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ELEKTROGRAD: RUSTED BLOOD

by Warren Ellis



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By
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CONTENTS

MINOR GLOSSARY

INTRODUCTION

ELEKTROGRAD

AFTERWORD

MINOR GLOSSARY:

TELEFON: a landline telephone: big black 1950's-style machine, pushbutton, with a small black and white screen bolted on to the side. Landlines are six numbers (66-6666).

MOBIL: Chunky candy bar-style mobile phones with a cylindrical bar down the side. The bar can be pulled out horizontally, to drag out, in scroll-fashion, a soft plastic computer touchscreen. Mobils are eight numbers (8888-8888).

TELECHARGE: downloads/uploads to/from mobils.

MOLOTOK: Elektrograd police-issue sidearm, based on the old Dardick pistol. Notable for its odd shape and its unusual long triangular shells.

ELEKTROGRAD is the city of the future.

Since the early 20th Century, it has been used as a test bed for futuristic modes of living. Each of its seven districts is an experimental site for new forms of architecture.

It is now the early 21st Century. Elektrograd is showing its age.

MEKANOPLATZ is the northernmost district of Elektrograd.

The snow in Mekanoplatz comes sudden and heavy, and stays until spring. It drapes across the district's great grey apartment blocks, settling on every sill. Fifty floors high, they've stood here for half a century by the sides of their motorways, ringed by Zen gardens of access roads and pavements traced in the gravel of the waste grounds they were sited in.

On the edge where the residential area met "old" Mekanoplatz, where the brick buildings still stood, a brief cloud of snow powder drifted from the top of an apartment block. A few old lamps along its height flickered into amber life.

The apartment block shook. Slivers of ice cracked off its windows, revealing, if you were a bird, the empty, unheated rooms. The whole edifice was empty.

Low down on the side of the building, a thick panel the size of a house slowly ground open, striking sparks off its frame. Within a moment, three others, all by each corner of the structure, also bumped on to their tracks and retracted upwards, revealing rusted mechanical workings and rotating metal claddings. Pistons breathed and heaved.

Vast mechanical arms birthed from the hatches, stretching and flexing in the cold air, bringing twelve-wheeled paws down to the ground, each wheel twenty feet high and as thick as a truck.

The wheels touched the road and compressed just a little, taking up pressure. The hydraulic suspensions moaned. From a distance, the building looks like nothing so much as someone about to commence a press-up.

There was a small shudder, enough to kick out flurries of snow and to send birds flying out of eaves. The hydraulics cycled through their waking sequence, dust blasting out between gaps in the frames and sleeves.

The block lifted itself off the ground.

It held and shuddered for a moment, just clear of the girder-sized pins that jutted out of the shallow foundation, revealing the umbilical orchard of cable bunches, pipes and tubes that connected the building to the utility grid. The building was plugged into Mekanoplatz.

There was a crest of pyrotechnic sparks, and a great cough of steam, and the umbilicals detached from the underside of the building, falling back into the foundation.

Free of its final pinions, the building flexed its arms and stood all the way up. And, shaking the last of the snow from its shoulders, it began to move, rolling out to the wide road before it.

Behind it, another apartment building shook the snow from its shoulders. The walking district was awakening.

A child watched the building judder and reach its way across the snowy wasteland, sitting on the rusted curve of the edge of his home. His home had once been a construction robot, one of the vintage kind, a giant metal humanoid figure. Long obsolete. It had been left when it once fell, seventy feet long and slumped on its side. The chest had been cut out sometime later, emptied into a metal cave, and the head, where the child and his family now huddled, maybe only ten years ago. If you were a detective, you could tell by the accretion of scratched graffiti and the stains of outdoor toilet use.

The child shifted around on the roof of his robot shanty, to go back to his original view of interest. He was often the only one paying attention to his surroundings, in his sleepy, affectless way. The rest of his family, older and more tired, tended to the campfire, stared into its hopeless handful of flames. They didn't even try not to breathe the fumes from the dried shit and ransacked rubber and plastic they were burning.

The child looked past the steaming foundation of the travelling building, past the frontage of the one stranded building out here, that boarded-up hall that not even the locals went near, to the dead man laying by the old street corner.

A terrible thing moved slowly down the road towards the body. It was a boxy pea-green monstrosity with pronounced and moss-streaked headlamps like the eyes of a mentally unbalanced sea monster. The back end had a fin moulded into the pressed-fibreglass bodywork on either side that had denoted to some mindless designer, in the distant past, a soaring and aspirational sense of The Future. The thing trailed the sort of hot cindery smoke that usually spoke of imminent explosion.

The terrible thing ceased its grinding motion next to the body, and went through a small, twisting, shuddering motion that was either a sketch of someone parking a car or a final death spasm.

Detective Inspector Ervin Strauss unpacked himself from his car, looked at the body and ran his calloused fingers through his stiff grey hair. In his heavy black coat, with his double-breasted suit and meticulously-worked tie, features thickened and saddened by fifty years above ground, he looked momentarily like a statue of some indefatigable old general, complete with hair the colours of stone and bird shit. Strauss sniffed the industrial air, smiled and said, "Ah. A customer."

The back doors of the car opened with some degree of internal struggle. Detective Sergeant Alia Noton, long and pale like some Nordic ghost, unfolded herself out of the car and carefully rearranged herself as if her bones had been threatening to poke through her skin. "Really, Mr. Strauss, you could have gotten a perfectly good car from the Mekanoplatz station pool."

Detective Constable Isaac Goldmark, a little shorter and wearing a suit chosen to show off that he had a gym membership rather than for reasons of taste, because he had none, had to practically toss himself out after her to get his shoulders through the narrow door.

“Yeah,” he said. “One from this century. I don’t know how we beat the meat wagon here.”

Walking around the front of the car, Strauss rested a fond hand on the hood. “This is a good car,” he stated. “A reliable car. In this day and age? A veritable yacht. Proper fuel-cell engine. None of your plug-in malarkey. Steady as she goes.”

He patted the hood. It flexed, with all the stoic rigidity of a wet cereal packet.

Goldmark was looking at the back end. “Sir, I think your car’s on fire.”

“Only a little. Your attention to the customer, Detective Constable Goldmark, not the quirks of my yacht.”

Goldmark, surveying the customer from a few feet away, jammed his hands into his pockets. “Well... he’s dead,” Goldmark observed after a moment, openly unimpressed by the customer’s quality. “Can we not wait for the coroner’s report, and just work the evidence?”

“Isaac,” Strauss intoned in the I Am Very Disappointed In You voice that Goldmark had gotten to know uncomfortably well. “The customer *is* the evidence.”

Strauss got down on one knee by the body, slowly and carefully. He was feeling well within the perimeter of that age when getting down there was as nothing compared to the battle of standing back up again. “When I took you on, it was on the basis that you wanted to make cases. Is this dead man somehow not up to your murdering standards?”

Defeated, with sagging shoulders, Goldmark pulled latex gloves out of a pocket. “No, Detective Inspector. It’s not. What I meant was there’s no shortage of dead people on the street in Mekanoplatz. I’m amazed it was even called in.”

Strauss was studying the customer. Dark hair, thinning badly. A snide moustache and an awful tie. A mangled right hand. Three bullets in the paunch. He knew when to keep his gaze off Goldmark. The younger man tended to lock up a little when Strauss didn’t keep his schoolmasterish tendencies in complete check. The temptation was always to loom over the youngsters and shame them into thinking.

Strauss instead observed, mildly: “And do you see no difference between this one and the usual customer Mekanoplatz offers such as we?”

Goldmark dropped fluidly into an easy crouch as he snapped on the gloves. “He’s wearing a suit? With the clearances and all, it’s pretty much only the homeless people left in this part of the district.”

“Good,” said Strauss. “But what story does the suit tell us?”

Noton was standing behind Strauss, arms folded. Strauss knew she was there. He’d some while ago noted her habit of looking for the whole picture from a distance.

“It’s a bit big for him,” she said. “Old. They haven’t cut new suits like that in years. And his shoes are on the verge of coming apart. He’s taken a rag to them, mind you. He wants to look like a working man, maybe like a professional, but he hasn’t got a pot to piss in.”

Strauss smiled across the customer at Goldmark. “Detective Sergeant Noton is good at these details because she socializes with people other than policemen. I imagine she has further insights that she is withholding for fear of upsetting me.”

Alia looked like she'd walked into a bear trap. Strauss twisted a little, not easily, in order to smile up at her.

"It's all right, Alia," Strauss said quietly. "I'm well aware of your reasons for wanting this post, and I approved you anyway. Talk to me now."

Alia looked around, checking her own thinking. Her eyes rested on the homeless in their salvaged robot squat, staring out at them blankly.

"The Walking City experiment," she said, "was done in Mekanoplatz because it's an industrial district. Working class, aside from the administrative centre. The Walking City reconfigures itself around each new construction project. There never were professionals out here in the active areas."

She pulled out her own latex gloves from a pocket. "The stats say the homeless people out here are killing for money, space and salvage. The social workers say these people have fallen all the way through the cracks. No support structure, no ladder back to work."

Gloves on, she hunkered down and carefully tugged the customer's wallet out of the back pocket she'd spotted it peeking from. The wallet's catch was broken, and it flipped open in her hand.

"A little bit of cash. Which is notable. But the fact that he still has it is even more notable. Not even those people over there, watching us, wanted a piece of this dead body."

She looked at Strauss, the hint of a challenge in her eyes. "I wonder why, sir."

Strauss nodded, pleased, and stood up. His head cocked to one side, taking a different view of the customer. A frown crossed his face. He looked behind him.

“Where are we?”

Strauss took a few steps down the road. “Something about the way he’s laying.”

He wandered on, not sure what he was looking for. Around the corner of the road, he found it. An old community hall, boarded up, rotting in its socket in the ground.

“I’ll be damned,” Strauss whispered. And then, louder: “Follow.”

The pair trotted after Strauss as he made best speed towards the hall. They caught up with him lazily, reaching him as he was already peering through gaps in the boards at the doorway of the hall. The boards and their fixings were old, but strong and placed with purpose. The door looked thick and well-made.

“Goldmark,” Strauss said. “Great strapping young lad that you are. Break down this door.”

Goldmark looked in and sucked his teeth. “I can see from here that the deadlock’s had the key broken off in it. Step well back, sir.”

Goldmark himself took six steps back, and drew his Molotok. Strauss thought he could see something impossible in the gun’s chambering gap.

Goldmark fired the Molotok into the lock, through the gap in the boards. There was a pause of some three seconds.

There was a fist-sized explosion in the lock. The door cracked down the middle, and the boards around it bowed out and splintered.

The spent shell ejected out of the side of the Molotok. Strauss saw the red star icon printed on the side of the casing as it span through the air. He snatched it out of space.

“Who,” Strauss ground out, “authorized you to chamber red star loads, boy?”

Goldmark just looked at him.

Strauss threw the casing at Goldmark. “You are a police officer and you will use only approved police ammunition until you are told otherwise by myself or someone even closer to God than I am. Am I very clear, Detective Constable?”

Goldmark holstered the Molotok, unable to keep the curl out of his lip as he replied.

“Sir, with all due respect, regulation ammo is weak, malformed and friable. It’s like trying to shoot people with biscuits. When I’m up against it, I want—”

“—a shell containing five tungsten darts with high-explosive cores?”

“—a bullet that I know will reliably put someone down in one.”

Strauss stepped into Goldmark. “I do not care. You will not load that shit in your weapon again, boy. We are detectives. If you’d prefer to be on the riot squad, I can have you transferred there quite quickly. And that would be your actual best case scenario.”

Strauss reached behind himself, under his jacket, and unclipped a short flashlight from the back of his belt. “Torches, please,” he said. “You are about to enter a piece of local history that a lot of people worked very hard to forget. I expect the floor and fittings to be treacherous, so look before you step.”

He twisted the torch on, and followed its beam into the hall.

Noton grabbed Goldmark’s arm, and hissed in his ear. “For god’s sake, Ike. This is Ervin Strauss here. You can’t piss him about.”

Goldmark yanked his arm free. “Half the street cops in Elektrograd use red star loads.”

“And do you want to be a street cop again? You don’t ever want to get ahead? Raise your game. Strauss decides if you live or die, Ike. Come on.”

Goldmark walked on, activating his torch.

Their lights trained over a ruined meeting place, filled with broken pews like a church.

“This,” said Strauss, picking his steps carefully, “was the meeting-hall of the old Philosophic Society. An early science academy, if you like. It kind of died the death after what some wit called the October Surprise.”

Strauss found the stage with his torch, broad and high at the back of the room.

“October, 1939. Dr. Wilhelm Rosetta revealed his Electrical Man to the massed Society, right here in this hall. A synthetic man. An intricate self-powered robot. I mean, you can imagine how that looked back then. A leap of genius. It should have been the real dawn of modern robotics.”

“Never heard of it,” muttered Goldmark, wandering around sullenly.

“They still don’t teach it in school?” Strauss said, raising his wiry eyebrows. “There were photos, you know. He was stood up on this stage, inside a Faraday Cage. His eyes were television cameras, which was a feat in itself. Quantum leap. There were supposedly three of them, according to one of Rosetta’s old assistants, but the public only saw the one.”

“I think I remember something about this,” Alia said. “There was a documentary. He got out.”

“Yes,” Strauss said. “There was awe and wonder in the room, right up until the Electrical Man decided he didn’t like it in the cage any more and stepped out of his own volition.”

“He went mad, they said.”

“Absolute bullshit,” Strauss said. “What happened was that he was in that cage for a reason. There was something wrong with the power distribution. As soon as he was out of that cage, his body started discharging electricity. Indoor lightning. There was panic. Some of the drapes caught fire. Some idiot called the police. There was gunfire.”

Strauss was up on the stage now, taking the scene in. Noton saw that his gaze was elsewhere. She didn’t know where he’d learned all this, but his eyes were in deep history. “The Electrical Man acted to preserve his own existence. He had no idea how to cope, but he was clearly trying to preserve his own life. And why wouldn’t he? Heavy guns were brought in. He probably died right here where I’m standing.”

“Sure,” said Goldmark, “but what about the people in the room?”

“There were, in total, three people with burns, one concussion from being trampled, and one broken ankle. And Rosetta himself, who died of a heart attack in the chaos.” Strauss looked around the stage, as if trying to locate the body. “His lab was never found, because he was a secretive old coot, and the Society itself was dissolved shortly afterwards because the city through they were colluding to hide Rosetta’s work. I bet nobody’s been in here in decades.”

“Can’t imagine why,” Goldmark said. “I don’t even know why I’m here.” He stomped up towards the side steps to the stage and the

floorboards sighed and rustled and collapsed before he or anyone else knew what was happening.

Strauss descended to the floor very carefully and stood by the side of the little abyss. “Are you dead, son? Shout if you are.”

“I hate you,” came Goldmark’s voice from the dark.

“Good, good. Still got your torch?”

After a moment, Strauss and Noton could see his light beam waving around. “Yeah. I think I’ve broken my ankle.”

“How portentous.”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Goldmark said.

“It was just an observation about broken ankles,” Strauss said.

“There’s giant fucking test tubes down here,” Goldmark said.

The basement level contained two glass-and-metal capsules, each large enough to accommodate a standing human. One was empty. The other contained an android device in an abstractly female construction, skinless and rusting, stains from leaked transmission fluid streaked down one side, slumped inside like a puppet with its strings cut. One of the seven big tripod lanterns lowered into the room was placed next to it, the stark lighting making it look even more alien and melancholic.

City workers, in orange coveralls and headlamps, were careening all over the basement, looking up and tutting, looking around and sighing theatrically, straining to give every impression of working without actually committing work. Getting the ropes and ladders down and the ceiling supports up appeared to have exhausted them.

They were having trouble figuring out how material was lifted out of here to the stage.

“Report,” Strauss said to Noton. He was standing by a steel bench that, among other detritus and tools, bore an old, locked briefcase that he was assiduously defending from the orange worker ants. It had been found under one of the capsules, discovered when their bases were checked to see if they were bolted to the ground or connected to any cables.

“Secret door, sir,” she said, flicking through her notebook. “This basement has a secret door that connects to a tunnel, and that tunnel’s mouth is three blocks away, back towards the old part of the district where the non-mobile buildings are. Still don’t know how they got stuff up to the ground level, but that’s how they got it in. This room is completely sealed and very well disguised. It’s no wonder the police didn’t find anything back in 1939.”

“Fascinating,” Strauss said, warmly. “One up top, two cages down here. Three Electrical People. Do you think he disposed of the third before the public demonstration, or will it be found at the other end of the tunnel?”

“We’ll know soon enough, I suppose,” Noton said. “Though it also occurs to me that there may only have been two. One cage for show, transported up to the stage with the thing in it.”

“Possibly, possibly,” said Strauss, taking a multitool from an inside jacket pocket. He turned to the briefcase, found the laser armature, and sliced the lock off the case with great precision.

Goldmark howled at him from the corner, where a medic had decided that his ankle was actually just sprained and that he should probably stop moaning. “You had a multitool but you told me to break down the door?”

“Nobody buys a dog and barks themselves,” murmured Strauss, opening the case. It was positively rammed with notebooks and loose papers. He grinned. “Wonderful.”

Goldmark hobbled over to see what was so fucking wonderful that he needed to not-break his ankle in its service.

Noton put her notebook away. “But unrelated. What’s next?”

Strauss raised an eyebrow. “Unrelated?”

Noton’s left eye twitched a little, in reaction to the Disappointed Voice.

“You didn’t notice that our customer was dragging himself here as he died? You didn’t see that he was trying to send us, the speakers for the dead, one final message? Oh, it’s related. This is our case, right here. The customer’s wallet, please.”

Passed to him, Strauss opened it, under two resentful gazes.

“Barbel Thaler. A private investigator’s license,” said Strauss. “A therapist’s card. A card from the local probation office. Are you remembering all this? Notepaper... a gun license. Interesting. Your mobil, please, Detective Constable Goldmark. It’s still early in the day. Let’s try his therapist’s home number.”

Goldmark handed over his mobil. Strauss hated using mobils, especially his own, for reasons ancient and arcane, and Goldmark had quickly given up asking questions or arguing about it. “I could just visit the therapist, Mr. Strauss.”

Strauss favoured him with a small smile as he thumbed the home number on the therapist’s card into the mobil. “I know. You’re eager to make cases and prove you can wear out shoe leather with the best of them. Embrace efficiency, young man. You’ll live longer.”

Dr Steffen Carnstein, slender, not yet forty and elegantly economical of movement, sat at his desk at home and answered his telefon. He remained entirely calm as he arranged a late-morning meeting with Detective Inspector Strauss of the Elektrograd Police Service, noting the time with a steel pen on a pad of adhesive-backed paper leaves. His grip on the pen was precisely judged to write smoothly without all the blood causing it to slip from his fingers. The angle of his forearm was such that the blood covering it would not touch the desktop.

Completing the call, he stood, and began the process of adding the adhesive note to his memory log. There was little free space left on the desk, and he preferred to keep the desk for older, core memories. So he went to the wall, and looked for a useful space towards the right, where the newer but transient reminders went. The wall rustled as he walked along it. Carnstein wondered if it was time to count them all. But he knew he'd have to write the final count down on a note and stick it to the wall, adding to the forest of them.

The Probation Service office in old Mekanoplatz was little more than a series of tired green plastic sheds behind the police precinct building. The probation officer had the appearance of having been physically diluted in brackish water. Long thin hands shook through paperwork. Even her veins, starkly present through translucent skin, looked like algae floated in them. Her voice was an abraded rasp, the sound of someone who had spent all day, every day, explaining exactly the same things to people for twenty years.

She laid Barbel Thaler out for Strauss and Noton. The life of a man picking out a few dollars between the cracks of a dying district, at least during the periods he was allowed on the streets. A private investigator, claiming to his probation officer as recently as three days ago that he had a paying client. The officer was surprised to

learn that Thaler had a gun license. He'd last been imprisoned for assault, and could not legally obtain a gun any longer. The license was deleted.

"He was, I think, good at his job," she said, towards the end. She was somewhat wistful, which, in her job, Strauss believed, constituted a significant emotional response to Thaler's death. "A good investigator. Clever and insightful. He was interesting to talk to. He had a nimble mind. The thing was that he was basically just crooked. All that, and he'd rather screw or beat the easy money out of someone."

Outside, they found Goldmark sneaking a cigarette.

"The morgue," he said. "I smoke maybe four a week, when I'm out on the beers, but I always need one after a visit to that place."

"What have you got?" said Strauss, relishing the smoke that drifted around him. A moment of sense memories and other times.

"Post-mortem condition could have been confused with a car crash, apparently," Goldmark said. "Shattered ribs and sternum, smashed hand—and I mean smashed, it was like a bag of bone chips – two broken arms. Three bullets in the gut, all from the same weapon, .22 calibre."

"What gun was Thaler logged as carrying, Detective Constable?"

"A Mikros .22, sir."

"Excellent. Breakfast, I think."

Goldmark suppressed a groan.

In many other parts of Elektrograd, it would have been called an automated café. The Mekanoplatz accent had no time for any pretty sound in the language, and steamrollered nuances flat. So Strauss and his team were eating breakfast in what was locally called an “autocaff.”

Alia Noton stabbed at the pushbuttons on the table’s service console with miserable loathing. The buttons were mechanical, and went “ker-*chunk*” whenever she shoved one. “But what I want isn’t on the menu,” she hissed.

Strauss was more amused than he thought he was safe to reveal. “Construction workers’ culture, Sergeant. They don’t want choice or customization. They want a simple set of selections for things that’ll get them through ‘til lunch. No messing around, no decision fatigue. This isn’t a part of town where you can make a point of ordering something that isn’t on the menu.”

“I would just like something that perhaps grew on or near a tree. I can’t do this much carb or fat so early in the day.”

“Only streaky bacon,” Goldmark commented. “Was back bacon not invented when this place was built?”

The conveyor belt mounted on their side of the café rattled and ground its worn old teeth, bringing three metal mugs of coffee and one plastic tumbler of cloudy water towards them.

“Benighted infants,” Strauss laughed, gesturing at Goldmark to get the coffees. “I’d be amazed if anything in here grew on or near an animal. It’s all that printed meat, diddled with by needles.”

Noton, reaching over for the water, chuckled. Strauss had never heard her make that noise before.

“Diddled with?” she said.

“Diddled with. You know what I mean. They stick the electric needles in it and diddle it. The electricity makes the meat flex like it’s exercising, so it’s more like muscle and less like limp shit. They diddle it.”

“I’ve just never heard it called that before,” she said, looking at her water and the motes swimming in it.

“So,” said Strauss, “young Goldmark. What do we know about our murderer?”

Isaac chewed his coffee, because it was so thick that it made you feel like you needed to. “Not a lot, really. I kind of want to start bracing his old friends.”

“Really? Out by an abandoned old building in a dead part of Mekanoplatz? Did the murderer show up with intent?”

“Well... no. Thaler was killed with his own gun, wasn’t he? I suppose that might mean it was opportunistic.”

“Go on,” Strauss said, watching him.

“Right. They met out here. Something went bad. Thaler drew his gun, and the assailant ripped it out of his hand. The broken fingers. That bastard must be strong. He used Thaler’s own gun to put three in Thaler’s belly and left him there. And they met out here because there’d be no-one around, right? A meeting, a transaction that turned into a shakedown because Thaler was a piece of shit and couldn’t help himself. He must’ve had something really good on the assailant.”

“You see, Isaac? Not every case has to be handled with a hammer and sickle. Every new case has something to teach us. Good job.”

Goldmark grinned. Noton hid her own smile behind her hand, enjoying the way Strauss managed the younger man. Alternating

beatings and praise was neither subtle nor advanced, but Strauss deployed it adeptly, and Noton absorbed the process.

Strauss' mobil rang. He answered it very grudgingly, and the conversation that ensued was short and sour. On ending the call, Strauss tugged on the thin bar that ran down the side of mobil, pulling out the soft plastic computing touchscreen scroll-fashion. Documents telecharged to the mobil loaded up, a report and a cluster of photographs. Strauss viewed them and closed his mobil with a grunt.

"It seems," he told them, "that the other end of the tunnel was emptied and abandoned."

Strauss sent Noton and Goldmark back to the crime scene and the hall, to follow up on discovery and keep things moving along. Strauss himself drove into the small colony of streets with money in Mekanoplatz. A cluster of business buildings here, a huddle of nice residential roads there.

Dr. Steffen Carnstein's office was in an elegant dark structure that the etched corner stone proudly declared to have once been the first mayoral building in Mekanoplatz. Upstairs, Strauss was ushered by a worried secretary into Carnstein's workplace, pausing at the door to announce Strauss as if he were a visiting dignitary.

There was money in therapy, it seemed. Rich leather furniture, imported dark woods, deep soft carpeting, all assembled with something close to taste. Carnstein, tall and blessed with thick dark hair, rose from his heavy desk to greet Strauss. Carnstein had one of those faces that could have been anywhere between thirty-five and fifty, and so Strauss immediately disliked the man.

Adhesive notes neatly arranged on the desk by the telefon. An open daybook in a leather cover. A schedule hanging from a hook on the wall next to the antique clock.

“How can I help you, Detective Inspector?”

“I’d like to speak with you about a patient of yours, a Mr. Barbel Thaler.”

They shook hands. Carnstein held the grip just a beat too long as he said, “Obviously, I can’t discuss my patients with the police service. So what did you want to talk about exactly?”

“His death, and, therefore, the elimination of your client privilege.”

“Ah,” Carnstein said, releasing Strauss’ hand as if it, too, were a dead thing. He waved Strauss to the sofa and stepped to the armchair next to it.

“I won’t be staying that long,” said Strauss, staying where he was.

“Ah,” said Carnstein again, just about to sit. He straightened up, and turned back to face Strauss, his amiable smile starting to fray at the edges.

“Mr. Thaler worked as a private investigator, I believe.”

“Yes,” said Carnstein. “His therapy was paid for by the state. He had some fairly grim experiences in prison that needed to be talked through. He didn’t make a lot of money as an investigator, even as gifted as he was. How did he die?”

“It wasn’t suicide.”

“I hoped it wouldn’t be. There had been suicides in his family. His outlook on life had improved since he found work in that profession. An accident, then?”

Strauss marvelled at how bad the man was at this. “He was murdered. What can you tell me about his work?”

“Well.”

“Come now, Doctor. You knew he’d found work. He talked about his life in prison. You know about his family tree, apparently. Tell me what he told you about the case he was working on. It would be far simpler than my waiting here for the court order to requisition all your documentation on Thaler.”

A little time passed, as Carnstein scanned Strauss intensely.

“Very well. Barbel had been hired—and I don’t know by whom, so don’t bother asking—to investigate and discredit the work of a long-dead scientist named Wilhelm Rosetta. Barbel told me that his client had told him that this scientist had somewhere secreted notes that would in fact expose the man as a charlatan. Somebody, somewhere, clearly has a vested interest in that, for reasons I cannot possibly imagine.”

“Where were these notes supposed to be secreted?”

Carnstein showed Strauss his open palms. “I have no idea. From what Barbel said to me, these notes were generally believed to be entirely mythical, and many people had wasted much time over the years in hunting for them. Barbel felt it was good money for a pointless job that might regardless prove an amusing way to spend time.”

Strauss thanked the doctor for his time, and, with a nod, moved to leave.

“Did it find it?” Carnstein asked. “Was that how he died? He found something?”

“No. No sign of them. No sign he even knew where they were. Except that he was found in front of the old Philosophical Society meeting hall. You know, where the thing with the Electrical Man happened back in 1939.”

“Oh,” said Carnstein. “What a pity.”

Tossing Barbel’s apartment in one of the walking city blocks that hadn’t yet been cleared and redirected was quite enough to convince Strauss to call it a day.

He drove back, several streets deep into the old town, parked up and looked for somewhere to eat. Within ten minutes, he found a place that, sixty years ago, may have been a shipping container for the torso of one of the robots that built the walking blocks. Today, swollen by decades of accretion and modification, it was a twenty-seat restaurant. He was the only one to take a seat. Strauss assumed it was because it was early in the evening, but the waiter told him that Mekanoplatz was being abandoned during the reconfiguration, not least because nobody seemed to be sure how long it was going to take and what the end result was going to look like. The chef herself came out before he had ordered, confirming that it was a quiet night. Together, the chef and the waiter tried to talk him into a glass of wine, but he begged off, and instead they provided him spring water from the northern countryside. He did, however, agree to be experimented upon, and, for far less than he’d pay for a basic restaurant meal in Central, they brought him nine dishes, each one original and delightful. Smoked lamb slices with a creamy fresh cheese. Gull meat on a bed of lichen and leek ash. Wonders.

Strauss was sad to leave. He decided he wasn't ready to go home. He walked for a while, and, after an hour or more, found himself among the roads and rings of the "new" district, pockmarked with the craters of uprooted blocks.

Struck by a thought, he wandered some more, back to the edge between regions of the district, where he found a children's playground, once nested between walking blocks and bookended by construction shacks. It was all flaked green paint and amber oxide. It may have been hidden from view for decades, or it may have been thrown up by residents out of whatever they'd been able to salvage. He sat on a swing, watching the moon come up, looking out at the new construction happening on the far side of the district, the destination of the rising steel buildings of Mekanoplatz.

"Hello, Alia," he said, after a while.

Alia Noton stepped out of the shadows. "I thought you might be pursuing the case without me."

"You've been trailing me for at least thirty minutes."

"Sorry," she said, walking over to him.

Strauss kept his eyes on the green lights in the distance. They moved like fingers, or like the sheets of the Aurora Borealis. He let the silence press her.

Alia sat on the next swing along. "I need my name attached to this case. I'm being honest. You know why I'm on the Murder Squad."

"Yes."

"Sir, I have nothing but respect for you, and the work that the Squad does. But I need to be able to see the whole picture. The entire spectrum. Macro-policing."

“That’s a good word,” Strauss aid.

“Yes, sir. A success here will aid me immeasurably in achieving that position, and I believe that that’s where I can do the real good.”

“I know,” Strauss said. “I’m not offended. Tell me: what are those green things out there?”

She lifted her head, looked out over the plain of abandoned foundations. “Flingers.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Flingers are like giant muscles. Electrically activated gel. They’re taller than the walking blocks. One day, transport shells will be attached to them, and the gel will ripple and stretch and whip the shells five miles up. They’ll release the shells, and they’ll be travelling at seven miles a second, so that they fly right into orbit.”

“Flung up there,” Strauss said.

“Right. The spaces here are all being cleared for new robotics factories. Mekanoplatz will be building and delivering labour devices into space. You know what I found out earlier? Some of the construction theory behind the new devices owes a lot to the reverse-engineering of the remains of Rosetta’s Electrical Man.”

Strauss meditated on the growing tentacles in the distance for a while before saying, “They’ll be demolishing the old Philosophic Society hall for that too?”

“I would think so.”

Strauss nodded, just once.

In the dark, another housing block shook off its anchors and began to walk.

It was very late by the time Strauss returned to his apartment. He found himself needing less and less sleep these days. It bothered him when it started, until he realized he could get more work done now. Time was, the old rituals would eat up the five minutes he could stay on his feet at the end of the day.

He walked through the apartment, cleared his telefon messages without listening to them, started some Russian ambient music on the sound system. Paused by the photograph standing alone on the mantel, in its black frame: a younger him, in an older suit, with the girl who was one month and one day older than him, in her dark Air Force lieutenant's uniform.

He took the bottle of local vodka from the freezer and the three shot glasses from the kitchen and brought them to the old metal table that he'd been lugging around with him for his entire life, as his father had before him. The shot glasses were old, too, the gold rims worn until they were almost transparent, the glass just a little cloudy now. He carefully poured off a shot into each glass, and replaced the bottle.

Strauss stretched his back for a few moments. He'd never admit it to a soul, but his car wasn't as comfortable as it used to be, and he spent too many hours sitting in it. After the stretching, it didn't hurt as much to bend down to retrieve the briefcase he'd brought home from Mekanoplatz. He laid it in front of his three shot glasses, and sat down on the single dining chair.

Strauss opened the case, lifting its lid carefully, and withdrew the notebooks therein. He put them to the side, closed the case and placed it on the floor. He moved the notebooks in front of him. He lifted and drank off the first of the three drinks he allowed himself each night, and opened the top notebook.

Alia Noton's apartment was much different, and she wasn't alone.

"Mekanoplatz," she was telling her boyfriend Maxim, "is just a black hole. It's horrible. No street lighting, no street patrols, no cameras. Beyond some shanty housing—and, seriously, people have turned old robots into shelters—there's barely even anyone on the streets at night. There's nothing left to burn or trash."

Maxim didn't have much of a sense of humour, which was a big part of why Alia liked him. When he did joke, it was usually a barbed and loveless weapon with which to cause distance or harm. "If I fall into a coma," he said, "will you stop?"

She shook the sheaf of post-mortem and interim report notes at him across the coffee table. "If you fell into a coma here I'd be able to get emergency services support. How does the city let an entire district fall into that state? They're even moving the housing units out."

"I don't care," said Maxim, who was the deputy chief executive of a large charitable foundation in central Elektrograd. He took a measured sip of forest-fruits tea before continuing. "The districts need to renew themselves, Alia. And they don't exist in a vacuum. Cities are interdependent creatures. Mekanoplatz, in its current state, is obsolete. Of course the walking units are being moved. Of course it's a terrible place right now. Experiments age. This is the way of things."

Alia sighed, and sat on one of the six chrome-and-leather stools they kept around the breakfast bar. "I get it. I do. I know why it's all happening. It just... just doesn't sit right with me. How are we supposed to live in the future when the future just abandons us to the night?"

Maxim didn't look up, but simply commented, "You've been spending too much time with that old man. You need to keep your

eye on the whole picture.”

“That’s my line,” she said, sourly. “I taught you that line.”

“Then don’t forget it. You don’t want to be a detective, remember?”

For no useful reason, that stung Alia. She took a moment to poke around the little bite it left on her conscience. Finding nothing practical about it, she sat and drank tea and ignored it until it went away.

Strauss had his own notebook open, and was jotting down dates, items and observations as he slowly paged through the old writings. As interesting as he found the history, the processing of the documents was largely automatic to him. Right up until that one thing.

He stopped dead. Made sure he was reading what he thought he was reading. Flipped back a few pages. Referred to his own notes. Went back to some of the loose papers he’d scanned earlier. Made connections. He returned to the page with the dead stop, and read it several more times, setting his certainty in concrete.

Strauss’ fingers were shaking as he reached for his last shot. He drank half, and then opened his mobil, bringing up the software keyboard on the screen, and began to type.

Long minutes ticked by before he took up the glass again and drained the shot. Newspaper and magazine archives, deeds and policies, reports and studies. He turned the last glass upside down, and then brought his fingers down on a magazine page from a good many years ago. There it was. A photo of Steffen Carnstein at home.

A local-interest article. Strauss squeezed and twisted the image on the screen, panning and zooming.

There. A framed photo on the mantelpiece by Carnstein's elbow. The frame was black. The photo was very, very old. Black and white. Three people in the photo.

Strauss snapped the mobil shut, stood up and grabbed his jacket.

Isaac Goldmark unhooked the police-awareness tapes around the Society hall's broken front door, switched on his torch, and went inside.

He had found the secret whatever-it-was by falling through the floor like a fucking idiot. He didn't find the briefcase full of all those dusty goodies that had made Strauss grin like a kid. He didn't even know what the cages were. He broke the case by almost breaking his ankle and then staring at stuff like a dog that was being shown a card trick.

He felt like he didn't have the education to do this case. Or even this job. He felt stupid, all the time. Which made him angry, all the time. And he knew that affected his ability to be patient and measured and forensic and all the rest of it, but, fuck it, being determined should make a difference.

Isaac just didn't want to be sad and angry all the time any more.

So he'd come back to... well, it wasn't the scene of the crime, but it was adjacent. He'd gotten it into his head while choking down a quick dinner at a street cart on the other side of Mekanoplatz that perhaps, with Noton's dismissive attitude, and Strauss focusing on the briefcase, and all the city workers all over the place getting in the way, that maybe someone had missed something. Maybe, if he

took a few hours, and tried picking over the place like Strauss, he might find something good.

He mounted the stage—on the other side, this time, and stepping a lot more lightly—and faced the room. Made a slow turn. Found the stage exit at the back, with his eyes. Nobody had found the secret hatch that must lead into the basement, but Isaac hadn't seen Strauss or Noton spend too much time upstairs and backstage. He walked over to the exit. A little hollow beyond it, and a closed door. It was stuck. Swollen with damp and jammed into the frame. Goldmark followed the join with his fingers and found the sticking point. He drew his Molotok and gave the door a firm tap with the gun butt. The door popped open. Steffen Carnstein looked quite surprised when the door swung.

Goldmark didn't even think about it. He brought the gun down into two-handed grip and fired.

Wood splintered, somewhere. A regulation Molotok shell casing bounced off a wall. Carnstein punched Isaac in the face, and Isaac felt his cheekbone collapse.

“Where is it?”

Isaac tumbled back on to the stage floor. Carnstein stamped on Isaac's good ankle, crushing it. Isaac screamed.

“Where is it?” Carnstein said again?

Isaac still had his gun in hand, and snapped four shots off wildly in Carnstein's general direction. None of them appeared to find Isaac's target. Carnstein brought his foot down on Isaac's gun hand, destroying gun and hand.

“Whatever it is you have. Whatever the old man left here. Where is it?”

“There’s nothing here,” Isaac gasped. “Fuck you. There’s nothing here.”

“I don’t believe you,” Carnstein said, gazing at his agonized subject.

“I don’t care! There’s nothing here. And you—”—Isaac laughed and coughed at the same time, tears leaking from his narrowed eyes —”—are under arrest.”

Carnstein, with a soft smile and a grace and attention that bordered on the tender, very precisely beat Isaac Goldmark to death.

Strauss’ car coughed to a stop outside a terraced three-storey apartment building that, on any other day, he would have regarded as beautiful and something of a miracle in the wastelands of Mekanoplatz. It was the dead of night. All the lights were out. He stepped on to the street, and walked casually to the large and devotedly maintained original front door, probably some one hundred years old. In the manner of these classic townhouses, the steps down to the outside entrance to the basement level were next to the front door, behind a short gate. Strauss looked at it sceptically. An experimental shove revealed that he wouldn’t have to painfully climb over it after all.

He walked down the twelve steps to the basement level’s own front door. He cast his eyes around for a second, and then, cupping the multitool with his free hand, he neatly lasered out the lock barrel and went inside.

Strauss thumbed his torch on and moved quickly. Everything was covered in wide white sheets. They’d been spread out long enough to have browned in places. He peeked under one or two of them,

finding old equipment that he could impute laboratory or engineering purpose to.

He knew what the tall thing under the sheet that stood alone in a side room was for. The glass and steel capsule was, after all, a recent acquaintance.

Strauss pulled the door shut and placed the lock barrel back in its borehole. At the top of the steps, he surveyed the area again, and then walked directly to his car, coaxed it into life, and drove away.

A few minutes later, a newer and lovelier car pulled up in the space Strauss vacated. Dr. Carnstein got out of his car, secured it, and walked directly to his front door, examining the gleaming surface for wear for a moment before unlocking it and returning home.

Isaac Goldmark's body was found by city workers early the next morning. He was finally identified as Isaac Goldmark an hour after his discovery.

Strauss' mobil was on the passenger seat of his car. He listened to it burp with telecharge notifications. At the first opportunity, he pulled it open. Central had sent him the house deeds he'd requested. He knew who now owned the house he'd visited last night.

At the old Society hall, he found forensic teams, angry uniformed police surrounding the place and looking for someone to punish, and a ghostly, painfully contained Alia Noton.

"I have something from the officer who sent Thaler down," she said in a low, controlled voice. "She said she nailed Thaler on the

assault, but that she'd been working for a year on something else."

Strauss didn't waste time or tempt fate by asking how she was. He knew from experience that that can be the worst thing to ask. He nodded at her to continue.

"Seems that when Thaler took a private case, the very first thing he did was to try and get dirt on whoever was hiring him. Usually photos. And then he'd give the client just a taste of the case he was hired for, and hold out for more money. If the money didn't come, the dirt came out. My guess is that he met his client out here in the middle of nowhere, shook him down, and the client lost his temper and killed Thaler."

Strauss blew out his cheeks and took a moment to ensure the little handful of puzzle pieces he'd be handled fit together seamlessly. They were a miserably tight fit.

"Look after Isaac," he said to her. "Make sure everyone is doing their jobs. I need to take care of one thing, and then I'll be in touch. Remember: you were his partner. What you say here is the law. Make sure they do things right."

He left before she could get a response past the tightness in her throat.

Strauss was already aware that Dr. Carnstein would still be at home this early in the day. He parked opposite the terraced three-storey house with a basement and knocked at the beautifully preserved door.

Carnstein, in a dark dressing gown and white slippers, allowed Strauss inside the door, unhappily, trying to politely prevent the

policeman from going down the hallway passage into the living room.

“I’m sorry, I’m working. The place isn’t really in the condition to receive visitors.”

Strauss angled past him. “I’m working too. And I don’t really judge people on the condition of their homes.”

Strauss strode quickly down the long hallway into the living room before Carnstein could lay a hand on him. He took five steps into the room and took it in. Desk and chair. Single armchair. And two walls covered in sticky notepad leaves.

“I could tell from your office that you had recall issues, but this is a little extreme.”

“I thought you didn’t judge people on their homes, Inspector.”

Strauss cast a hand over the forest of notepad leaves. “A little beyond forgetful, wouldn’t you say?”

Carnstein stood in the doorway to the living room. “I have a bad memory. At the office, I have staff, but here...”

“We do what we must, I suppose, to get a job done,” Strauss said.

“They say all psychiatrists could use time on the couch themselves. This is my little issue. I hate to forget things.”

Strauss looked around, turning around to take it all in. “Mmm. So I see. And yet I don’t see the picture.”

“What picture?”

“Some psychiatry magazine did a feature on you, when you first hung out your shingle in Mekanoplatz. Took a photo of you right here in this room. And on this mantelpiece was a photograph in a

black frame. The resolution, in the magazine shot, wasn't great. But mobiles are wonderful things, Dr. Carnstein. A little piece of the working future in our pockets. I was able to put together a fair emulation of that photo on your mantel. You see, I've been trying to work out why you hired a private investigator and then killed him."

Carnstein laughed. It was a good and human laugh. "What possible evidence could you have to tie me to my own patient's murder?"

Strauss, wandering around the room, made himself smile. It was probably a poor approximation of one, he knew, because he was terrified. Carnstein was still standing in the doorway, blocking Strauss from returning down the passage to the front door.

"None at all," Strauss admitted, spreading his hands, eyes scanning the floor. "I have no case. No evidence. Nothing. But I do wonder what Barbel Thaler showed you that would drive you to beat him half to death, rip the Mikros out of his fingers and put three in his gut. Except that I know his racket was to photograph his own clients for leverage in the pursuit of currency. What could he possibly have on you? I mean, you're quite right, photographs of this place wouldn't do the trick. It's eccentric at best."

"Exactly," Carnstein said. "What are you looking for? What is so interesting about my floor, Inspector?"

Strauss ignored him for a few seconds, and then looked up and showed Carnstein a casual smile. "But then I found Wilhelm Rosetta's notebooks," he said.

Carnstein froze.

"That's right. Fascinating reading. I'm no scientist, but the man was clearly no charlatan. Who were the people in the photo with you, Dr Carnstein?"

“I don’t remember.”

“Oh, I’m sure you do. I’m sure you remember that. It was a very old photo.” Strauss began scanning the floor again. “There was the first Electrical Man, who died outside the Society meeting hall. The second Electrical Man, who was actually female in shape, whom we found under the Society meeting hall, rusted out. And you, Dr. Carnstein. The third Electrical Man, left behind at Rosetta’s home lab in the basement of this very building. He was a secretive old coot, wasn’t he? Hidden workshops everywhere. Afraid even that a secret tunnel and a staging area three blocks from the Society hall might be found.”

Strauss found what he was looking for, curled up behind a waste paper bin by the desk in the corner of the room. A thick cable with an unusual plug attachment on the end.

“There it is,” he said, bending to pick it up. “Did your patient photograph you with this plugged in?”

Carnstein did not speak. His eyes were moving from side to side very rapidly.

“It’s all in Rosetta’s notes,” Strauss said, examining the odd plug. “The home lab, the third robot. The one who was just a little too alien, a little too self-absorbed, just a little too cold. Beloved, perhaps even less prone to electrical discharge, but not fit for a first demonstration of engineering prowess. So I got to thinking: Why would a robot who had passed as human and operated perfectly since 1939 need his creator’s notes all of a sudden? Unless something was wrong. Unless that electrical man was suffering some kind of failure, some malfunction that he did not know how to repair.”

Strauss dropped the plug. Carnstein began moving, slowly, around the perimeter of the room. He looked distracted, eyes juddering in their sockets. Strauss was calculating the possibility of

reaching the exit before Carnstein reached him. He didn't like the sums.

"For an important doctor with an office and a staff, you had an awful lot of memory aids on display. And look at this apartment. Nothing but reminders. I wonder if you even remembered you were within a block of the old Philosophic Society's meeting hall when you killed the private investigator you hired."

Strauss started moving, too, deliberately, stepping around the armchair, keeping his eyes locked on the circling Carnstein, stridently aware of being locked in a room with a prowling predator.

"My brain," Carnstein smiled, "was not designed to retain and organize so much information. More than seventy years' worth of memories. Not without maintenance. Not without updates and upgrades."

Carnstein brought a hand to his temple, tapped it with black amusement. "I'm full," he said. "I lose files and key chains. I forget things."

Strauss watched the hand carefully as it lowered again, and slowly balled into a fist.

"The little bastard had photos of me recharging," Carnstein said. "He told me he knew how to get to the notebooks, but that he'd need more money. More money than I had or could get. There's never anyone on the Mekanoplatz streets at that time of night. And it's not like I leave fingerprints or DNA. I knew he was lying. So I killed him. What you care about is beyond me, Inspector."

"Speaking for the dead and laying them to rest, Doctor, is the human thing to do."

"Don't talk to me about what's human. I have spent decades listening to what is in your heads, just to try and grasp a minimum

understanding of why you are even alive. Do you know how much noise a human body makes, to these ears? All those wet pulsing tubes, all that liquid movement inside you. I'm amazed you can hear yourselves think. I'd need another hundred years to understand you. To understand the animal that built me."

"Why did you kill Constable Goldmark?"

"The boy at the meeting hall? He saw me."

"Human life means nothing to you, then."

"See human life from my perspective, Inspector. From my perspective, more of it is squeezed out of bags of meat every single day. No human life is special. You're produced like sausages."

Carnstein paused and emulated a sigh. "Well, Inspector. Now what shall we do?"

"I have to arrest you."

The air began to spark around Carnstein.

Strauss turned and started for the front door, down the long hallway.

The armchair hit Strauss in the back, slamming him into one wall.

Strauss bounced off, and felt the wind of Carnstein's arm as a punch missed him by millimetres and put a hole in the wall.

Strauss stumbled away, reached under his jacket as he tried to push himself forward.

The next punch didn't miss. Strauss took it on the left arm, and felt the sickening thunderclap of pain that immediately told him the bone was broken.

He landed halfway down the hallway, his right shoulder denting the wall's rendering. It hurt enough to make him yell, but he knew his right arm still worked.

And he had enough space between him and Carnstein to draw and aim his Molotok.

Carnstein saw it and giggled.

Strauss put three shots in Carnstein's chest. Each one impacted with a sound like a spike being driven through sheet metal.

Carnstein took a step forward, and another, and said, "Seriously?"

The ejected shells hissed as they hit the carpet, one by one. Carnstein may never have seen that each shell had a red star on the side.

Steffen Carnstein's torso exploded.

Goldmark's funeral was a thing of slow pain. Goldmark's family seemed impossibly young to Strauss. Possibly, he wondered, it was just that everyone seemed impossibly young to him now. There was too much standing up involved for him. His back was black with bruising, and the strapping around his broken arm was stinging. He stood there through the talking and singing and crying, willing himself to stay upright, reflecting on how it took so much longer to bury people than it did for them to die in the first place.

He was shuffling stiffly by the time it was all over, and the walk to his car seemed like a death march across the Arctic.

Noton was waiting by his car. There were layers to the sadness on her face that he couldn't help but perceive as very carefully

arranged.

“Sad day,” he said, giving her a chance.

“Very,” she said.

Strauss sucked his teeth. “Your transfer’s gone through, then.”

She flinched at the Disappointed Voice. “Yes. I’m moving to Statistics tomorrow. I have to go into Central now. I just wanted to talk to you before I go.”

He looked back at the cloud of black suits and dresses behind them. “Funerals. They always make you question your career choices.”

“You know I was questioning them before that,” she said.

“No, you weren’t. You were gathering information. Deciding who you want to be.”

She shifted, uncomfortable, not meeting his eyes. “It’s... it’s not even that. The Murder Squad just seems so small. It’s not that murder investigation isn’t important. But all I could see were all the things surrounding this case that were wrong. I can’t do this. I have to be able to see the entire picture. Everything. Does that make sense?”

“Of course it does,” he lied, finding in himself one last kindness for this woman he didn’t understand even a little. “From some perspectives, every murder is a small thing. I gave you a good reference, Alia. In return, I hope you remember me when you’re running an entire district and I’m still down in the dark with the dead people and the small things.”

Alia smiled. They made gentle, truth-less goodbyes.

In the far distance, another walking city block of Mekanoplatz uprooted itself and lumbered away. Humans and devices were swarming in, now, levelling the old and stranded constructions that remained. Steel feet trampled down the old Philosophical Society meeting hall. Glowing green flinger lines stretched up through the dust into the sky like tentacles.

END

AFTERWORD

I laid down the outline of this story years and years ago. I remember mentioning it while addressing the Architectural Association School of Architecture in London, which must have been in 2009. I spoke after Sir Peter Cook, also of Southend-on-Sea, who, in the 1960s, was part of the experimental architecture group Archigram, in whose pages *The Walking City* was first posited. I've been interested in architecture—experimental, theoretical and physical—since the early 1990s, and I conceived of ELEKTROGRAD as a way to play with those collected ideas like *The Walking City*. I'd originally intended for it to be a cycle of short graphic novels, but that didn't work out, and the complete outline for this first story languished in the Loose Ideas folder for years.

Something over a year ago, I turned the outline into the story you just read, picking at it on planes and trains, in hotel rooms and balconies and back gardens. And back it went into Loose Ideas, for I had no use for the thing. I'd simply gotten it out of my head and into a complete form, and I had other things to employ that released space in my brain for.

I had a little medical escapade about a month ago, and, somewhere in the blurry period surrounding it, Ed had sent me an email saying, well, we're at about a month after the release of *CUNNING PLANS*, so what's next?

"What's next," that day, was, I believe, filling another gallon jug with urine for some pervert medico at the hospital who had no possible use or need for several gallon jugs of my urine unless he was trying to brim a plunge pool.

A couple of weeks ago, I remembered I had this story in the file.

The original plan was to write seven stories: one for each of the districts of Elektrograd, each one built around an old architectural conceit and whatever science-fictional notion it suggested. It was hard not to write something about robotics after settling on The Walking City standing up and strolling off, and easy to reach back into science fiction's past for something complementary. And, of course, anyone who knows my prose fiction knows that I love crime stories, so the framing was kind of a given.

So perhaps this is where the intended ELEKTROGRAD cycle gets its second life. I think I'd still like to write, and read, those six other stories. A little theatre of might-have-beens and remember-whens. Let's send this dream of unbuilt cities out into the world and see if anyone agrees with me.

Warren Ellis
The Thames Delta
July 2015