

# VELVET CONSPIRACY

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# THE VELVET CONSPIRACY



THOMAS BLACK

## **The Velvet Conspiracy**

by Thomas Black, with an assistance of ChatGPT

a Visual Steampunk Novel, Matrix 2025

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## The Shadow of the Reich

The café smelled of bitter coffee and machine oil—a strange mix that had grown too familiar in this fractured world. The faint scent of freshly baked strudel lingered beneath the acrid tang of burning coal wafting through the slightly ajar windows. Outside, Vienna's cobblestone streets gleamed in the golden afternoon light, damp from a morning rain. The city maintained a veneer of elegance with its sprawling boulevards and Baroque facades, but the weight of war and occupation clung to its air. Automaton carriages hissed as they passed, their brass fittings gleaming, while pedestrians in muted attire hurried along, heads down.

Inside the café, ornate steampunk decor met the decadence of old Vienna. Gilded cog-shaped chandeliers hung low, casting warm light over velvet-lined booths. Pipes of polished brass snaked along the walls, steaming softly as if the building itself were alive. The automaton waiter clattered past me, its brass limbs clicking rhythmically as it served a table of disinterested officers, their voices low as they pored over maps and documents. Neutrality didn't mean safety, either.

I sat at a small, round table by the window, my reflection faintly visible in the glass. The porcelain coffee cup in my hand was delicate, its rim painted with intricate patterns of roses and gears. My outfit was chosen with care—an elegant black dress that clung to my figure, its high collar trimmed with lace. A fitted jacket with sharp shoulders lent me a sense of authority, its brass buttons catching the light whenever I moved. Around my neck hung a pendant—more than just jewelry, it was a cipher tool hidden in plain sight. My auburn hair, rich and vibrant, was swept into a sleek chignon, a single rebellious curl brushing against my cheek, a detail that softened the calculated precision of my attire, and my gloves, jet black and seamless, rested on the table beside me. Red lips, a bold statement in a world of muted tones, curled into a faint smile as I surveyed the room from beneath the brim of my wide-brimmed hat. Under the table, I lazily dangled a Louboutin pump from my toes, the signature red sole flashing like a hidden weapon. The subtle motion was deliberate—both a sign of ease and a calculated display of power, a reminder that even in relaxation, I was in control.

I felt him before I saw him. Anton moved like a ghost, silent and deliberate, sliding into the seat across from me. He didn't look up, his face half-hidden beneath the brim of his hat. His coat, worn but impeccably tailored, bore the

subtle creases of long travel, and his gloves—still damp from the rain—left faint prints on the wooden table. The tension between us hummed like a taut wire, but we both knew better than to speak before the moment demanded it. Instead, I raised my cup again, letting the faintest flicker of a smile pass between us like a secret handshake.

“Berlin,” he said, his voice low and clipped. He didn’t waste time. Anton never did. “You’re to infiltrate the Reich’s Ministry of Defence. There’s chatter about a new weapon. We need details—blueprints, schematics, anything.”

He slid an envelope across the table, its crimson wax seal catching the dim light. I let it sit there for a moment, a small act of rebellion, before finally picking it up. My gloved fingers slid under the edge, breaking the seal with a soft crack.

Inside was a photograph. I stared down at the image of Friedrich Heigl — sharp cheekbones, piercing blue eyes, the kind of face that could carve its way into your thoughts and linger. My stomach tightened.

“Heigl is SS,” Anton continued, his tone like ice. “Brilliant, ruthless... and susceptible to charm.”

I arched an eyebrow, letting the corner of my mouth curl into a faint smirk. “Is that why you always pick me for these assignments? My charm?”

Anton’s expression didn’t change. He was as unyielding as the machinery that ran this world. “Heigl is your way in, Isla. Use him.”

His words landed like a blow, and I hated the way they made me feel. Disposable. Replaceable. Just a blunt tool. But I nodded anyway. This wasn’t about me; it never was.



“Remember,” he added, leaning closer, his voice a whisper now, “if it comes down to it, you’re expendable. The mission isn’t.”

I slipped the envelope into my bag and rose from the table without another word.

The chill of the evening air nipped at my skin as I stepped out of the café, the envelope in my bag feeling heavier than it should. Vienna’s streets were quieter now, the cobblestones slick from the evening mist, and the gas lamps cast golden pools of light that barely kept the shadows at bay.

Expendable. The word echoed in my mind like the final toll of a church bell. A simple fact, delivered with no malice, just the cold efficiency of someone who’d seen too many operatives come and go. I clenched my jaw and quickened my pace, heels of my boots clicking sharply against the pavement as I made my way back to my rented room.

The building was unassuming—a nondescript facade that masked its purpose well. A perfect choice for someone who needed to vanish without a trace. The landlord didn’t ask questions, and neither did I. As I slipped inside, the faint smell of wood polish and old books greeted me, comforting in its mundanity.

I locked the door behind me and leaned against it, exhaling slowly. The weight of the assignment pressed down on me, a mixture of anticipation and dread. I shrugged off my coat and set the envelope on the small desk near the window. For a moment, I stood there, staring at it, as if opening it would make it all more real.

Instead, I crossed the room to the wardrobe. Inside were the tools of my trade—not just clothing, but the building blocks of transformation. A scarf that could shift a face into obscurity, gloves that left no prints, a compact mirror

with a hidden compartment. Each item carried a story, a memory of missions past.

I reached for the low wedge lace-up boots tucked neatly in the corner. Practical, silent, and familiar. They'd see me through the start of this mission, at least. I placed them by the door, a small act of preparation in a night that would allow little rest.

Eventually, I returned to the desk and opened the envelope, my fingers steady despite the turmoil beneath. The details of the target and the task ahead spilled out, lines of neatly typed text that hinted at danger without revealing its full scope. I memorized them quickly before burning the papers in the small fireplace, watching the edges curl and blacken until there was nothing left but ash.

The night stretched on, but I didn't allow myself the luxury of sleep. Instead, I rehearsed identities in my mind, crafting personas that could adapt and survive. By the time dawn broke, pale light filtering through the curtains, I was ready to begin again.

As the morning sun filtered through the heavy curtains, casting long shadows across the room, I stood before the full-length mirror, eyeing the garments laid out on the bed. Every detail was crucial—this wasn't just about the clothes; it was about setting a mood, crafting an identity that would slip through the cracks of the ordinary and become something more elusive, more powerful.

A lot of travelling chests packed with all the clothing and – in hidden compartments in case of a control – unusual assembly of tools for a diva, have been picked up by a carrier boy earlier, and were already on the way to train station, to be delivered to an apartment Velvet has acquired for me in Berlin.



I ran my fingers over the fabric of my travelling attire: a tailored, deep burgundy jacket, its silhouette sharp yet subtly feminine. It hugged my waist in all the right places, giving me the appearance of both strength and grace. Beneath it, a simple black blouse with delicate lace trim would offer a whisper of mystery when the right eyes caught a glimpse.

The blouse's lace trim was an elegant touch, but it was the lingerie beneath that provided the foundation of my confidence. A smooth black satin bra, its cups molded to fit perfectly, felt like a second skin. The intricate lace edging along the top added a touch of softness, yet the sturdy underwire gave me the support I needed to stand tall, unflinching, in any situation. I had chosen it for more than just comfort—it was a quiet reminder of my ability to control every detail of my appearance.

I slowly slipped into a pair of black silk stockings, their sheer fabric clinging to my skin like a second skin, that of a predator, smooth and tantalizing. I adored the feeling of them against my legs, the way they hugged every curve, emphasizing the long, toned muscles of my thighs. The lace trim at the top of each stocking added an elegant touch, but it was the subtle, almost unnoticeable seam running down the back that would catch the eye of anyone who took the time to look. It was a small detail, but one that conveyed everything I needed them to know—that I was deliberate in every move I made. Carefully I attached the clips of the garter belt, chosen to match both the satin of the bra and lace of my thong panties.

I stood, letting the stockings stretch over my legs, feeling the cool air caress the skin left exposed. Then, I turned to the boots I'd chosen: high, black leather heels that would add inches to my height and an undeniable edge to my walk. The stiletto heel wasn't just for looks—it was a weapon in itself. The sharp click of the heel against the floor was a signal, a prelude to whatever drama would unfold. As I slid my feet into them, I reveled in the feeling of power that coursed through me. The heels seemed to make the world look at me differently, as if suddenly, I commanded more space, more attention.

With each movement, I could feel my legs elongating, the stockings making my calves appear more sculpted, the heels accentuating the curve of my ankle. I knew how my legs would move in those boots, how they would draw eyes when I walked into a room. It wasn't just seduction; it was a silent promise of danger and sex, a slow, deliberate dance that left no room for misinterpretation. Legs that wrapped and trapped all who would dare to get nearby.

But it wasn't the clothes alone. It was the accessories that told the story—the silver bracelet from Prague, the one I'd earned during a particularly dangerous



assignment, and the blood-red lipstick that I had perfected over years of practice, knowing it could be as lethal as any weapon. I chose my shoes with care: tall, black leather boots with stiletto heels, perfect for both speed and the kind of slow, deliberate movement that would command attention in the right moment.



The sense of control was palpable—beneath the elegance of my traveling attire lay layers of calculated precision. Every inch of my ensemble, from the satin lingerie to the perfectly pressed jacket, served its purpose, bolstering my confidence. This was not just about appearance; it was about owning the space I walked into, commanding attention without speaking a word.

I wasn't just dressing for a trip; I was dressing to be seen. I wasn't merely a woman walking into Berlin—I was a weapon, wrapped in silk, ready to strike

when the time came. I wanted the city to look at me the way they would a piece of forbidden art: admired, desired, and never quite understood.

The moment I stepped off the cab and into the bustling heart of Vienna's train station, I felt the pulse of the city rise around me. It was a spectacle of gears and metal, steam and clockwork—a world where the old and the new collided in a dizzying dance. The station was a marvel of steampunk design, a towering structure of brass arches and copper piping, with airships drifting lazily above and the hissing of steam-powered machines filling the air.

Above me, giant clockwork gears turned slowly, their rhythmic clicking synchronized with the heavy chug of a distant locomotive. The station's ceiling was an intricate lattice of iron and glass, allowing the pale morning light to filter through, casting long shadows over the polished marble floors. Brass lamps flickered overhead, their soft glow adding an ethereal quality to the otherwise industrial atmosphere.

I could hear the sharp clank of mechanical arms loading luggage onto the trains, their chrome surfaces gleaming in the ambient light, their movements smooth and calculated. The station's platforms were lined with gleaming, steam-powered trains, their engines billowing great clouds of vapor that mingled with the faint scent of hot metal and oil. Everything here, from the ornate metalwork to the towering clock on the station's far wall, was a blend of Victorian elegance and mechanical innovation. A city of progress, draped in the beauty of a bygone age.

As I walked across the platform, the hard click of my heels on the stone echoed, but it was drowned out by the cacophony of bustling travellers and the deep-throated whistles of steam engines. A quick glance over my shoulder and I could see the silhouette of a man in a top hat, the glint of his goggles catching

the sunlight as he fiddled with a suitcase attached to the loading platform. A nearby vendor was selling copper-tipped walking canes and leather gloves, while another stall offered steaming cups of spiced tea from a brass teapot that hissed with every pour.

But I wasn't here for the sights or the sounds; I had a train to catch.



I walked with deliberate steps toward the platform where my train awaited, my legs gracefully swinging beneath my hem, the stockings smooth and almost ethereal in the mist rising from the tracks. The heel of my boots clicked against the metal grates, a sharp contrast to the cloud of steam that rose around me, briefly shrouding my figure in mystery. A few curious eyes followed, but I paid them no mind. The world had learned not to stare too long at me.

At the head of the train, its engine gleamed under the light, the mechanical marvels of its design both practical and beautiful, with delicate filigree etched into its brass exterior. The train was a sight to behold—an elegant blend of power and sophistication. Massive gears spun behind protective glass, the hissing of steam escaping through vents as the machine prepared to launch.

I boarded the train swiftly, my eyes scanning the other passengers—a mixture of well-dressed nobility and adventurers, each one wrapped in their own secrets. But I was already focused on my destination, my mind racing ahead to Berlin. This journey was more than just a move across Europe. It was the next step in a much grander game, and I was determined to win.

The train's doors hissed closing behind me, the soft click of the locks sealing us inside, and the rhythmic hum of the engine began as it jerked into motion. The train departed Vienna under a blanket of twilight, the city's steeples and towers fading into the distance as the rhythmic clatter of wheels on rails settled into a soothing cadence. My accommodations for the journey were a private sleeping coach—a luxury befitting the diva I portrayed. The room was intimate yet elegant, with walls of polished mahogany, brass accents, and velvet drapes in deep burgundy that framed the small window. A fold-down bed with crisp white linen sheets was tucked against one wall, and a brass sconce cast a warm, flickering glow that lent the space a comforting ambiance.

Shortly after the train began its steady trek northward, I changed into an evening dress suitable for dining. A deep sapphire gown hugged my figure, its high neckline and long sleeves balanced by a subtle slit that revealed a glimpse of leg as I moved. Stiletto heels with a thin silver t-strap that took place of the boots clicked faintly against the polished floor of my coach as I adjusted the dress and touched up my lipstick—a deeper crimson than usual, a shade that



demanded attention. The silver choker I wore caught the lamplight, casting delicate reflections on my collarbone.

The dining car was a testament to the train's luxury. Tables draped in pristine white cloths were adorned with fine china, gleaming silverware, and crystal glasses that sparkled under the soft glow of brass chandeliers. I took a seat by the window, the leather upholstery cool against my skin as I smoothed the folds of my dress. The air was alive with the quiet murmur of conversation and the occasional clink of glasses. Outside, the countryside blurred into darkness, the occasional glimmer of a distant village breaking the monotony of night.



Dinner was an indulgence—a perfectly roasted duck breast accompanied by herb-infused potatoes and a delicate red wine sauce. I paired it with a glass of Riesling, its crisp sweetness a delightful counterpoint to the richness of the

meal. The waiter attending my table was young, with sharp features and an air of polished confidence. He lingered a moment too long as he poured my wine, his dark eyes catching mine with a hint of intrigue.

“Will there be anything else, Fräulein?” he asked, his tone polite but carrying an unmistakable undertone of curiosity.

I let the silence stretch for a moment before answering, my lips curving into a small, enigmatic smile. “Not for now, thank you. But do stay close—I might need something later.”

His expression faltered, just briefly, before he composed himself and nodded, retreating with a slight flush to his cheeks. The exchange brought a flicker of amusement to my otherwise tense thoughts. Harmless flirtation, perhaps, but it grounded me in the moment—a reminder that even amidst the weight of my mission, I could still command attention when I chose.

The night deepened as the train’s pace steadied, and the hum of the wheels became a soothing rhythm. Back in my private coach, I reclined on the plush bench, my sapphire dress exchanged for a silk night gown that clung to my form in all the right places. The stiletto heels remained, their sharp lines a deliberate choice. I poured myself a glass of wine from the small crystal decanter provided with the room, savouring the way it warmed my throat as I gazed out the window at the endless stretch of darkness beyond.

The knock at the door was soft, tentative, as though the person on the other side wasn’t sure if they were meant to be there. I glanced at my reflection in the brass-framed mirror—a composed image of silk and poise. My dressing gown, a shade of midnight blue, cinched at the waist with a delicate sash, its neckline teasing the faintest glimpse of lace beneath. My stiletto heels were

still on, their sharp silhouette a deliberate choice; I liked the way they kept me balanced, both physically and mentally.

I rose from the velvet-upholstered bench and crossed the cabin with a measured grace, the heels clicking faintly against the polished wood. Opening the door just enough to peer out, I saw him—the waiter from earlier. His polished demeanour from the dining car had softened, his posture now slightly unsure, as though the boldness of arriving at my private coach had only just dawned on him.



“You called for me, Fräulein?” he asked, his voice low, carrying a mixture of curiosity and trepidation.

I stepped back to let him in, gesturing toward the plush chair by the small fold-out desk. “Come in,” I said, my voice warm yet commanding, leaving no

room for hesitation. “I thought it might be nice to share a moment of quiet. These long journeys can be so... lonely.”

He stepped inside, his eyes flickering around the room, taking in the polished mahogany walls, the soft golden light of the brass sconces, and, finally, me. I let him look; the faint flush on his face told me my presence was having the intended effect.

“Would you like some wine?” I offered, picking up the crystal decanter from the small side table. Without waiting for his response, I poured a glass and handed it to him, our fingers brushing briefly as he accepted.

“Thank you,” he murmured unsure of himself, taking a sip to steady himself.

I settled back onto the bench, crossing my legs in a deliberate motion that drew his gaze downward. The slit in my dressing gown parted slightly, revealing the curve of my thigh and the delicate lace trim of my stockings. His reaction was immediate but subtle—a quick intake of breath, his eyes darting back to meet mine as though he were caught trespassing.

“So,” I began, swirling the wine in my glass, “do you always answer late-night calls from passengers, or am I a special case?”

He hesitated, caught between formality and candour. “It’s... not common, Fräulein. But you seemed—” He stopped, searching for the right word.

“Seemed what?” I pressed, leaning forward just enough to close the space between us, my voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper.

“Unforgettable,” he said finally, the word tumbling out like a confession.



I smiled, pleased with his honesty. “Unforgettable is a good thing to be.” I let the silence stretch for a moment, watching the way his shoulders tightened under the weight of my gaze.

He took another sip of wine, clearly working up the courage to say something more. “You... you don’t seem like the other passengers. There’s something about you—something...”

“Dangerous?” I offered, arching an eyebrow.



He chuckled nervously. “Intriguing.”

“Well,” I said, leaning back and resting the glass against my lips, “a little mystery keeps life interesting, don’t you think?”

He nodded, but his eyes betrayed his curiosity, his desire to know more. The wine glass in his hand trembled slightly as I reached out, letting my fingers

graze his wrist, lingering just long enough to make my intentions clear. His breath hitched, his composure faltering in the presence of my deliberate gaze.

“You don’t need to be nervous,” I said, my voice dropping into a softer register. “Unless, of course, you’d prefer to leave.”

He shook his head almost imperceptibly. “No. I want to stay.”

“Good.”

I took the glass from his hand, setting it aside on the small brass table before tugging gently at his collar, loosening the starched fabric of his uniform. His scent—clean, with a hint of soap and cedar—was intoxicating in the confined space. I leaned in closer, my lips grazing his ear as I whispered, “Do you always play it so safe?”

His hands found my waist, hesitant but growing bolder as I allowed him to pull me closer. My dressing gown slipped open a little more, revealing the faint glimmer of the lace garter beneath. His eyes flicked downward, his breath coming faster now, the tension between us mounting.

The train swayed slightly, its gentle motion lulling the air between us, pulling us together in a way that felt fated. The rhythmic rocking seemed to echo the beat of my pulse, a subtle dance that matched the growing tension between us. I reached for him, my fingers finding the back of his neck, the heat of his skin sending a thrill through me as I pulled his lips to mine. The kiss was tentative at first, as if he was still unsure whether to cross the invisible line that had separated us. But the hesitation quickly faded, overpowered by a rising urgency, as though the moment had arrived, undeniable and inevitable.

His lips pressed harder against mine, coaxing and demanding all at once. The air between us thickened, charged with the weight of the unspoken, the si-

lent promise of what was to come. His hand cupped the side of my face, his thumb brushing over my skin in a gesture both tender and possessive, as if memorizing the feel of me. Then, with a sudden shift, he lifted me effortlessly, as if the weight of the world had evaporated in that instant, and gently set me down on the plush velvet bench opposite.



The fabric of my gown, cool and silky against my skin, brushed against my thighs as I settled back, the smoothness of the velvet under me a stark contrast to the burning anticipation building inside. His hands traced my waist, moving with a deliberateness that sent shivers down my spine. Each movement was an exploration, mapping the curve of my body, the delicate layers of lace that clung to me like secrets waiting to be uncovered.

As he shifted closer, I felt his fingers glide beneath the fabric of my dress, pushing it up with a quiet command, as though he already knew the rules of the game. The cool air of the train car contrasted with the warmth of his touch as his fingers brushed over my skin, drawing a shudder of anticipation. Slowly, with the care of someone who knew exactly what he was doing, he lifted the hem, revealing the lace-trimmed stockings that wrapped around my thighs, their delicate filigree a stark contrast to the raw desire in his gaze.

His touch moved higher, his fingers tracing the lines of my belly, finding the waistband of my lace thong. The intricate design of the fabric felt almost like a secret, a tantalizing puzzle beneath his fingertips. I leaned back, my body surrendering to the moment, to the overwhelming rush of sensation as his hands found their way under the last layers of fabric, revealing the bare skin beneath. His lips followed his fingers.

The hum of the train beneath us grew louder, its rhythmic motion matching the frantic pace of my heart. I could feel the pulse of the journey syncing with my breath, each undulation of the train mirroring the growing urgency of our bodies. His touch became surer, more confident, as if shedding the mask of restraint he had worn for so long. There was no more pretense between us now—only the undeniable truth of what was happening, of the hunger and the heat that neither of us could deny any longer.

For once, I let go. I let myself surrender completely, allowing the weight of my mission, the endless layers of deception and control that had defined me up until this point, to fall away. There was no room for strategy here, no need for calculation. Only the raw truth of need, of feeling every inch of him as he brought me closer to the edge of something dangerous and beautiful.

For next few stolen hours, I wasn't a spy, or a performer, or a woman with a target on her back. I was simply Isla, sharing a fleeting connection with a man who didn't need to know who I really was.

I woke with the first rays of sunlight streaming through the window, gilding the mahogany panelling of the sleeping coach with a soft glow. The train swayed gently beneath me, its rhythmic motion a soothing backdrop to the day ahead. I stretched, savouring the lingering warmth of the silk sheets before swinging my legs over the edge of the bed. My thighs still remembering the company I enjoyed along the way. Even as the mission in Berlin loomed large in my mind, I allowed myself the luxury of touching myself, feeling the lingering slick wetness, the shiver of remembered pleasure running along my spine as I arched with afterglow purring quietly. Damn, I needed that, I smiled to myself before lowering my feet onto the carpet as I started to slowly, methodically prepare for the role I was about to step into.

I opened my travelling trunk, a marvel of steampunk engineering with brass fittings and hidden compartments for my more clandestine tools. Selecting my attire for the day was no mere act of vanity—it was strategy, every piece chosen to create an impression of poise and allure, while concealing the razor-sharp intellect beneath.

The centrepiece of my ensemble was a deep crimson velvet dress, its rich colour striking against my pale skin. The fabric clung to my figure, the neckline plunging just enough to command attention without giving too much away. The bodice was adorned with intricate black embroidery, swirls and filigrees reminiscent of the ironwork gates of the grand Viennese palaces.



Beneath the dress, I fastened a corset of black satin, its boning cinching my waist into a perfect hourglass. Stockings of sheer silk slid over my legs, their tops held in place by a delicate black straps. I smoothed the stockings carefully, letting my hands linger over the luxurious material as it hugged the curve of my thighs.



For footwear, I chose a pair of stiletto heels with deep red soles, their glossy black finish catching the morning light. The sound of their sharp clicks would announce my presence where needed, a bold statement that matched the persona I would assume in Berlin. The glossy black stiletto heels I wore weren't just for show—they held secrets. Lock picks in one, a cyanide capsule in the other. My gloves, thin and supple, concealed the faint tremor in my hands. Finally, I secured a small black choker with a crimson gemstone at its centre—a subtle but striking accessory that drew the eye to my neckline.

My makeup was simple but effective: a hint of rouge on my cheeks, kohl-lined eyes to add depth to my gaze, and deep red lipstick that matched the velvet of my dress. I pinned my hair into a loose updo, allowing a few strands to frame my face, softening the otherwise commanding image.

With one last look in the mirror, I smirked. The woman staring back at me was ready for Berlin, her appearance a weapon as sharp as any blade. She was confident, glamorous, untouchable. Her crimson dress clung to her curves, its velvet folds catching the light with every movement. The sweetheart neckline framed my collarbones, drawing attention to the delicate gold locket resting against my skin. My auburn hair fell in soft waves, perfectly styled.

I adjusted my black silk stockings, making sure the seams ran straight up the backs of my legs.

You're not Isla anymore," I murmured to my reflection, my voice barely audible over the hum of the train. I let my auburn hair cascade into soft waves that framed my face, a deliberate choice to project Sophia Brandt's allure. The fiery red tones shimmered under the dressing room lights, enhancing the illusion of a captivating diva stepping onto her stage. "You're Sophia. A singer. A muse. A weapon."

I had just finished when a soft knock came at the door.

"Come in," I called, expecting the porter.

Instead, it was him. The waiter from last night. He stepped inside, his polished demeanour intact but his dark eyes betraying a flicker of something more personal.

"Fräulein," he began, holding a silver tray with a steaming carafe of coffee and a single red rose. "Breakfast, as requested."

I arched an eyebrow, amused by his choice of flourish. “A rose? You’re setting a dangerous precedent, you know.”

He set the tray down on the small table, his movements practiced but his gaze lingering on me. “I thought you deserved something beautiful to start your



day.”

The corners of my lips curved into a smile. “Careful. You might make me think you’ve forgotten all about the rules of professional conduct.”

He chuckled softly, pouring the coffee into the delicate porcelain cup. “Some rules are worth bending.”

I took the cup from him, my fingers brushing his briefly. “You’re bold for a man who spent the night following orders.”

His gaze met mine, steady now. “And you’re even more intriguing in the daylight.”

For a moment, I let the silence stretch, the hum of the train filling the space between us. “You should go before someone notices,” I said finally, though my tone lacked urgency.

He nodded but hesitated at the door. “Safe travels, Fräulein.”

“Until next time,” I replied, watching as he left.

By the time the train departed from Prague, the world outside had transformed. The countryside was a surreal blend of nature and industry, a steam-punk landscape that reflected the dualities of the era. Rolling green hills were punctuated by towering brass wind turbines, their blades spinning lazily in the morning breeze. Smoke billowed from distant factories, their chimneys twisting like spires into the sky, leaving trails of dark clouds that curled against the horizon.

Villages with cobbled streets and timber-framed houses dotted the landscape, their charm offset by the occasional dirigible floating overhead. These massive airships, their frames glinting with polished metal, cast long shadows over the ground as they moved silently toward their destinations.

Closer to the tracks, workers in leather aprons and goggles tended to mechanical contraptions that seemed almost alive, their gears and pistons hissing with steam. Automaton vendors rolled along the platforms at smaller stations, their compartments opening to reveal hot tea, fresh pastries, and glowing newspapers printed with the latest headlines.

The train itself was a marvel. Its exterior was a gleaming mixture of steel and brass, with exposed gears that turned hypnotically as we sped along the

tracks. The carriages were fitted with stained glass windows that refracted the sunlight into colourful patterns on the walls and floors. At intervals, sleek observation decks jutted out from the sides, allowing passengers to step outside and take in the view.

As we approached Berlin, the scenery became more urban. Tall iron viaducts criss-crossed the landscape, supporting elevated railways that hissed and groaned as trains rushed by. The skyline was dominated by clock towers, each more elaborate than the last, their intricate faces surrounded by gilded numerals and sweeping hands. Steam rose from grates in the streets below, mingling with the faint hum of electric lights flickering to life in preparation for the day.





## Berlin

Finally, the Hauptbahnhof came into view, its massive dome of iron and glass a testament to the city's grandeur. Intricate cogs and pulleys lined the entrance, moving ceaselessly to open and close the giant arched doors for arriving trains. The platform bustled with activity: porters wheeled ornate brass luggage carts, and uniformed officials barked orders as passengers disembarked.

Berlin greeted me with its usual spectacle: towering brass spires, their clockwork mechanisms whirring softly, and airships drifting lazily across the skyline like metal leviathans. Automaton enforcers patrolled the streets, their