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September 2nd, 1923

Ruhr Valley, Germany

A combination of dark brown mud and clotted dry dirt made up the road which carved its way through the eastern hills. The morning rain sat pooled in nearby fields of sugar beets, increasing the ambient buzzing of flies and local wildlife. In the distance, a tall white steeple rose against a darkening sky, its presence a sign of the village center.

The road forced both men to choose - the slick mud of the road or the clotted dirt of the fields to either side. The farmers in the beet fields could see it was a choice neither one liked. The man in front was tall, and took long striding steps along the side of the path, while the shorter man behind him slogged through the mud, content to keep moving.

“Is there a reason he lives this far out from Essen?” the shorter man called to his taller companion.

“Anonymity is the key to many investigations, Julius. You of all people should understand that,” Pierce replied.

Understanding was one thing, but practicality was another. The Ruhr Valley was not like more metropolitan areas of Germany. It lacked many of the basic services most of the modern world had come to enjoy, like electricity or somewhat maintained roads. The people who remained here were trying hard to recover from the war, pounding out whatever existence they could, while serving up reparations for their country’s ill-fated aggressions.

Slowing to look over the countryside, Julius could see it was an uphill battle. The farmers worked the beets into thick wooden wheelbarrows with shovels, discarding the dirt as best they could, but their hard work was painted all over their faces and clothes. Admirable as their dedication was, Julius couldn’t help but feel they were fighting an unwinnable war, which forced his face into a grin given their country’s financial situation.

Germany hadn’t just lost the Great War: losing would have been acceptable. After the Treaty of Versailles, Germany was

left kicked and beaten by several of the world's most powerful nations, especially France. These countries demanded reparations for the toll the war Germany started, even though some on the Allied side argued the cost too high, and the impact too great for Germany to bear. Years after the repayment began, the crushing effects were being felt at every level of society Julius saw in Germany.

Julius continued forward, pressing his feet into the muddy road, focusing on the village ahead. The pale white church sat at the crossroads marking the center point of Hamborn, the sleepy town outside Essen where Pierce had guided them. Once they'd reached Essen, the car they'd driven was seized by French troops, for their own uses. Julius voiced his concerns earlier when their border crossing raised eyebrows with armed troops, but Pierce ignored him for the most part, choosing to cloak the difficulties as commonplace while on an investigation.

Those difficulties multiplied after losing the car, forcing both men to walk the final twenty five miles through a day and a half of rain. The walk was peppered with banter back and forth about the reason for coming to Germany, which Pierce refused to reveal. Julius pressed him several times in the first day, but to no avail. Deep down he hoped Pierce wasn't pulling him along on another Division goose chase. Julius spent the past year chasing every rumored mystical object the group came across, most turning out to be hoaxes or failed trips. He'd traveled to the highlands of Scotland, Salsvatn Lake in Norway, and the Ionian Sea near Patra.

Each time he was regaled by a member of the Division with some impossible tale. At first, Julius believed them, because he could see the fire in their eyes. As days turned into weeks, then months, the investigations went cold as hope withered. Pierce would return to find Julius alone or researching his own interests instead of working on what Pierce had assigned to him. Julius wasn't willing to be dictated work by someone who never appeared to do any work himself.

In the time since he'd left India, Julius was given all manner of projects and papers to review, except for the most obvious one of all. Each time he'd mentioned the Idol, in passing or in direct communication, he'd been ignored to the point

where he no longer brought it up out of frustration. Each step in the muddy road took him further from it, and closer toward another Division-inspired failure.

"There's no need to remind me of my past failures. While I admit the remote nature of this place could be conducive to secrecy, it puts us well beyond telegraph lines or a decent library," Julius called back.

The man from Brown received the typical response - or lack thereof. Pierce often ignored entire conversations they had if the discussion did not favor his opinion in the end. From Julius' perspective he was an amateur debater, using fiery speeches and rhetoric to convince Julius of the purpose the Division had. When pressed, Pierce withdrew to a simpler and more defensible argument and did his best to guide the discussion toward a different topic. The two men spent hours in the days after their first meeting in London discussing what brought them to this strange life they led.

Pierce had two different doctorates, one in medicine and the other in law, both from Cambridge. He'd spent a full decade in advanced studies and landed coveted research positions, choosing to further the core of the practices and expand his pocketbook, rather than go into public practice. Pierce explained in the London hotel room they shared that he always believed his research would prove invaluable in some future legal matter or surgical procedure. He built up a great case for the years he spent afterward working toward humanities studies, and even impressed Julius with a deep understanding of political matters. Pierce, now in his fifties, was tapped by the Division because of his experience in legal matters and a well-polished reputation. Julius could see the sense in the latter given the sensitive nature of much of what they did. There had already been two occasions where Pierce had leaned on the degrees and names of men who would vouch for him to get past certain scrutiny.

He was a hell-bent man, this Dr. Pierce. Unwilling to bend on his goals or their priority when it came to things large and small. Julius could still remember the day he was forced to skip breakfast and lunch because Pierce had to have his eyes on a series of documents from centuries before Christ. Still, Julius thought he meant well enough. Pierce just needed to learn the art of compromise.

“Failures remind us we still have something left to learn. They keep us honest and fuel the desire to improve in our next endeavor. Learn from your failure, Julius, before it consumes you.”

The words grated against the inner parts of his skull, his fists clenching as the sodden march continued. Pierce was never willing to discuss the Idol in an open forum, but was willing to land verbal jabs on Julius' wounded pride when the opportunity arose. In this way, the older man took on a paternal tone, standing above the fray and failures of a common man.

They continued on in silence for several minutes, as the wind picked up across the sugar beet fields, biting into Julius' face. The high grey clouds stretched on for miles, with smaller clouds gathering beyond Hamborn as they approached a tall wooden post with city markers nailed to it. Pierce gave Julius two weeks to prepare for the trip, which he spent reviewing his German and catching up on what the London papers had on the post war situation.

The Weimar Republic was flailing in a deep sea of inflation, as the government decided to print its way out of money problems. On top of those problems, the French occupation of the Ruhr inspired many Germans to refuse to work for French bosses, further deepening the Franco-German divide. The cocktail the French and British were stirring up gave Julius an upset stomach just thinking about it. Worse yet, the French continued to ramp up the pressure for Germany to pay their reparations on time - like blood from a stone.

If he had his way, Julius would visit France, and pick up Lyra's trail again. In the first few months at Division headquarters in London, Julius was allowed a little more freedom to move around the city and even traveled to France a few times, while Pierce dealt with a bad case of pneumonia. The libraries in Paris and Lyon were well-stocked and Julius tried hard to uncover anything on the Poisoned Heart, but like any other secret society, libraries lacked any hard evidence.

Julius returned to a vicious scolding between coughing fits as Pierce finished mending, directing the newest member to stay put in London until he recovered. Julius knew he would have to find a way to research the group from a distance, so

he began to make friends in the libraries and universities of London, impressing them with his historical knowledge and willingness to debate. Julius spent a full week at Oxford in deep debate with the history chair on the fall of the Roman Empire, fighting the chair to a stalemate in a long final session. It was enough to procure an invitation to future debates and classes, which Julius used to lobby for access to the vast Oxford libraries. Yet even these did not reveal a single text concerning Lyra's shadow group of assassins.

Julius was left to question where the group might have come from and how they learned about the artifact in the first place. When he found the willpower to cable Professor MacDonald to apologize about his lack of communication, he confessed all his failures in India, sending the repayment which was requested months beforehand. The cables that came back were filled with short, curt responses until the professor stopped replying to Julius at all.

The relationship Julius and the professor cultivated over years of study and mutual respect were washed away by the fateful train ride out of India. Months had passed before this contact, and in those months he lost credibility and damaged his professional reputation - such as it was. These events were a prelude to some uncomfortable moments in London where he was forced to explain his travels through India after Professor MacDonald sent letters to Britain's major universities. Julius was able to answer the questions without revealing too much about what had really happened, and claimed a mental lapse after the loss of his travel guide and boat capsized in the monsoon-swollen rivers. Far from the moment, the scholars of Britain nodded in understanding and gave Julius the benefit of the doubt.

In this he gained Pierce's approval, but only because it gave him the run of the Oxford libraries, which meant running errands for the older man. In truth, no one knew about Akram's fate and Julius meant to keep it that way. The guide had betrayed him in his moment of need, and even though Julius felt bad for killing him, he did not feel guilty enough to turn himself into the authorities.

The reason for their visit to Essen had nothing to do with the Idol though. Pierce had received an urgent request for assistance from Thomas Avett, who was working within Germany

to secure several important artifacts during the war. Pierce conveyed that Avett was a sharp man who was well-traveled and had a vast list of contacts they could draw from. With Division numbers affected by the aftermath of the war, each one left would move mountains to help another.

Unless that member was Julius.

The road climbed as the two travelers reached the cross-roads where the church sat. Making their way across the quiet intersection, Pierce strode over to the oak doors and rang the bell, while Julius stopped to pick the mud out from his boots with a knife. The light over the front door cast shadows against the weathered exterior of the building, but Julius was grateful for the light it provided. The quiet march through the German countryside had done little to warm his disposition toward the broken nation.

Moments later, the broad oak doors opened, revealing a slight man with grey hair and pock marked features. His heavy fur coat, oversized for such a small man, was buttoned high to his neck to keep out the chill wind the evening carried.

“Yes? How can I help you gentlemen?” the man’s voice croaked out through dry lips. Light spilled out from inner reaches of the church, painting Pierce and the surrounding area in a dim glow. Julius picked at the last of the caked mud on his boots and turned to join Pierce at the doorway.

“I’m sorry to bother you, Father. We’ve been walking for the past day after our car was seized in Essen. I was hoping we could find shelter here until we move along in the morning.”

“If I only I could, my son. Our halls are filled with the evicted, sick, and troubled. I have no rooms for rent or space to offer,” the robed man began to push the door shut.

Julius stepped forward and placed his hand against the door, stopping it from closing. Pierce shifted out of the younger man’s way, letting him take the lead. The priest looked up at Julius, fearful of the coming reprisal, but Julius caught his eye with an open hand.

“We’ve not come to make any demands, Father. Perhaps you could spare some coffee or bread for two weary men who have a long road ahead. We’re willing to make whatever do-

nation the church requires.”

The older man’s eyes opened a bit wider as Julius spoke about the donation they would make. It was a cruel game to play on the needs of the church, but having not eaten in the past day, he was willing to say whatever need be to acquire something to eat. He knew the father would be eager to gain whatever extra finances he could lay his hands on as long as it was in a reputable manner. Julius’ offer of a donation reduced the elder’s range of excuses, allowing him to seize the opportunity to feed his flock.

“It is late, gentlemen, but I cannot refuse two men in need in such an hour as this. You have traveled through our countryside and doubtless must have seen the depths our peoples’ toil. Come inside the foyer and I will bring what I can spare. The people will be grateful for whatever you can donate.”

As the priest stepped back, Julius pressed the door open to peer into the church foyer. The wooden floor expelled a wave of high pitched creaks as Pierce joined him. What light was available revealed sconces inset into thick white walls. The room had two exits to either side, leading deeper into the congregation pews. Julius stole a quick glance around the corner and saw the priest wind his way down the main aisle, dodging the arms and legs of several parishioners sleeping inside.

It was no secret German churches were overtaxed by the surrounding communities; the London editorial papers carried letters describing the pain Germans were going through because of the reparations. People hated the war when it was on, but now with it over they wanted the suffering to end. The swelled pews of the quiet German church showed the reality - the suffering that continued.

“It’s all a breeding ground Julius,” Pierce’s voice wafted over his head. “Each one of these families will grow up hating the French and what they did. It won’t matter to them how Germany got here. All that will matter is who the oppressor is.”

Julius turned back to face the older man, who stood just outside the overhead light, casting long shadows over his Roman nose and angular face. The Division members he’d met in London over the first few months gave Pierce a wide berth,

some out of respect and others out of fear. They all spoke well of him and his professionalism, but they also eluded to something unnatural about him. Whispers followed Pierce as he passed from room to room, and if one lingered long enough they could catch a stray rumor about his past. Once, when researching in South America, he burned a village of tribesmen when they tried to keep him prisoner. Julius had never asked his mentor about it, but it fueled his own concerns about what kind of person Pierce really was.

“Didn’t Germany bring this on themselves? If anyone should be blamed, it’s the former leaders at the Reichstag that pressed their country into war.”

“Do you think that matters to the people sleeping in the next room? Half of this country is up in a panic just trying to find food to eat. It’s tougher here than in the south, where French troops aren’t taking everything with reparations ringing in people’s ears,” Pierce whispered.

“No, Mr. Pierce, I think these people are like most of us. When leaders make rash decisions, it’s everyday people who take the brunt of those decisions. Leaders might be deposed, killed, or jailed in the future, but the common man still loses no matter what.”

“Spoken like a true Humanist,” Pierce replied.

Julius rolled his eye at Pierce’s response and turned back to the look at the filled church pews. The world had changed, through war or some other invisible force, Julius wasn’t sure. America was awakening, its natural internal revolutionary forces were starting to reshape social policies. Germany wasn’t so lucky, and with winter coming, the people sleeping here would be risking starvation.

“Even you have to admit these people deserved better than to end up kicked from their homes and left to live off the church.”

Soft steps approached from behind as Pierce drew even with Julius to stare out over the midnight congregation. His grey fedora shielded his eyes, but Julius could feel the mechanical stare sweep the crowd back and forth. Pierce had never shown any semblance of real emotion, except contempt, and even then he was always withdrawn. He could act if he chose

to, like the first time they’d met, but none of the emotion was more than surface deep.

“We are here to complete a task, Julius: nothing more. Do not allow yourself to become distracted by the social issues facing your fellow man - they’ll only drag you down with them.”

Across the sanctuary, the father strode out from a darkened doorway. In his hands a small brown satchel was clenched close as he picked his way through dark room. The thick fur coat replaced by a more traditional black tunic and coat gave him a much more formal appearance. Julius shifted his weight and let Pierce take the forefront.

“I apologize for the wait, gentlemen. This is all we could spare, but I hope it will keep you until you make your way to someplace safer. Now I must retire to my bed before the morning comes, so I pray you go with God.” The priest extended the satchel to Julius and his hand in Pierce’s direction, which he quickly filled with a stack of silver coins.

Turning to the doorway, the two travelers exited back into the night and toward their target.