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Silk Road

A Case for Elliott Kern



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The development engineer of a technology company in Brugg suspects the Chinese partners, whom the company boss has proudly engaged, of having spied on his developments. He discreetly turns to the Federal Intelligence Service. Elliott Kern is given the task of investigating the issue. However, this must be done secretly, because the federal authorities and the Swiss economy dread provoking China.

Kern investigates, and when a murder occurs, he is again integrated into the team of the Aargau Cantonal Police, which eventually succeeds in solving the crime.

Elliott Kern was formerly with the FBI. He lives with his mother in Aarau and admires the philosopher Michel de Montaigne.

Andreas Pritzker was born in Windisch (Switzerland) in 1945. He studied physics at the ETH Zurich and worked as a researcher, consulting engineer and in science management. As a writer he has published ten novels, two novellas and three non-fiction books. Moreover, he has edited various texts as a publisher.

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1 – Wednesday, April 7, 2021

Tamara called at nine. "Hello, Elliott. Are you awake?"

"Of course! Why not?"

"We suspect you like to sleep late. The colonel claims that whenever he called you early in the morning, you seemed rather sleepy and only pretended to be out of bed."

Kern grinned to himself. "Nothing can be hidden from the chief of the intelligence service. What are you calling about?"

"The colonel wants you to meet an engineer from Brugg. The man suspects the Chinese of spying on his developments. And you should pursue investigations as discreetly as possible."

She hesitated, causing Kern to ask, "So what's the catch?"

She sighed. "It's all unofficial. The engineer contacted us through a comrade from his military service, apparently against his company's wishes. They're reluctant to investigate. They're afraid of spoiling the Chinese market for themselves."

"That means no charge has been filed. And so as not to burn his fingers, Felix has his assistant tell me about the job."

Tamara laughed heartily. "Nonsense. He's just short on time, and the assignment is so simple that even the boss's assistant can deliver it."

Kern joined in the laughter and said, "After all, watching the two of you, it's not always clear who's in charge."

"Stop fooling around, Elliott. Now then, you should listen to what the engineer has to say. You're supposed to meet him discreetly. He says he can't meet you in Brugg without

being noticed, every last person knows him there - I'm quoting the colonel. Since the cafés are still closed due to Corona restrictions, he suggests the hikers' car park on the Staffelegg. When are you able to meet him?"

"I don't have any appointments in the next few days that I can't reschedule. What is the man's name? And the name of the company he is working for?"

"The company is called Ytronic. And the man's name is Brunold. Patrick Brunold. I'll make an appointment with him and call you back."

Kern sat down at his private laptop - he didn't use his work computer to surf the net for security reasons - and entered Ytronic. Google immediately provided a link to the company's website, including a map showing the location.

Kern learned that Ytronic manufactured high-precision electronic switching elements. The company boasted of having developed elements with a perfect switching curve, accurate to nanoseconds. There was a link to a page with a long list of international references. All over the world, the items had apparently been installed in complicated systems. The information was technical, but Kern could see that in some cases it was about controls in weapons systems and aviation.

The company was located in Brugg's Schachen district, was medium-sized and employed around fifty people. The CEO and main shareholder was Rolf Hostettler. The organization chart comprised four departments: development, production, marketing and logistics. ETH-engineer Patrick Brunold was named as head of development. Good, thought Kern, I'll listen to what Brunold has to say.

Soon Tamara called again. "Brunold will be in the parking lot at noon today. He drives a red Porsche and thinks that's enough to identify him."

"This seems urgent," Kern commented. "Okay, I'll talk to him and let you know."

"Thanks Elliott. You sure have a heck of a job. While I'm slaving away in the office, you get to walk around in the countryside in the most beautiful spring weather."

"Meaning you have nice weather in Bern? It's raining and cold here."

"No. But at least you're out in the fresh air while I'm sitting in a stuffy office."

Kern grinned. The intelligence directorate was housed in large, bright rooms. He said, "That's because you're no good for field work. Such a good-looking woman just can't move inconspicuously."

Tamara laughed. "Now I'm in two minds. Should I report you for a sexist remark or be happy about the compliment?"

"I recommend the latter."

"It's a deal. Have fun."

Since he was on official business, Kern dressed in what he called his everyday uniform: light blue shirt, gray pants, dark blue blazer, no tie. That was how he'd dressed as an FBI agent, too. A scrutinizing look in the mirror showed a lean forty-something with straight brown hair, angular features, and brown eyes. Pretty unremarkable, no distinguishing features whatsoever.

Before he left, he checked the cat food situation. His mother had obviously had little time in the early morning. He prepared a small bowl of dry food. Pharaoh had been sleeping on the couch in the living room. When he heard Kern fiddling in the kitchen, he immediately turned up. Kern could tell that the cat liked the idea.

He took his raincoat from the coat rack and put on a Boston Red Sox baseball cap that someone had left at his apartment in Washington many years ago. Then he drove off. At a quarter to twelve, he parked his car in the parking lot on Staffelegg. He got out and admired his new car, a Qashqai. He had loved the old Captur, but it had become increasingly prone to repair. He put on his coat and a sanitary mask and looked around. The view over the

Mittelland and the Jura heights was magnificent on a clear day. Today it offered only clouds, from which there was a light drizzle. Despite the weather, there were a few cars in the car park, and on the paths leading up to the wooded heights, there were people walking their dogs.

Kern didn't have to wait long. Around noon, a red Porsche approached on the winding road from the Schenkenberg Valley at a fast pace. The man who got out looked likeable. He was of medium height, slightly roundish, wore Aviator sunglasses despite the weather, and had a dark, sweeping mop of hair. He was dressed in black jeans, boots and a leather jacket.

Kern walked up to him, and the man pulled off his sunglasses. They had hidden dark eyes that stood above a powerful nose. He, too, was now donning a mask.

"I'm Elliott Kern from Intelligence," Kern said, offering the man his elbow.

"Patrick Brunold," the man replied, touching Kern's elbow with his, "Can I see some ID?"

Kern pulled out his badge, and Brunold looked at it closely. "Excuse me, but I have to be careful."

"Well, that all sounds very exciting."

"It is."

"Do you want to take a walk, or shall we sit in my car?"

"Better get in the car. Seems more discreet."

As they sat, Kern asked, "You suspect industrial espionage, but you don't want to or can't press charges. How did you make contact with us?"

"What would we do without our military service? I described my suspicions of espionage to a friend and fellow service member, a Brugg lawyer. He served with your commandant."

"The Army, a valuable network," Kern said. "I've already studied Ytronic's website." He looked at Brunold expectantly from the side.

"Then you know what products we are talking about. As we like to state, the main feature of our switches is a perfect power-on curve. No one has been able to do that as well as we have. I developed the 'Ultrafast Switch 20053' and tested all competing products, including that of the Chinese company Sinoelectric, which comes closest to us in terms of quality. Now I have discovered that Sinoelectric recently started to offer a switch with the same characteristics as ours, but at a much lower price. I ordered such a switch through a friend, tested and analyzed it. It is clear that it was copied from our switch. I immediately informed our boss and voiced my suspicion of espionage. But Hostettler – the company owner – doesn't want to hear anything about it and is against pressing charges."

"Why spy on it? Can't you just build one of those things with trial and error?"

"My boss asked the question too, and I told him the same thing I'm telling you. In principle, yes, but it can take a long time, and most importantly, you'll hardly ever get exactly the same result. Much easier to take a shortcut and get the exact blueprints. Still, he doesn't want to file a charge."

"Why is that?"

Brunold grinned. "Out of sinophilia, if you'll permit the expression."

Kern laughed. "You'll have to explain that to me in more detail."

"Hostettler is very impressed by the Chinese. He's always raving about the new Silk Road. But let's be specific. A major customer for our switches is the Chinese company Wuhong. The business attaché of the Chinese embassy, Mike Liu, brokered the deal. He often stays in Brugg. Hostettler regards him as a friend and is simple-mindedly proud of it. At Liu's request, he even took his niece, Feng Cheng, as a trainee in my development team. She is studying electronics and is twenty. Feng – that's her first name – has no access to production, and I keep her working

on isolated projects. She is to develop a Schmitt trigger, or clock generator, for Wuhong in a contractual collaboration. Wuhong thinks that if she learns from us, the power-on curve will be perfect."

"The names of these switches sound, sorry, Chinese to me," Kern said with a grin.

"The Schmidt trigger was developed in Germany in the 1930s. Well, the Chinese are great at replicating and developing further, but creativity is lacking. Could be related to their political system. But that doesn't matter now. The point is, someone in the company must have supplied the Chinese with documentation or information. Since such an operation requires minimal expertise, it could be one of the three technicians who work on my team. I reject this possibility. The techs are reliable and basically happy with their very well-paying jobs. I suspect Feng of organizing the espionage. Possibly, she bribed one of the techs, which I also find hard to imagine. But I think she's involved."

"Is it conceivable that sex played a role?"

"Anything is conceivable. But I don't think so. One of my technicians is gay. And the wives of the other two needn't fear comparison with the rather naive young Chinese woman - at least that's my assessment."

"Are there any clues about the how, where and when the spying was done?"

"Yes. I'm also in charge of company security, so years ago I had video cameras installed that monitor access to the main building where the executive office and the development division are located. We never checked the videos because we had decided that we'll look at the footage only if there was a break-in. And we never detected a break-in. So when the suspicion of espionage came up, I figured that the spying had taken place probably about six months ago. That's how long it takes to set up an industrial production of these switches. I asked one of the technicians to look through the recordings from that period, and he hit