

THE THREE HEADS OF DR. CUBA

Dr. Cuba II

Sample chapter

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Chapter 4: The Silver Girl

Lady Petra did not enter the room, she slid into it, as if someone had gently nudged a block of ice over a sheet of ice. Her movements were perfect in every way and enticing to every man. Within the opulent hall of Schwetzingen Palace, sitting neatly between Heidelberg and Mannheim, a small quartet played Schubert, and elegantly dressed men and women flirted over trays of imported champagne.

Heidelberg had been liberated early by the US forces, and thus enjoyed relatively less damage and shock than nearly every other major city in Germany. It recovered quickly, and the would-be aristocracy of smoldering Germany gathered here to relive an era before bombs and camps and Nazis. Lady Petra was one of about sixty wealthy Germans sliding, like ice, across the Palace's immaculate and elaborate marble floors as the musicians played portions of the *Winterreise*.

Upon closer inspection, many of the men and women at Schwetzingen were not as well-off as they might have wanted to appear, and their elegant suits and immaculate dresses were not so elegant or immaculate. These were older clothes, re-washed, re-dyed, and re-stitched to fix or hide damage from storage during the war. No one here was wearing anything particularly new or modern.

Except for Lady Petra. Her silver dress lay on her thin, perfect frame as if someone had poured liquid silver over her and then dusted her with diamonds. The dress dipped low on her chest, revealing enough to catch the eye but without causing scandal; the hem fell nearly to her ankles, but allowed a pair of white, crystal-dusted shoes to remain in view. Her blonde hair was pulled up tight and adorned with a few diamond pins. She was a walking shimmer of light and glint, with a small emerald pendant as a single point of color.

Her skin was pure white; cream, in fact. Her eyes blue and shining, the whites of her eyes unblemished with even a dot of red. A perfect upturned nose, perfect lips, perfect brows. Lady Petra would have been

beautiful if she had walked into any ball at any of the richest social events anywhere in pre-war Europe. Her appearance here, post-war, at Schwetzingen, was something entirely of another level. It was as if she had stepped down from the clouds to join Man just for a short while, to remind them that the gods existed, they were watching, and they could still provide comfort and grace to those of us below. She had not arrived at the party, she manifested.

Perhaps it was ironic that such a specimen of German perfection appeared only *after* her country was forced to abandon its pursuit of racial purity.

If Lady Petra shared the views of Germany's fallen leaders, it was entirely hidden. If she had contempt for the working class or loathed the Jews, this was obscured. She floated through the crowd as if such things were beyond her notice, entirely unimportant. Now, in this moment, only one thing mattered now to this divine, angelic apparition:

"Champagne, and lots of it," Lady Petra whispered to a wandering palace footman. "I quite intend on getting drunk."

A former banking official, no doubt now broke but still in possession of a fine suit, approached Petra. His hair was fine enough but the style of his mustache was ten years out of date, and he had the slight smell of bacon. "I am Lord Bassermann," he said, extending a hand in greeting. "Of the ... Bassermanns," he added, as if it mattered. The German aristocracy had been scattered to the ends of the earth after the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm in 1918. The people here were pretending, for sure, but so long as everyone was in on the pretense, it was all very acceptable.

Of course, Lady Petra was no "lady," either. She came from a different stock entirely.

Petra allowed her hand to be taken but did not do so enthusiastically. She was being polite. "Very nice to meet you," she said.

"And, your name, miss?" he asked.

“The Lady Petra. I won’t lie to you and say I’m of some family, since – as we all know – those families don’t exist anymore. No, I’m the first of my family line. I won’t say otherwise.” Petra managed to tell the complete truth while remaining absolutely charming, with an innocent smile that shone as brightly as her dress.

Her demeanor was somehow inexplicably charming and dismissive all at once. Perhaps it was her innocent face, with its small nose and slight smile, that allowed her to insult the person she was talking to without them ever feeling slighted.

But, then: there. *Him*.

Across the hall was a tall man, 40-ish, dark hair but with flecks of silver beginning to appear. Well apportioned, well dressed, and in what appeared to be a new suit. Nothing re-stitched for him.

“Excuse me,” Lady Petra said to the Bassermann fellow. She took both his hands, and looked him in the eye, to fully engage him. “I do promise to come back, you’ve ... enchanted me.” Her smile was the perfect balance of youthful innocence and wholesome flirtation. Her teeth were perfect. Lord Bassermann could do nothing but smile back and nod.

The Lady Petra then slid away, ever so gently, allowing Bassermann’s hand to linger for a moment on her pinky. But this other man, this tall rake, begged her attention. She had to know who he was. Her legs, hidden behind the shimmer of her slinking dress, carried her to the other side of the hall. She put herself within his eyeline, and without ever looking directly at him, drew his attention immediately.

He came over, of course, because there was nothing else he could possibly do.

“Hello, Miss,” he said, offering a hand. “I’ve not seen you here before.”

Petra pretended to be surprised by his approach. She glanced at his hovering hand, and then offered hers, but only after the perfectly timed delay. He took it, and kissed her hand near the gentle, white knuckles.

“I am Lady Petra. I won’t lie to you and say I’m of some family, since – as we all know – those families don’t exist anymore. No, I’m the first of my family line. I won’t say otherwise.” Fortunately, Basserman wasn’t close enough to hear her repeat herself.

“I am Hans Müller. I did not come prepared with a fictional title, but you can call me Baron, I suppose. Or Duke?” His smile was clean, his hair neat, his skin well maintained. She took him for about 35 years of age, dark haired but still very German.

Petra uttered a sound that existed somewhere between a giggle and a hiccup, as if she intended to laugh, caught herself, and cut it off abruptly, all in a single second. It was delightful, of course. Müller was already captivated. “Perhaps Baron, then?” she said. “It sounds powerful and with a bit of menace.”

“You like a bit of menace?” Müller asked.

“The only people who don’t like menace are those that prefer to be bored,” she said, showing a bit of pearl teeth with her girlish smile. “I do not prefer to be bored.”

Müller did his best to pretend to be aloof. It was not working on Petra, of course, but she was impressed by his skill at it. He was a handsome man, likely used to the flirtations of any woman near him, but she could still see through much of his pretense. “Well, I shall try to be menacing, then,” he said.

“Dance first?” she asked, boldly. No matter how demure, how charming, how delicate Petra appeared, she was telegraphing that she also knew how to take control when she wanted to.

Müller nodded, taking her hand and whisking her away to the floor, to float about during more Schubert. The crowd quickly threw their eyes on the couple, as they were beyond a doubt the most handsome – and youngest – attendees at the event. The older people smiled, the vision of Petra and Müller dancing reminding them of happier times, decades ago; the middle-aged men smiled, but only to hide their jealousy.

The beautiful couple remained a couple for the rest of the evening, until the musicians packed up and it came time to leave. They had shared enjoyable conversation, pleasant dance, lovely food, a bit too much champagne, and now Müller intended to finalize his evening with an appropriate conquest of Lady Petra's body.

That did not happen.

Inspector Thumann and Ximena arrived in Stuttgart after a quiet and pensive 12-hour bus ride from Berlin. Thumann's mood had not improved since arriving in Berlin, although Ximena sensed some of his anxiety may have lifted now that they were out of Thumann's home city. At least the scenery was nice, during their passage through the rural parts of Germany; in between the cities there was less evidence of outright wartime damage.

Stuttgart itself was as bad as Berlin; buildings were collapsed, hotels left half-standing, and rubble was everywhere. The Rathaus, or City Hall, still boasted a single clock tower, but the surrounding buildings were roofless and shattered. There were cleanup efforts underway, but it was still too soon to claim that Stuttgart was even more than a quarter of the way to being restored.

Thumann and his protégé were headed towards a cinema which, reports insisted, had been left untouched by Allied bombs. It was there that two men were murdered by the alleged "Golem," who had been terrorizing the country for weeks. The ICPO wire said the cinema had been torn to shreds by the beast.

The bus dropped them at a depot, and a short taxi ride took them to the cinema. It was very much intact and did not appear to have been scene of any great drama other than whatever might have been projected on its weathered screen. A sign on the front read, in German, "Stuttgart's Best Cinema is Open Once Again," suggesting that for at least some point during the war, it had not been open.

Thumann crunched his way over gravel and street debris into the cinema's lobby, where he was met by a young usher. Ximena followed behind; she spoke not a word of German, so had to rely on her instincts – and context – to tell her what was being said.

“Your manager?” Thumann asked.

“One moment, sir,” the young usher said, scurrying off to find an adult. The inside of the theater smelled like mold and stale cigarettes; the carpeting was red, or would have been if it wasn't covered in dirty footprints and water damage stains.

“Sir?” an older man asked, emerging from an office.

“I am Inspector Thumann of the International Criminal Police Commission.”

“The what?” the man asked

“Some refer to us as ‘Interpol,’” Thumann countered. “We are here to ask questions about a murder.”

The man nodded. Ximena only understood about fifty percent of the conversation.

“Oh, yes. Two men were killed, right here in the lobby.” He pointed to a spot near the center of the room. “You can see the bloodstain.”

In fact, you could not. At least not apart from the rest of the filth on the war-damaged carpet. Thumann nodded anyway. “Can you tell me what happened?” he asked, in German.

“A street thug, dressed in an overcoat and hood, shot them dead. It was all over in about one minute. It shocked us, of course. We cancelled the matinee. The police took the bodies, and that was that. I can't tell you much more.”

Thumann took out his pipe. “And this killer? What happened to him?”

“Gone as soon as the deed was done. Disappeared into the streets while the people here screamed and ran around like rats.”

Thumann lit his pipe now, scowling. “We heard reports of a large man, very large. A wrestler or circus performer, perhaps. Dressed in burlap.”

The cinema manager looked confused. “Sir?” he asked.

“How large was the killer?” Thumann asked, smoke spewing from his pipe.

“A normal man, thin. Difficult to say, but normal. Not a giant, that I am sure of. Dressed in burlap? No, a normal wool coat.”

Thumann nodded. “Thank you, sir. I believe we have been misled and will leave you to your cleanup.”

As Thumann turned the man said, “Cleanup? We already cleaned.”

Thumann did not argue. He and Ximena exited and stood underneath the tattered marquee sign.

“Inspector?” Ximena asked. “I didn’t understand all of that, but it sounded like the killer was not a giant?”

Thumann smoked more, liberating a large cloud of tobacco smoke into the Stuttgart air. “That’s right, dear miss. It appears this was a normal killing, likely a criminal act, robbery gone wrong, something of that sort.”

Ximena scowled now. “We cannot trust the ICPO wire reports, then. Too many people are reporting myths and nonsense. Perhaps there’s no ‘Golem’ at all, then?”

Thumann’s bushy mustache twitched slightly. “Likely not. Those reports never made much sense, but I did assume we were dealing with some large circus brute on a murder spree. Now I suspect these cases are not connected at all.” Thumann pointed the tip of his pipe towards a bakery across the street. “Let’s get coffee,” he said.

The two entered the bakery, and for Ximena, it was as if she had entered an entirely different world. Gone were the gray bricks and craters and piles of garbage, inside the bakery there had been no war outside, no bombs. There was only the sweet smell of cakes, fresh cakes, and bubbling coffee. The display case held what must have been over forty million

different types of desserts, or so it seemed to Ximena. Tarts, cookies, pastries, pies, cakes; every one of her senses was rewarded. She looked around and thought it strange that the bakery was nearly empty.

Thumann sat at a table near the window. Ximena followed. "It's so empty," she said.

"It's the hour," Thumann answered. "Germans don't eat many sweets at this time. In another two hours or so, the place will be a madhouse."

"So many different types of ... of... everything!" Ximena said, wide-eyed.

"I felt the same when I was in South America, in the bakeries there, dear miss. It only looks amazing because the items are different. But we will still not find your delicious alfajores here."

The waiter approached.

"Two coffees," Thumann said, "and whatever the young miss would like." Ximena pointed at a decadent slice of chocolate cake, and the waiter left to fill their order.

"Danka shane," Ximena attempted to say. She huffed. "My German is terrible," she grumbled.

"Again, now you know how I felt in Chile and Peru," Thumann said. Someone in the back put on a record of German traditional music; Ximena smiled. "They think you're a tourist," Thumann said. "That's for your benefit."

Ximena's momentary joy here, in this bakery, lifted Thumann's mood slightly. The waiter returned with two hot coffees, fresh and steaming, and a plate of what Ximena thought was the largest slice of cake she had ever seen. "I can't eat all that!" she said.

"Yes, you can. I have faith in you," Thumann said, smiling under his thick, tangled beard.

"Inspector," Ximena said, suddenly a bit serious. "I was reading the ICPO wire reports during our bus ride, and noticed something. I think

it's important.”

“Yes?” Thumann asked.

“Back in Paris, we assumed all the reports of attacks and murders were related to this Golem.”

“Right,” Thumann said, recalling their discussion at the Fourth Floor office.

“Something doesn't make sense. Many of the attacks where witnesses claimed to have seen the man in burlap were against Nazis, and included property damage.

“Right. Smashed houses, all that,” Thumann conceded.

“But there are all these others that don't fit that pattern. Murders of random people, rich, poor, male, female. Not only Nazis, but even some Jews. And with these, there are no reports of a burlap man, no property damage.”

“Continue,” Thumann said, interested. Thumann was frustrated. *While I was sulking on the bus, Ximena was doing her job.*

“These other killings are more ... I don't know what the word is. Traditional? Can you have traditional killings?” Ximena asked.

“I know what you mean. More textbook,” Thumann said.

“Yes! Like out of the textbook,” Ximena said, nodding. “Simple killings. The Golem attacks suggest a motive: revenge against the Nazis. These other killings might be sex crimes or just a serial killer, but don't seem to be related to the war or politics. I think we may have *two* crime waves, not one.”

Thumann thought for a moment. “The Golem attacks met the Three-Country Rule, for certain. What about these other murders?”

“Only Germany,” Ximena admitted. “At least that I can see from these wire reports.”

“Then we continue to probe the Golem attacks, per the limits of our ICPO remit,” Thumann said. “But let's pay attention to these others, just in case there is some overlap.” *I want to get out of this damned country as*

soon as I can, Thumann thought.

“Sir?” a voice said.

Thumann turned. It was the young usher. “Yes, boy?”

“I heard you speaking of the Golem,” the boy said sheepishly.

“Hmmp,” Thumann said, turning his attention back to his coffee. “What of it?”

“The Golem struck the other cinema. Not this one. The other one. On Schellingstraße.”

Thumann momentarily froze. Then, he sipped his coffee; it was good. “Boy, make sure you know what you’re talking about. We are serious people and not in the mood for being sent all around town chasing ghosts.”

Ximena loved when Thumann referred to her as an equal. She bit into her cake and nearly forgot her own name. *Madre de Dios*, she thought.

“Not a joke, sir. The roof was smashed, the walls caved in. It’s only a ten minute cab ride there, sir. You can see it. I swear by my mother,” the boy insisted.

Thumann reached into his pocket and handed the boy a coin of some sort. “If you’re wrong,” Thumann said, gruffly, “we will come back and break a toe.”

The usher ran off, the coin gripped tightly in his hand. Ximena had not understood what Thumann had said, so did not react to Thumann’s fake threat to the boy.

“A tip?” she asked, chocolate smudged on her lip.

“A tip.” Thumann acknowledged. “We can relax here a bit more, and then we are off to another cinema. Apparently, murders in cinemas are the new fashion.”

The Homunculus arrived by fanboat. He had never piloted one before, but the principle was simple enough; he could have killed the foul-

smelling captain and simply taken the boat, but – he admitted – he had no idea how to navigate in the maze of sawgrass. Eventually, the boat’s noisy fan cut off, and the dock came into view.

The Homunculus stepped off the boat, onto the dock, and stood straight like a statue, facing the black, rundown shack of Madame Blavatsky.

“I’ll be back in an hour to getcha,” the pilot said.

The Homunculus turned, staring the sun-baked, stinking man in the eye. He raised one hand – the one with the red finger – and pointed downward. It was as if he were telling a dog to “stay,” and the pilot did just that. He stayed.

The Homunculus turned towards the shack, and began walking. Occult symbols decorated the dock and the front of the shack, a combination of legitimate curse-warders and phony tourist trappings. Off to one side was a garden growing cannabis and other questionable weeds. Crickets whined and cicadas screamed. A dog slept on the porch, as if dead.

The door to the shack opened. “Do not approach, Thing,” a woman’s voice said.

Madame Blavatsky stood at the door, dressed in a shamble of cloth and beads that vaguely looked like a dress made during a hurricane. Layers upon layers of material hid her real shape, but it was large, very large. She was also nearly as tall as the ivory-skinned demon standing in front of her. Her mass of hair was a nest of dreadlocks, beads and matted braids. She had a black eyepatch over one eye, embossed with the symbol of a red dragon. Her skin was cragged from the Florida sun and too many years of smoking cigars, pipes, and all manner of illegal substances. Despite her habits her hands were steady, which – for the moment – was all that mattered, since she held a sawed-off shotgun, aimed right at her demon’s heart.

The Homunculus remained motionless, except for his lips as he spoke. “You are Madame Blavatsky. I am Dr. Cuba.” It was one of the

first times the Homunculus had overtly used his Brother-Son's prior name.

"You are no more a doctor than I am pinup queen," Blavatsky said, without an iota of fear in her being. "To be a doctor requires first that you be a human, and you are not that."

The Homunculus did not move, but his curiosity was triggered just a bit. "You see me, then? I mean, as I am."

"I see you, Thing. And I don't *want* to see you, so turn around and get back on your boat. Take your walking carcass to some other witch's hut." Blavatsky raised the gun slightly higher.

"I will leave, but only after I have an answer from you, Madame Blavatsky. I only need an answer, which means I will only ask a question. Then I will go."

Blavatsky remained silent. She was not about to ask this creature what its question was, but she also was curious as to why it shambled up her dock.

The Homunculus continued. "You are, they say, the great-granddaughter of the Russian theosophist Helena Blavatsky. Some say this is a ruse, to sell trinkets to curious tourists. But I know better."

"How so, Thing?"

"You helped Inspector Heiner Thumann defeat my brother."

"Did I?" Blavatsky asked. "You mean I helped rid the world of a soulless, damned beast, and I hadn't even realized it? I'm even better than I thought."

"I'd laugh, Madame, but we both know I have no sense of humor and I would only be doing it as a pretense. A courtesy. Having no soul makes it hard to understand, much less appreciate, things like humor or music."

"What's your question, Thing? The faster you ask it, the quicker you get to leave here with your head still attached." Blavatsky was not bluffing.

"You advised Thumann on the Sunken Gods. My brother was

consumed with the desire to raise the God King Skyx, his queen-consort Macapax, and others with names such as Aan, Fog'h, and Intipax. These gods pre-dated humans. My question is this: how did you come to know these things?"

Blavatsky snorted. "I read a *book*, you dimwitted, skulking bugger. That is how one learns things."

The Homunculus now fell silent, pausing on the thought. Blavatsky's raised shotgun never wavered, never lowered.

"Give me this book," he said.

Blavatsky raised one eyebrow, the one without the eyepatch. "You said one question and you'd leave. I'm not a library. Now turn around."

What happened next would be called a blur, but a blur presumes someone was watching and could see it. This happened within the tiny second that Blavatsky's eye blinked. For that moment, as the lid shut and prepared to reopen, the Homunculus had moved. With her unpatched eye open again, she now saw he was gone.

No. *Behind her!*

A hand at her throat grasped her windpipe. Another hand forcefully knocked her arm down, sending the shotgun to the ground. It fired, a loud bang that shook the sawgrass and would be heard for miles. The dog woke.

"Give me the book, I will leave, and you will live," the Homunculus said, gripping Blavatsky's windpipe. "If you don't, I will just kill you and search your shack for it. I will leave with the book no matter what. You decide whether I to it over your corpse."