quickly glanced over his shoulder, then relaxed when he saw Rudolph Moser, a new young courier from the secret service, and his personal conduit back to Bismarck.

"You need to be a bit more discreet. I heard you two blocks away," Gunter lied. He hid his relieved shudder, not wanting to show his surprise.

"Do you know about the tavern up here? It has hearty dark lager," Rudolph proudly announced, catching up to match Gunter's strides. Rudolph was not much older than he had been when he joined the service. Still young and naïve, his effervescent smile was sickening; it still brimmed with the enthusiasm of the brand-new spy. Gunter remembered that same smile from his first years, before the boredom of ordinary espionage set in. Especially what was here in London.

"I know. Been there more than I care to admit," Gunter mumbled. He shook his head and gazed at the filth that filled the cracks between the cobblestones. Heavy autumn rains filled and backed up discharge pipes, bubbling fetid sewage into the streets. He wondered whose shit clung to the soles of his shoes. "In fact, so many times that the innkeeper knows precisely what I drink, where I sit and what time I come in."

Rudolph frowned.

"I'll show you," Gunter said and led his understudy across the street. When Gunter opened the door, a lazy cloud of acrid cigar and pipe smoke billowed out to greet them. Rudolph stifled a gag as he stepped into the choking haze, stopping to survey the room for a moment.

"Dark lager, table in the corner," the innkeeper said as he stepped out from his back room. He flashed a smile at Gunter, then wiped his hands on his stained yellowed apron.

"Two today. One for my friend here." Gunter nodded back to Rudolph.

“Two lagers it is, then,” the innkeeper replied and disappeared into his keg room.

Gunter noticed three women in the corner; the same three tarts had been there all week. Their ample breasts bulged from the fringes on their low-cut blouses. Two had dark hair coquettishly strewn about their faces, as if to accentuate their earthy willingness. The third one, the red-haired one, caught his eye again. He had always been partial to red hair.

He combed his fingers through his stiff gray hair, then through his thin, wiry beard to be sure no crumbs nested in the hairs. Primping was not his routine, but he figured it could help at this point. He realized his rugged face might not be the most handsome these ladies had seen, but he was in excellent physical condition. And since the pleasures of the flesh had been scarce for him lately, he knew he had to do something different.

“Your lagers,” the innkeeper interrupted Gunter’s thought. “Her name is Anna,” he added, wiggling his eyebrows.

Gunter nodded and paid for the drinks. “Over there,” he added. He motioned to the corner table for Rudolph and led the way.

“What interests you, Rudolph?” Gunter asked as he sat down. He sighed loudly as he stroked his beard, then sent a veiled invitation toward the red-haired woman. He fished around for his pipe and stuffed it full of the dry, wretched tobacco strands left in his pouch.

“I’ve always been partial to the arts,” Rudolph said quietly as he settled in. He quickly glanced around the room to be sure no one heard him, then leaned forward. “Performing arts, that is. I played the viola before I broke my hand,” he added.

“I see. The viola?” Gunter mumbled. He didn’t really care, but he needed a segue. He leaned back in his chair as his stare drifted aimlessly. “Mine is engineering, you know, building things. And diving. Have you ever been in a dive suit?”

“No, never have been.” Rudolph shook his head.

“If you put engineering and diving together, what do you think you get?”

Rudolph cocked his head and rolled his eyes toward the ceiling, as if thinking deeply about Gunter’s question.

“I don’t think I know,” the young spy admitted.

“Almost ten years ago now, I was on the docks in Kiel with a man named Wilhelm Bauer. Do you know Bauer?”

Rudolph did not respond. Gunter had entranced him.

“We developed the *Brandtaucher* — a submersible — a vessel that would travel under the water, unseen from any enemy until we wanted to be seen. A vessel that could have changed the entire complexion of war as we knew it.”

Gunter chewed on his pipe as he sent a stream of smoke toward the ceiling. It had been months since he had a captive audience to listen to his rambling dreams. No one it seemed wanted to listen to him ramble about how his ideas could revolutionize naval tactics.

“It was so innovative,” he continued. “We had expected that someone, somewhere, would have continued the experiments. But no one has. Now it’s just a rusting hulk in the cold waters off the German Federation coast.”

“So why are you here, I mean in the Secret Service?” Rudolph tipped his head. He scrunched his boyish face with a sideways twist to his mouth and stared deeply into Gunter’s gray eyes.

“I thought there would be excitement. Adventure. The intrigue of being a spider on the wall while generals, princes and kings haggled over troops and strategies. That thrilled me. And maybe even get into a good fight now and then.” Gunter grinned. “Fighting is good for you, you know. Fighting exercises the body

and the mind. Don't think, and 'boom'. You learn quickly."

Gunter suddenly fell silent. His eyes locked on two men who had just entered and stopped at the bar. From the thickness of the London mist, a pair of Americans slipped in. That there were Americans in London was not odd. He had seen hundreds of them before. Nor was it odd that the Americans were Southerners. The cotton, tobacco, and sugar cane trade had at least doubled in volume over the past year. It was who the Americans were that was nothing short of a stroke of luck.

"Who are they?" Rudolph asked. He had turned enough to see the men who had grabbed Gunter's attention.

"James McClintock," Gunter whispered as he leaned forward and shushed Rudolph by pressing the mouthpiece of his pipe to his lips. "Brilliant, innovative engineer. I've studied some of his work and what he has designed is unrivaled. Simply remarkable."

"You've studied Americans?"

"Just a few. McClintock in particular. I heard he secretly designed a submersible. Don't know if he built it yet, but that would be something I would kill to get a look at."

Rudolph cocked his head and glared at Gunter, then shifted his glance back to the Americans.

"And Baxter Watson," Gunter's voice grew distant and calculating. "Mr. Watson is known to the unaware as simply McClintock's engineering partner. But I know that Watson's hands are behind every one of McClintock's inventions. That man is an artist when machines are involved."

Gunter quivered and fell silent. Close motion caught his attention. A tall young Englishman rose from a chair at a nearby table and waved directly to the two Americans.

"There he is, James," Baxter said, pointing toward the fellow.

Gunter glanced back to the tall figure, who now waved cordially back toward the Americans.

"Do you know him?" Rudolph whispered. He lowered his head but his eyes remained glued on the Englishman.

"That is William Alexander. One of the brightest engineers any English university has ever graduated," Gunter spoke softly, but clearly was curbing his excitement. "Do you realize what we have here, Rudolph? I believe we have found the someone. Now we need to know the somewhere."

Rudolph closed his eyes hard and squeezed his forehead, obviously trying to catch up with Gunter's rapid deductions. The Americans passed close enough that Gunter could have snatched the papers that peeked out from McClintock's coat pocket. Gunter glowered at Rudolph and pointed to his ear while he looked up with a professorial glance. Rudolph nodded. Gunter recognized he understood the "listen carefully" signal.

"Gentlemen, welcome to London," Alexander greeted them. He tipped his head in a refined, polite manner.

"Dreary weather, William. But tolerable," McClintock said as he extended his hand to shake. Alexander obliged, tipping his head politely.

Gunter took out paper and a pencil as the men completed their salutations and took their seats. He scribbled nothing but nonsense words on his paper between upward glances, acting like a writer in the midst of inspiration.

"I have looked over your proposal, James. You are keenly aware what you are proposing has never been totally successful." Alexander's tone broached condescension. He tented his hands in front of his face and then pursed his lips tightly around his pipe's well-chewed pipe stem.

"It's not a new concept, William," McClintock prodded.

"History has not been lost on me." Alexander puffed briskly through his pipe. He sent a chain of smoke clouds toward the ceiling.

“And it is possible. Hell, I got most of my ideas from —” McClintock stuttered. His expression went blank. “In fact, one was developed in —”

“Germany,” Baxter Watson finished for him. “The *Brandtaucher*, I believe it was called.”

“Yes, yes. The *Brandtaucher*,” McClintock noted.

Rudolph glanced at Gunter with a knowing look. Gunter flashed back a scolding, professorial scowl, as if his furrowed brow shadowed spectacles. His message was clear.

“That was nothing more than a failed experiment,” Alexander explained and adjusted his posture.

Gunter immediately squirmed, as if he had been skewered in the back. Under his breath he whispered “That’s not true. We were successful, damn it. I can show you. I know where I can find the diagrams.”

Sitting upright, Alexander oozed arrogance. He sipped at his beer, then swallowed quickly. “All the accounts I have read indicated it sank on its initial trial,” he added.

“Lies,” Gunter mumbled. He leaned back and chewed fervently on his pipe.

“Then are you suggesting we should not even consider a venture such as this?” McClintock said. His deep-set dark eyes drilled into Alexander.

“On the contrary, James.” Alexander puffed out his chest and gazed wryly at McClintock. “It is precisely why we should. No one would suspect such a venture. And I believe the *Brandtaucher* proved that a submersible was not only feasible, but could be a very valuable vessel.”

McClintock and Baxter both lifted their eyebrows. Gunter squirmed again to regain his own composure.

“However, as I am sure you are aware, for support we require a need. And the need is not in England,” Alexander said as he spewed a stream of smoke toward the ceiling. He smiled coyly and leaned forward.

“Then, we can count on your support to help build this vessel?” McClintock cut to the chase.

Alexander leaned back in his chair. He slipped his right hand through his well-trimmed brown beard. There was no surprise in his expression.

“There is a question of money, James.” Alexander closed his eyes and shrugged his shoulders. “I have plenty of ideas, but no money.”

“Money isn’t an issue. We already have the financing settled,” McClintock offered. “Mr. Horace Hunley, a very successful businessman, has agreed to help financially. It didn’t require a great effort to convince him that some of the consequences of our possible actions place his well-being in jeopardy.”

“I see.” Alexander nodded. An impish grin cracked his poker face. “You chaps are as revolutionary as ever,” he added under his breath.

“You should make arrangements to come to Virginia. And it should be sooner rather than later,” McClintock noted. He glanced around the room, then leaned forward. “The politics are ripe for secession, and I am sure the Federals will be blockading the ports soon thereafter. Getting through after that blockade will certainly be challenging, to say the least,” he added in a hushed voice.

Alexander stiffened when his wandering glance caught Gunter’s eyes. Gunter quickly looked back to his papers. He scribbled “McClintock,” “Watson,” “Alexander,” “Hunley,” and “Virginia” as reminders.

“Perhaps we should change our venue. This part of town is a might seedy for me. Perhaps my modest office would be a bit more private,” Alexander added, his posture rigid. He leaned only his head forward and wiggled his eyebrows. “I have some sketches I believe would interest you.”

The men glanced over to Gunter, then nodded their concurrence. With brisk idle chatter about the weather, the men quickly finished their drinks and hastily departed the tavern.

“Shouldn’t we follow them?” Rudolph asked. He pushed his chair back.

“No, not now.” Gunter shook his hand close to his chest. “We need to let this settle a bit. I know where Alexander works. I’ve been in there before.”

“What if they leave? They were talking about leaving soon?” Rudolph asked.

“We can watch for passenger lists at the port,” Gunter suggested.

“You know what he’s building?” Rudolph’s tone had grown impatient.

“Not absolutely, but I believe the clues lead in only one direction,” Gunter assured him. “Let’s go to my room. I finally have something you can take back to old Otto.”

Rudolph agreed. Gunter stuffed his scribbled note into his pocket and started toward the door. He paused as he neared the women, then winked teasingly at the red-haired woman. She smiled, but Gunter simply tipped his head and left with Rudolph in tow.

Once they opened the door to his rented room, Gunter noticed an envelope had been slipped under his door. He hustled Rudolph into the room, closed the door behind them, and picked up the envelope before Rudolph could blink an eye. The single seal was all Gunter needed to see. He scurried to his stack of books on the small table in the center of the room, then slipped out one with a dull green binding. He tore the envelope open, pulled out the letter, and laid it on the table. On the inside back cover he moved his finger down the page, then across. Noting the number, he quickly flipped inside the book.

“What was it that was so important back there?” Rudolph asked as he watched Gunter decode the message, letter by letter.

“It was rumored that McClintock has been secretly working on a design for a submarine-type vessel for years. Ever since we were successful with the *Brandtaucher*.”

“How do you know that?” Rudolph paced around the room.

“Wilhelm met with him several times to discuss the design,” Gunter answered mechanically as he worked through his decoding.

“And Alexander?”

“There are no two engineers that could hold a candle to that combination for creativity and design. They’re simply brilliant,” Gunter concluded as he finished the decoding. “I know they are collaborating on building a submarine,” Gunter mumbled as he read what he had written.

“Well, what does it say?” Rudolph looked over Gunter’s shoulder, bouncing from one side to the other.

“I do not believe I will be seeing you for a while, my friend. Old Otto knows something is going on,” Gunter said, confidently. An immediate brightness covered his face as he reopened the book. He carefully encoded a return message, folded the letter, and inserted it into an envelope he had pulled out from the front of the book. He deftly ran a bead of wax over the flap.

Rudolph studied Gunter with interested eyes as he fondled the letter. He slowly grabbed Gunter’s extended hand.

“This will be my last message with you, Rudolph. Make sure it gets there.” Gunter grinned widely enough that his beard spread out like a coarse brush and curved up the corners of his almond-shaped eyes into smiles.

“Where are you going?” Rudolph released the handclasp.

“My sentence in this godforsaken country is over. Old Otto is sending me to America.”

