

DR. CUBA

A pulp.

By Christopher Paris

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Chapter 1: All Things Are Born

Dr. Cuba liked the smell of gasoline, as it reminded him of his childhood in Ancash, and his father and that battered red bus, but the taste of it was almost too much for even him to bear. Nevertheless, he finished the entire glass.

Todas las cosas nacen, he thought to himself. *All things are born.*

The ink from yesterday's newspaper headlines had barely dried. El Mercurio had reported on the robbery of a large number of gold bars stolen while en route to an official government warehouse in Argentina, and now it found itself setting type for a nearly identical story in its own city of Santiago, Chile. It may have been too early to connect the events, but the editors were more than willing to do so anyway.

ROBAN CASI 2,500 KILOGRAMOS DE LINGOTES DE ORO

¿Es el año 1945 el comienzo de una ola de criminalidad?

Just a month earlier, in March of 1945, Chile was fixated less on the nation's entry into World War II and its declaration of war against Japan, and more on the third place finish of the country in the Americas Cup. Football had, as always, the ability to nudge war and cataclysm onto the second page.

In the absence of either, therefore, the theft of 200 gold bars from the Central Bank would have to do. For this week, anyway.

The robbery defied logic. The gold had been stored in a highly secure vault which, itself, was sealed behind an ever expanding set of reinforced rooms. To enter the vault, one would have to first pass a set of bored and underpaid national police guards, then make way through a main building built of concrete walls, reinforced with steel rebar, and then into an outer cage of hardened steel bars, through to an inner cage with even more bars, until one reached the vault itself. Each room was sealed by a metal door of increasingly complex make and security, with the vault door being the state of the art for 1945 Latin America. To blast one's way into the central vault, a variety of explosives would have been necessary, with more and more destructive power

needed as one reached the center.

But there were no explosives. There was no sign of any force used at all, not a bent hinge nor a pried lock. Everything looked as pristine after the robbery as it likely had before.

And yet 200 gold bars were now missing. There were certainly more items of value in the very same vault, but these were left untouched. Jewels, currency, even coins were left behind. In fact, there were far more valuable ingots of platinum, and many more of silver, which were left untouched.

The next question was just how the thieves moved their prize. The total gold weighed nearly 5,500 pounds, thus demanding both time and equipment to move it from the vault to wherever the thieves called home. A train was the most likely option, and there were available tracks in and out of the Central Bank's main warehouse, giving the thieves at least the capability of using a railcar for their escape. Except that the tracks were blocked by a single engine already occupying the space immediately outside of the warehouse, which had been sitting there for at least four months, and which had not been moved. To use a rail car, the thieves would have had to have carried the gold from the vault, through all the inner buildings with their respective cages and gates, into the railyard, to load it all onto a separate car positioned in front of the idle bank engine.

And, thus, the need for both equipment and time. Even with hauling barrows and railcars, the amount of work necessary to break into the building and remove the gold would have required hours. To do so in silence, perhaps days. Somehow, however, the thieves performed the entire operation within a single night, without being seen, without making a noise, and without bending a single hinge or prying a single lock.

The Mercurio reporter, Jose Torres de la Cruz, had uncovered no possible explanations in his brief, but moderately thorough, investigation. He had interviewed a smattering of the Central Bank's employees – at least those he was able to talk to before government officials pushed them into a back room away from the press – and received nearly identical accounts from all of them. It had been a normal day of work, with nothing particularly interesting having happened. It then ended, as every workday does, with the day employees leaving for their homes, and the night shift guards taking over.

None of those whom de la Cruz interviewed had seen anything, heard anything, suspected anything.

“An inside job,” El Mercurio’s editor muttered, as he read de la Cruz’s draft. “There’s no other explanation.”

“There were at least 50 or 75 people working the day shift,” de la Cruz said, with a slight air of defense. “Then, at least 25 night shift men took over. All the normal procedures were followed.” De la Cruz clearly felt his reporting was being challenged.

“Print it,” the editor grumbled, shoving the draft back into de la Cruz’s hands. Nothing more. De la Cruz realized his boss wasn’t questioning him at all, he was just filling the air with his uninformed opinion before yielding to the clock on the wall, which was demanding the day’s stories be filed within the half hour.

In New York City, the Homunculus walked the streets with an aura of confidence and, one might say, elegance. It wasn’t because he was particularly confident or elegant, but simply because he lacked a soul, and therefore did not care at all for the creatures scurrying around him on Fifth Avenue.

He wore a tailored black suit, tailored shirt with perfect cuffs, and a fashionable, if slightly modern, bespoke fedora with shocking red hat band. Tight black leather gloves covered each hand. Again, the entire look would have led anyone to believe the Homunculus was wealthy but had paid for none of it.

The suit was hand-made, of course, but by an old tailor who had been tied to an oak post in a rundown warehouse on Canal Street, while copper wires ran from his feet and neck to a rusty car battery. Once the suit was made, and the fit checked for perfection, a switch was thrown, and the old tailor’s career rapidly ended. The tailored shirt was made by a Chinese tailor, also near Canal Street, but who was spared the indignity of electrocution once the last button was affixed; instead, he was thrown into a fire. The hat, meanwhile, was made by a relatively young hatter who had studied under one of the more famous fashion houses in the city, but who wouldn’t be missed when thrown in front of a train, and only after finishing that shocking red hat band.

It's best not to discuss the gloves at all.

In the end, the Homunculus had filled his somewhat spare closet with an assortment of fine garments, for sure, each with a story to tell, and each costing him absolutely nothing except some moderate physical exertion.

His choice of clothing was neither the product of his upbringing – we'll get to that soon enough – nor any particular sense of fashion. It was purely a necessity. If he was to enmesh himself in the fabric of society that would make his goals possible, he needed to dress the part. But in that spare closet were other types of clothing for other types of needs: mechanics overalls, a butcher's apron, even a heavy fur-lined coat for use in the arctic.

For now, however, the black suit with red-banded fedora was the appropriate dress for today's objective. The Homunculus rounded the corner, and entered an opulent restaurant attached to an equally opulent hotel renowned for business travelers of the highest classes. He removed his hat and gloves.

"The name for your reservation, sir?" the maître d' asked, feigning interest. His face changed to genuine curiosity – if not concern – when he noticed the forefinger of the Homunculus' left hand was colored deep, ruby red. If this was some sort of sailor's tattoo, it was unlike anything the maître d' had seen before, but nevertheless raised suspicions about this strange patron's social status.

"I'm here as a lunch guest for Mr. Leonard Port," the Homunculus said, ignoring the man's shift in emotion. He was used to it.

He also knew the name Leonard Port would cut short any lingering doubts as to whether he belonged in this restaurant or not. Port was one of the wealthiest men in New York City at the time, and while no figure of history nor much public renown, maître ds in opulent restaurants nevertheless knew who he was. Port likely had his own table in most of the city's expensive spots, as he clearly did here.

"Yes," the maître d' said, looking down at his reservation book. "I see Mr. Port is expecting one for lunch. May I have your name, sir?"

"Mr. Guest," the Homunculus replied. It was ridiculous, of course, and no one believed the name was real, but it hardly mattered. It matched what Port had given the restaurant's management.

“Please follow me,” the maître d’ sniffed.

Now, as they walked, the maître d’ examined the Homunculus a bit more closely. He noticed the pure white skin, with an unnatural smoothness that gave the appearance of literal ivory; if the Homunculus had pores, they were too small and fine to see. He noticed the coal black hair, neatly styled and recently trimmed. He noticed the straightness of the nose, the sternness in the eyes. Those eyes, too, were black. In fact, it appeared as if the Homunculus had stepped out of a black and white film, as the only dashes of color breaking up his starkly monochrome appearance were the red hat band and that single, ruby finger.

They approached a table in the rear, noticeably away from any windows and far from the kitchen, giving Port some intentional privacy for whatever business he may conduct there. Port himself was already seated, drinking a light white wine while fussing over some papers. He was oblivious as the Homunculus approached with the maître d’.

“Mr. Port,” the maître d’ said, with nearly exaggerated respect, “your guest has arrived.”

Port looked up and acknowledged the two. He was younger than one might guess from his wealth; about 40, with a stylish suit, stylish short hair, and thin frame. There was more color in his appearance than the monochrome Homunculus. Perhaps having a soul did that to a person.

Although few might accuse Port of having a soul. He was known to be ruthless in business, uncaring for his workers, and interested in only two things: the profits of his investments, and – rumors said – a number of sexual deviancies that were uncommon in the day.

The Homunculus was only interested in Port’s first interest.

“Please, have a seat,” Port said. “I ordered a German white, given the hour.” A look of relief passed over the maître d’s face, as Port’s reaction let him know he had not just brought over the wrong man, a possible dark menace.

He took the Homunculus’ coat, hat, and gloves, and left the two to their privacy. The Homunculus sat.

“Mosel Sahr,” the Homunculus said, glancing at the wine’s label.

“The Germans may be terrible at world diplomacy,” Port replied, “but they can grow a few good grapes.”

Port moved the papers to one side, now giving the Homunculus his full attention. “Pardon all this,” he said, indicating the papers, “some unexpected and tiresome last minute wrangling. A birthmark?” Somewhere during that last comment, Port had turned his attention to the Homunculus’ red finger. The question was abrupt, but people of Port’s wealth rarely had time for courtesy about such things. He was, no doubt, sizing up the man before him.

“Exactly that,” the Homunculus responded. “The waiter likely assumed I was a brawler from the docks, tattooed and such. I daresay he hesitated to bring me back to you.”

“Jeffrey is a prude, but he keeps the riffraff out. It’s his job, in fact. But he can’t tell the difference between a tattoo and a birthmark, unfortunately.”

The Homunculus nodded, even as he thought to himself, *It’s neither.*

“Your letter intrigued me,” Port said, looking into the Homunculus’s black eyes. If he felt anything strange in those eyes, Port didn’t telegraph it.

“I surmised as such. If it hadn’t, you wouldn’t have invited me here.”

“Correct,” Port said, curtly. “So why, exactly, do you need private access to one of my largest warehouses, in one of the most remote locations in the city? Why must it be empty? A less cautious man would suspect you have something illegal planned for it.”

Port certainly was direct. The Homunculus was unshaken, however, for a variety of reasons. First, such behavior had little effect on him no matter how wealthy or powerful the person in front of him might be. But second, and more importantly, what Port thought about anything was irrelevant, since in 24 hours he would be quite dead.

“You are, if I may be blunt, a wealthy man.” The Homunculus was returning Port’s curtness. “There isn’t any amount of money I can offer you for the use of the warehouse, since you don’t need the money. And given my admittedly opaque conditions, I can understand if you are wary of the risks.”

“I’m not worried about risks,” Port snorted, confidently. “Challenging risks directly is how I made my money.”

The Homunculus knew Port would fall for this trap. If he challenged Port as a coward, Port's only possible response was to reject the accusation and open himself up further to the deal. Manhood, and all that.

"But I as mentioned in my letter, I have something else you need that, I believe, will see your way to agreeing to my terms."

"And that is why you're here, sir," Port answered. "I'm curious as to what you think you have that I may need."

"My contacts include men from all levels of society, from those at the highest levels to those that walk beneath their feet. I came to learn some associates in Chinatown that you were moving large quantities of opium between locations there, in an effort to distract ongoing police investigations."

Now Port appeared shaken. How could the Homunculus have known this?

"Don't worry, sir, I'm not interested at all in how or why you are engaged in this business. I have even less interest in reporting such things to the police, who I view with I daresay more contempt than you, yourself, might."

If that was intended to relieve Port, it hadn't worked. He was beginning to appear as colorless as his guest.

"I am also wholly disinterested in bribing you, which is an activity I find repulsive. My offer is quite the opposite, one which stands to work in your favor."

"Get to it," Port grunted.

"I have a vault of significant size located in New Rochelle. The location goes nearly entirely unnoticed due to its proximity to a meat packing plant, and it further benefits from being built below ground, something one can't do on the island of Manhattan. If you give me access to your warehouse for two days, I will let you have the vault. Forever. You can do whatever you want with it, store whatever you want. It would be suitable for both currency and, ... products."

"Its size?"

"The vault's interior is just under 1,000 square feet."

"And you'd give it to me. To keep." Port sounded unwilling to believe

the offer.

“It no longer serves a purpose for me. I have not used it in over five years, and for me, it has little value. For someone engaged in your types of transactions, however, I think it could have value.”

“There must be some other angle, here.”

“The only other requirement is that, to keep my activities in the warehouse private, you will have to hand me the keys personally. No one else must be involved.”

“And when do you propose to begin this transaction with me?” Port asked.

“You can have the vault immediately. I have already drawn up the bill of sale, for the price of one dollar.” The Homunculus withdrew some papers from his breast pocket. “If you sign it, the transfer is complete.”

Port took the papers and examined them. His eyes darted quickly over the pages, but the rest of his body remained entirely frozen.

“There is nothing here about my warehouse,” Port said.

“No. That is to keep our arrangement entirely private. I am trusting you, Mr. Port. I believe that you will honor the arrangement, and I have no need for your signature to ensure it.”

Port’s face finally relaxed, somewhat. The Homunculus knew what he was calculating. Port assumed that the activities planned for the warehouse were far more nefarious than even his opium smuggling operations, so much so that his monochrome guest was willing to make an extreme offer. And, likewise, a vault such as described would have incredible value to Port, for reasons not only limited to his Chinatown business.

“I will sign this” Port said, pulling a pen from his vest pocket. “but I will need to see the vault before I agree open my warehouse to you.”

“I assumed as much,” the Homunculus said, politely. “Take a week. Send men to see the vault or visit it yourself. There are three main locks, and the combinations for all of them are listed in that contract. I am sure you will be satisfied. Then, we can arrange a date for you to bring the keys to the warehouse to me, personally. Again, however, I must insist you come alone. No driver, no bodyguard. Alone.”

Port signed the contract. “Done,” he grunted. It was also his invitation for the Homunculus to leave.

And so, he did.

Inspector Heiner Thumann disembarked the *SS Kerguelen* with some visible stiffness. The nearly monthlong trip across the Atlantic, from Marseille to Buenos Aires, left him not only stiff from a lack of exercise, but creaking and wheezing due to extended exposure to sea air.

Thumann was fat and unhealthy before he boarded the *Kerguelen*. The journey may have allowed him to shed a few pounds, but it hadn’t suddenly made him fit. With little else to do but read and smoke, Thumann may arrived in Argentina in worse shape than when he left.

Thumann was a man of the street, not the ocean. His expertise was in solving murders, conspiracies, major crimes. His main places of work were the pavement under his feet, and his shoddy wooden desk back in the office. For two decades he worked the dirty alleys and sidewalks of Berlin. When the Nazis became too noisy, he fled to the UK where he continued his work in the dirty alleys and sidewalks of London. He had hated the short trip across the English Channel, and realized then he was not meant to be on ships.

Coming to South America to investigate a rash of crimes linked to similar ones plaguing London? He was beginning to think this voyage was a mistake.

Still, it felt good to be standing on a surface that wasn’t in constant movement. At the bottom of the gangplank, Thumann lit a cigar and waited. His portly frame filled his waistcoat, and his pants and overcoat were filthy from the trip. He smelled of fish guts and diesel fuel, but his nose had stopped picking up the scents about two weeks ago. Others around him weren’t so lucky.

He scanned the port for Gentleman, his assistant. Gentleman should have found Thumann’s trunk and bags by now, but he was nowhere to be seen. *This might be a two-cigar wait*, he thought to himself.

It was morning in Buenos Aires, and the air was still cool, filled with voices speaking the sing-song Spanish of the region. Thumann spoke only

German and English, so was already at a loss. He had been promised an adequate interpreter, however, a woman named Ximena, but she would not be joining them until Thumann and Gentleman reached Chile, still many days away. Until then, he'd have to muddle along in the languages he knew.

Thumann spotted a small restaurant – if one could call it that – across from the embarkation area. It was little more than a flimsy shack with a gas burner in the back, but had a few rickety chairs and tables outside, no doubt to serve passengers in circumstances similar to what Thumann found himself in right now. He walked across the boardwalk and sat in one of the rickety chairs. He felt for a moment it might collapse under his weight.

The proprietor emerged, a thin man with sweaty hair and a dirty apron. He muttered something in Spanish, and Thumann simply pointed to the coffee pot near the back of the kitchen. The thin man nodded, and scurried away to, presumably, prepare a cup.

As he waited, Thumann scanned the port for Gentleman, while running the facts of the case once more through his head. For almost exactly one year, a series of crimes had burst across the map of Western Europe. In March of 1944, three banks were robbed in France. One month later, a high-ranking businessman in Spain killed himself, but only after having deposited his fortune in a secret safe deposit box which was promptly emptied upon his death. In June of that year, two banks and one warehouse were robbed in Germany, while a train in Portugal was also derailed and left without the contents of its high value cargo. And so, the crimes continued, without any apparent pattern: Switzerland, Italy, even Morocco were added to the map.

Thumann had been paying a bit of attention to various crimes, but – like so many other police detectives around the world – he had failed to notice them as part of a pattern. That is, until they also began occurring in the UK, on Thumann's patch. A wealthy actress in Scotland was murdered, her private safe found empty at the scene. Four banks were robbed in London, and one more in Wales, until finally Thumann was personally assigned to oversee the crime wave. Now, Thumann saw patterns.

In each case, no matter where the crimes occurred, the loot taken was nearly always gold. Jewelry was never stolen, nor were other metals, such as silver or platinum. When documents of value were taken, these were somehow

tied to gold deposits or other related interests. Paper currency and bonds were ignored.

In each case, the loot was heavy, suggesting a team of robbers were responsible, but without any clues or evidence left behind. The police were left baffled. Moving heavy loads of gold would require men, and specifically men with equipment. There were never any signs of such things.

And, finally, in each case, there were no witnesses. There should have been, however, since in each case there were people at the scene who should have seen every detail but, mysteriously, did not. Night guards, tellers, passersby, train conductors... there were always people on the scene at the time of the crime, but no one with even a passing knowledge of what happened under their very noses. The lesser press gave the criminal various melodramatic names, like “The Ghost” and “The Invisible Devil.”

It was Thumann who began to scour the non-English press for similar crimes, thinking the events might be occurring in countries outside of the ones he’d visited during vacation. Thumann ordered copies of newspapers from Northern Africa, the Middle East, and – eventually – South America. Struggling to understand the printed words, Thumann nevertheless realized the crime wave was a global phenomenon. Similar crimes had occurred in the United States as early as 1943 and were spreading across the Americas with lightning speed. Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, Peru, Colombia, Panama... there seemed to be no country that was safe from The Invisible Devil.

An associate of Thumann from Germany, Dr. Brühl, was the man responsible for organizing a global search for the criminals. Brühl was a retired police captain, with an impressive military background, who also had excellent contacts in the halls of multiple governments. Brühl asked representatives from across Europe to put together a task force to investigate the crimes, and it was Brühl that recommended Thumann to head it up.

And so, this was the reason Thumann now found himself sipping bitter Argentine coffee from a filthy teacup at a rickety wooden table across from a grimy metal ship while listening to local fish-sellers shout offers for the day’s catch, in Spanish, at the top of their lungs.

Thumann knew what he’d find in Chile, if he ever got there. An empty safe or warehouse or bank vault, with no sign of forced entry and no sign of

anyone having removed the contents. And no witnesses.

But only whispers of one name. The name he heard a few times muttered by informants in Edinburgh, by prostitutes in London, by gamblers in Lisbon. By an opium addict in Berlin, and by a 12-year old street thug in Madrid. Always one name.

“Dr. Cuba.”

If The Invisible Devil had a name, it was that.