

Waltz in Syncopated Time

Part 9

August 17, 1987

It was well past midnight, he realized, finally working the window open and slipping into Bundesbank offices. He closed the window behind him, and slumped against the wall, taking deep, even breaths and attempting to slow his swiftly beating heart. The easy part was over; the real test was about to begin.

Steeled, he took the moment to examine the environs. He appeared to be in a file room; row after row of steel cabinets surrounded him. With his hands outstretched, he moved cautiously forward - hoping not to run into anything . . . or anyone.

After what seemed like an eternity, he found the door. Slowly and soundlessly, he worked the knob and pulled it open. In the hallway, he was more vulnerable - lacking any place to immediately conceal himself. He stuck close to the walls, and began to creep down the corridor. His eyes, already well adjusted to the nocturnal dimness, continued to scour the area for any sign of Winkel's lair.

A sign for Winkel, however, was the last thing he expected. Yet, there it was - a large nameplate announcing, Peter Winkel, Vice President of Foreign Investments. "Son of a bitch has a set of brass ones," Lee grumbled under his breath.

He pulled a lockpick set from his pocket, and set to work. The doors, designed hundreds of years ago to be imposing, had handles that were almost at chest level with Lee, and locks that were even higher. Unbalanced by being forced to work upright rather than on his knees, he worked more slowly and clumsily.

"Möchten Sie 'nen Schlüssel?" He felt a hand on his shoulder at the same time a gruff voice asked him whether he wanted a key.

"Ja," he answered in German. Turning to look at his confronter, he continued, "I'm not quite sure where I left mine."

"Perhaps this will help you remember," the imposing guard responded and swung his fist in the direction of Lee's cheekbone.

Lee blocked the punch and then, countered with one of his own. "Nein," he continued the verbal skirmish, "but maybe you could lend me yours." Ducking as the guard threw another punch, Lee used the opportunity to snatch the ring of keys from the man's belt.

"Sorry, my friend, I'm sure you're just doing your job, but it's time for me to find my wife, and I can't have you getting in the way," Lee grunted, and hit the other man at the base of his neck, effectively knocking him out.

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He stood at the head of the stairs. Looking down over the banister, he saw her on the couch pouring over a catalogue. Hesitating a brief moment, he then took them two at a time and leapt into the landing, "Grandma?"

"Yes, darling - what is it?" She set the glossy mailing aside and looked up at him.

He stared at his feet, shifting his weight awkwardly as he spoke. "I was just wondering . . . and Jamie and me were talking . . . and it's been a while, and well, have you heard from Mom?"

"Jamie and I," Doty corrected automatically, and then paused, a brief, indiscernible look crossing her face. "Sorry," she offered and patted the sofa cushion beside her.

Phillip shrugged, rejecting her offer, and redirected his gaze from his shoes to the ceiling as he waited for an answer.

"No, honey," she finally answered, "I haven't heard from your mother. But," she continued, "you know how it gets when she's away for work; she gets so wrapped up in what she's doing that she completely loses track of time. I'm sure everything's fine," she concluded.

Phillip nodded and walked away slowly. "Thanks . . ."

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"Okay, where are you?" Lee closed one drawer and opened another, feeling along the sides and bottom in search for a false bottom or hidden panel. The desk was impressive, massive, dark oak, and he knew there was a secret compartment somewhere - it was only a matter of finding it.

Pulling out another drawer, he began methodically to run his fingers along the inside - comparing the internal dimensions to the external ones. Finding an asymmetry, he then began to tap, listening for the telltale hollowness that would prove his hunch right.

Hearing it, he pulled a penknife from his pocket, and carefully pried the lower panel away. "Gotcha!" He retrieved a sheaf of papers. Scanning them quickly, he saw Amanda's name on several of them and took out his mini-camera. He efficiently photographed each page and carefully returned them to their hiding place. Then, he slid the drawer's false bottom back into place, and slipped out of the office.

"Ufa!"

The guard was on him the moment he shut the door. Lee broke the hold, but the guard caught him again. Struggling, fighting in the hallway, he felt like a man possessed. Rolling over, he finally managed to pin the guard.

The other, larger man struggled beneath Lee, and the agent knew his hold was slipping. "I'll hit you again if I have to," Lee uttered in a strangled whisper. "Just let me go. It's nothing personal - I just want to find my partner."

"Your partner? But there is no one else here," the guard answered, seemingly bewildered by Lee's remark.

"The hell with it." Lee hesitated only briefly before slamming his fist into the other man's jaw. In place of the face before him, he saw that of Peter Winkel.

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August 17, 1987
Bratislava

"So, what are we going to do today, Sophie?" Amanda followed the question with a deep sip of the woman's thick coffee, still trying to shake off her dreams from the night before.

"You're to meet a fisherman on the Donaj - his boat is called 'Das Flusspferd'. You give him the list; he'll give you a package."

"That's all?" The assignment struck Amanda as too simple, and she was certain Sophie wasn't telling her the whole story.

"For now," Sophie answered with what, to Amanda, seemed like studied nonchalance. "Just bring the papers back to me, and we'll decide where to go after that."

Amanda took another sip of coffee. "The Donaj - is that . . . the Danube?"

The question did not seem to be the one Sophie was expecting, and she paused a moment before answering, "Yes . . . yes, I guess so."

Amanda continued, "And 'Flusspferd,' in English that means 'river horse.' That seems like an odd name for a boat."

"Hippopotamus," Sophie corrected. "From the Greek." Then on that tangent, she added, "Jason was the first one to sail this river."

"The Argonauts," Amanda mused momentarily and then returned to the task at hand, "I guess I have to go see a man about a river horse . . ."

END PART IX