

Knight Light by Claudia Riess

EXPRESS

Mid-afternoon Harrison was back from his lecture class on Baroque painting. He found Erika holed up in her third-floor study, absorbed in whatever she was scribbling in her notepad. He pulled out the chair from what had once been his grandmother's vanity and sat beside her. Displayed on the computer screen was a series of lines structured like a poem; at a glance, unintelligible. He planted a kiss on her cheek. "What the hell is it?"

She put down her pen and turned to him. "It's a translated excerpt from Jean Arp's poem 'Der Vogel Selbdritt.'"

"That explains why it's inscrutable. It's Dada. Why is it of interest to you?"

"To us," she corrected. "I've been trying to get a handle on our proposed investigation. Let me start from the beginning."

"Will Lucas be joining us?"

"Not for a while. He's sleeping."

"He does a lot of that."

She smiled and flipped back the pages of her pad. "First question: What's the main subject of interest—the MacGuffin, so to speak? Answer: Alekhine's letter. Why? Because Alekhine died under murky circumstances shortly after he wrote it. Because it contains leads to recovering art lost during the war, which is of great interest on all fronts honorable and evil. Because it's the only document Chuck conveyed to you, so he must have thought it was the most important one of the collection. And last, because it's the only tangible item we've got." She took a breath.

"Next. Who would benefit from getting their hands on this letter, either to gain information from it or to make sure the information remains hidden? We have to exclude anyone with honorable intentions, since violence was employed to secure the document. The agency of evil comes from the dark side of the art world. From blackmail to black market." She stared hard at him.

"We can voice our suspicions, but we cannot actually go there. You do understand, right?"

Harrison nodded. "I do."

"I'm not convinced."

"I will never put you at risk."

She shook her head. “You left yourself out of the equation. Not good enough.”

It will have to be, sweetheart. “We will both stay safe,” he said aloud. “Behind the line of scrimmage. Go on with your report.”

“Just so you know, I don’t quite believe you. But for now, let’s not lose our train of thought. So. What are the lines of inquiry generated by Alekhine’s letter to Ambassador Martins? One. Learn anything we can about the fate of the Jules Eisenberg Gallery in Paris. This includes its owners, their living relatives, if any, and its wartime art inventory. Two. Try to trace the provenance of the paintings specified in the letter. Three. Contact organizations that might help identify the German referred to in the letter—the one who Alekhine says fled to Brazil.” She skewered him with another look. “The operative word here is identify. We identify. The guys in bullet-proof vests track down.”

“Got it.”

“Do you?” She glanced down at her notes to check if she’d missed anything. She hadn’t.

“Anyway, the hope is that down the road these lines of inquiry will intersect, and we’ll be able to contribute a couple of leads to pass on to the authorities.”

“Who are fixated on another line of reasoning altogether,” Harrison reminded her.

“We’ll have enough evidence to convince them otherwise.”

“You’re an optimist.”

“Realistic, not wide-eyed.”

“And it’s contagious,” he said, laying his hand on hers. “Now, tell me why you’ve got Jean Arp’s poetry on display.”