

Five

Sanok • 23rd of Iyyar, 5675 – Friday, May 7, 1915

ELIA AND HIRSCH ferried bodies from the front to the make-shift morgue next to the command center for the next six hours without a break, glad for the relatively cool, overcast day. By mid-afternoon most of Sanok had been taken, although a detachment of Russians remained holed up in the castle by the river. While exhausted soldiers rested at the front line, a battalion sergeant argued with a German 2nd Lieutenant over the use of artillery on the last of the holdouts. All such arguments, framed to try and spare Sanok's few remaining historical buildings, fell on utterly deaf ears.

As the task of razing what was left of Sanok was handled by German gunners using a trio of howitzers at nearly point-blank range, a hefty soldier came running up to the command center. Winded, he bent over with his hands on his dirt-covered knees, barely able to keep his balance, gulping for air. "Medic. I need a medic. Now!" He struggled for air, "We have a wounded man on Chopina Street, on the other side of Park Miejski, at Zacisze. My, my..." he coughed, "My brother."

A sergeant who had been studying a map, turned, "Gevral,

what the fuck were you doing on Chopina anyway?"

Gevral was still breathing hard.

"What would happen if every goddamned corporal decided to attend to family in the middle of a battle?" He turned to a medic, "Go get him," then he turned back to Gevral, "I'll deal with you and, God willing, with Mendel later. Go get him. Now!"

"Sir," the medic said with a vague salute, leading Gevral, Elia and Hirsch toward town.

When they were almost a block away, the Sergeant yelled, "Move it!" Elia broke into a trot as another yell came. "He's my nephew!"

They made their way to Chopina Street the long way in order to avoid the mopping-up operations. "Before the war I was a tailor. Had a shop of my own, just off the *Rynek*, in a building that seems to be gone," Gevral explained, shifting his Mannlicher rifle from shoulder to shoulder. "I was called up early from the reserves. Sent Rose and our four children to stay with my uncle's family in Opole."

"Where'd your brother get it?" the medic asked Gevral.

"Leg. I think it shattered his femur."

"We'll get him out of here. Not to worry."

"There's our home." Gevral pointed to an untouched three-story brick apartment block. "Mendel is in the alley, just around back." They crossed the street and walked quickly past the home. After Gevral cautiously peeked around the corner, they ducked into the shadow of the alley.

"Mendel, thank God you're all right," Gevral said, propping his gun up against the sooty brick before falling to his knees to embrace his brother.

"Thank God you've come," Mendel replied with surprising vigor.

Gevral turned to the doctor, "Morphine, now! Please."

Elia propped the rolled up stretcher while Hirsch lifted the rifle off Mendel's lap and stowed it next to Gevral's gun as the

medic rifled through his bag of field dressings.

Mendel was clearly the younger brother, and notwithstanding his blood-drenched pants, appeared to be the fitter one as well. He was slumped against the wall about three meters in from the road, his rifle, bayonet fixed, lying across his lap, his boots nearly touching the neighboring building across the narrow passageway.

“Take these,” the medic said handing the wounded man two pills. “Under the tongue.”

Mendel eagerly did as instructed while the medic examined his wounds, calling out his findings like a coroner during an autopsy. “Shattered left femur, mid thigh, femoral artery intact, major quadriceps trauma, right fibula abrasion, clean exit.” Turning to Gevral, he spoke with tenderness none of them thought him capable of, “He’ll make it; he’ll be fine.” He looked at Hirsch and Elia, “Move him.”

Elia gestured to the street. “Corporal, Herr Doctor.” As they exited the alley, the medic reached into his jacket for his cigarettes and offered one to Gevral.

Elia and unfurled the dark green canvas sling and laid it next to the patient like they’d done a thousand times before, when the crack of a gunshot shrieked down Chopina and echoed sharply off the tight walls of the alley.

Elia instinctively glanced toward the source of the noise. In the street the doctor was calmly pressing on his neck with his hand, cigarette still smoldering between his fingers, trying to stop the geyser of blood draining from his brain.

Another shot echoed.

Hirsch hit the ground as Gevral dove into the alley, landing on him.

“Gun!” Gevral screamed at Elia, scrambling to his feet, his back to the street.

The medic collapsed in the dirt, eyes fixed, dead.

A shadow crept along the wall as Elia frantically groped for a weapon. Securing a Mannlicher, he thrust it out over

Mendel and Hirsch towards Gevral, who locked onto the rifle with his hand.

In the thin sliver between Gevral and the wall, Elia saw the soldier. He wore black boots, an olive field jacket with crossed supply straps, and brown pants, cropped at the calf, billowing over his thighs. His face was angular and ghostlike, with high cheek bones, a straw-colored moustache, and wispy matching eyebrows. A stream of blood, flowed freely down his chin to his neck, and onto his field tunic from an open wound on his left cheek. In a brief and awful moment, their eyes met. Elia could swear they'd met in Przemyśl, perhaps on Blonie field during a football match or at Antmann's for beer and politics. But as the adrenalin flowed, whatever humanity had bubbled to the surface evaporated as visions of broken comrades obscured any possible compassion and a voice in Elia's head began screaming for vengeance, growing louder with each pulse of his heart.

Elia reached for the second gun as a distinctive metallic click came from the street; a miss-fire or an empty magazine, followed by a sickening gasp from Gevral. The two Austrian soldiers, stared with remarkably casual disbelief at the tip of the bayonet that had just gone through Gevral's back, severed his renal artery, skewered his intestines and emerged between the bottom two buttons of his tunic.

Gevral's rifle fell to the dirt as the silver blade disappeared back into his body.

Elia cocked his rifle.

Gevral's body tensed briefly, and then collapsed in a heap.

The Russian tried to cock his rifle but the bolt was jammed.

Hearts racing and hands trembling, the Russian and the Galician leveled their stares at one and other, simultaneously realizing that the prospects for their lives from this moment forward revolved around a single germane fact; one rifle had a bullet in its chamber; the other did not.

The Russian dropped his rifle and ran.

By the time Elia had leapt over the bodies and made it to the street, the assassin was no more than twenty paces away. He brought the slowly bobbing head into the crosshairs of his rifle and, as instructed, gently squeezed the trigger. The runner stumbled, and then fell like a sack of potatoes tossed from a cart. A burgundy stain oozed from a hole in the back of what was once the Russian's skull and wicked its way through his dirty blond hair.

Elia dropped the rifle, his stomach in knots as if he'd told his mother a lie.

WHILE MENDEL RECOUNTED to a gathering of field medics the story of the gun-battle on the streets of Sanok, Elia and Hirsch made two trips back to the alley to collect the remains of Gevral, the medic and the assassin. By the time the boys returned with the last corpse, the tale of the heroic stretcher carriers had spread from the hospital to the First Battalion, to the Army headquarters outside of town, with added embellishment at each stop.

"Thank God it's Silverberg," Hirsch said, sitting on an empty cartridge crate, looking down the street. Elia lit a cigarette and pulled the sweet, harsh smoke deeply into his lungs. Looking to the rapidly dimming sky, he exhaled a series of smoke rings.

"You all right, Elia?" Hirsch asked.

"No."

Silverberg, Manes and an Austrian officer flanked by several aides approached the boys. Elia rubbed the glowing tip off of his smoke using the edge of a wooden cross brace on the crate, then pinched the remaining embers out between his thumb and forefinger, saving the butt in his shirt pocket for later. Both he and Hirsch came to attention.

"The whole battalion has heard about what happened today. You've brought great honor to the men of the Tenth,"

Silverberg said, excitedly.

Elia bowed his head, unable to look at him.

“This is Captain Malczewski. He has something for you two.”

Elia stared at his boots as the desiccated Malczewski stepped forward. “For bravery in the field befitting a soldier of the realm, and by the authority invested in me by the Emperor Franz Joseph, I hereby promote both of you to the rank of private, with all the responsibility and privilege befitting of the rank.” He snapped his fingers. An aide came forward with two pike-gray field uniforms, complete with metallic white buttons and parrot-green facings under the collars. They were exactly like those the rest of the battalion wore, only cleaner.

“And for private Reifer, our expert marksman,” Silverberg added, “a red lanyard.”

The Captain curtly dismissed the assembly.

Five minutes later, Elia was walking out of Sanok in his new uniform. After crossing the San on a hastily assembled pontoon bridge, Manes came up beside him, weighing him down with an arm around his shoulder.

When they had been passed by the bulk of the platoon, Elia stopped.

“What?” Manes asked, “What’s wrong, comrade?” Streaks appeared on Elia’s dusty, sun-burned face.

Elia wept.

“It’s kill or be killed. Kill or be killed.”

Elia compose himself. “But I shot him, Manes.”

“You did what you had to do.”

“No. You don’t understand.”

“What?”

“I...I...”

“Tell me, Elia.”

“I shot him in the back, Manes. In the back.”

**Przemyśl • 26th of Iyyar, 5675 – Monday, May 10,
1915**

ZIPRE WALKED WITH her father as far as the portico of Przemyśl's Old Synagogue. Like many modern young women, Zipre refused to enter the majestic old limestone synagogue, in protest of the gender segregation practiced there. Her deceased mother, her aunts, and countless other female relatives had entered this building with their husbands, uncles, and brothers only to part ways just past the door: men continuing into the great hall and women climbing two flights of stone stairs to the balcony. One group performed the time-honored rituals, the other observed from afar.

"I'll do Kaddish at the cemetery," Zipre said with measured spite.

"I love you," Meyer said as he turned and walked into the synagogue.

"I love you too, father," Zipre whispered as she pulled her scarf over her hair and walked briskly up Jagiellońska toward the cemetery.

Two months after the Russian takeover, food had returned to the market stalls and a relative calm had descended on Przemyśl. The absence of artillery din was a divine pleasure that Zipre would never have imagined a few months ago. Yet it was all wrong. These men sat at the café just like the other ones. They drank tea or schnapps like the others. Yes, the uniforms were different. Yes, the language was foreign. But most of all, the faces were unfamiliar. "Avoid eye contact," she could hear Rivka telling her as she ducked into Laufer's Apothecary, a few doors up Słowackiego, next to Besser's Bakery.

"Good morning, Feiga," she said to the elderly woman behind the counter.

Feiga Laufer was perpetually hunched over making her seem even shorter than she was. Her deep hazel eyes were

framed by grey hair and bushy, black eyebrows. For the better part of half a century she had sold medicines, lotions, and untold knickknacks to the people of Przemyśl, privy to each family's particular needs, wants, and desires, recording them in her head with the fidelity of a scribe and the recall of a learned rabbi.

"Candle?"

"Yes, please," Zipre said, dropping some copper on the counter.

"Will the Austrians return?" Feiga asked in hushed tones, leaning toward Zipre as she picked up the coins. "What does your father say?"

Zipre glanced around the empty shop. "Father's agent in Cracow said the Kaiser's assembled a million men under Mackensen, and that the Russian lines had already buckled. Within a fortnight the Germans will be in Przemyśl."

Feiga mumbled under her breath in Yiddish.

"What do you hear, Feiga?"

"Me? I'm just an old woman. I know who has problems with smelly feet; I remember at what age each Jewish girl began her menstruation. War? What do I know of such things? Your father knows, not me. What else does he say?"

Zipre smiled thinly. "Father says the same thing always: armies come and go; governors come and go; only gold remains." She paused. "But I am not as sanguine as my father. Things will never be as they were, not for any of us."

"Things are never as they were, sweetheart," Feiga said, bringing the full weight of her stare to bear on Zipre as she handed her a brown paper sack with a candle and a small box of matches.

Other than the occasional swerve to avoid a pile of horse manure, Zipre walked straight uphill on Słowackiego with deliberate speed, keeping her head down and her gaze on the cobblestones just ahead of her. The brilliant sun of the early morning had turned overcast; she left no shadow on

the stone pavers beneath her.

The size of a small farm, it was called the New Cemetery, but to most, it was just *the* cemetery. It was on the fringe of town, on the road that leads to Dobromyl, just past a small Roman Catholic chapel and *goyish* burial grounds. There was a rubble stone wall enclosing two sides of the sacred place, running along the road, separating the plots from the chapel. The balance of the grounds were defined by a line of stately larches toward the top of the gentle slope that followed the contour of the road and a knot of smaller trees and bushes at the crest of a steeper ridge a few hundred meters away. The wall was broken by a large iron gate, wide enough to drive a horse cart through, which was padlocked shut, along with a smaller, unlocked, pedestrian gate.

Passing into the cemetery, Zipre pictured her mother's face and began to weep, gently at first then with increased emotion, as she walked by a number of familiar monuments. She only stopped once, to pick up a small, smooth rock by a rusted fence post.

Situated halfway up the hill, the Weiss/Hecht burial plot was among the finest in the cemetery. Save for a chest-high stone entrance, the full perimeter of the ten by ten meter square was enclosed by a well crafted iron knee wall, replete with clusters of metal leaves, spires, and stars of David, with an inner hedge of neatly trimmed boxwoods. All of the nine limestone markers were elegantly engraved and had slate roofs that made them look like an irregular row of dollhouses. While most of the stones were etched in Hebrew, the one in front, obviously one of the most recent, was rendered in western script:

Esther Weiss

1871–1905

Beloved Wife and Mother

Kneeling before her mother's grave, Zipre struck a match and lit the wick of the *Yartzeit* candle. Standing, she placed the stone she had picked up on a small ledge under the slate cap and began saying Kaddish: *Yis'ga'dal v'yis'kadash sh'may ra'bbo...* By the second verse she was deeply in her own spiritual world, completely oblivious to the sound of crunching twigs and leaves beneath boots, growing louder. *Oseh sholom bimromov, hu ya'aseh sholom olaynu, v'al kol yisroel; vimru Omein.* As soon as she finished, her senses returned and she saw them out of the corner of her eye. Her brain screamed trouble; flight reflex took over. She wheeled around and raced down the path, retracing her earlier steps. "How many? Two? Three? Blue pants, yellow stripe—Cossacks—rapists and murderers. Can I make the gate?"

Her practical thoughts were interrupted by the man furthest up the hill yelling, "Halt!" Zipre turned her head briefly to survey the situation. There were three: two men, or boys, running down the outside paths and one, slightly older and fatter, walking and yelling well behind her on one of the interior routes. A quick assessment of the geometry of her situation told her that she was not going to make it to the grass field, not to mention the gate or the road, before the two runners would intercept her. She stopped by an unfamiliar grave and was immediately surrounded by three soldiers. Frozen with fear, she dropped her head, staring at their black knee-high boots.

"Papers!" the fat soldier shouted in accented Ukrainian.

A shiver ran up Zipre's spine, as she recalled how Don Cossacks were always the perpetrators of the worst pogroms in all of the stories her grandmother had told her growing up.

As she extended her arm to present the document to the red faced Slav, he seized her by both wrists. Twisting her so that her palms were facing up, he laughed as the papers fell silently on the dirt path. "Look at these hands." He spoke toward his comrades, smiling evilly.

“The hands of a spy! A Jew spy!”

“The hands of a whore!”

“Let me be! Please, let me go!” were the last words Zipre spoke that day. She never saw the fist coming at her and later couldn’t recall which of the trio had first thrown the punch. In all her years, she had never been hit, and from the first blow she receded into a state of semi-consciousness, experiencing the pain and degradation of the next minutes as if they were hours. She felt as though she were out of her body, like she was watching a nightmare from above.

Zipre remembered hitting the ground. She remembered her blouse being ripped and her skirt bunched up around her waist. Her underpants ripped by filthy fingers. The taste of blood in her mouth. Dirty, coarse hands latching onto her skin like leeches. Nervous laughter. Shouted words: “Whore! Bitch! Christ killer!” The slobber and stink of one; abrasion from the rough face of another. Deep dull pain of forced entry from all three.

She remembered the arrival of men on horses. Arguing. Shouting. She might have been taken back to town by cart.

Zipre woke in her bed the next morning, scared at first and then relieved to see her father from the eye that wasn’t swollen shut. As she drifted in and out of consciousness, memories of the past day slowly started coming into focus. At first, she allowed herself to feel fortunate to be alive, but these thoughts were quickly washed away by a flood of unrelenting pain.

**New York • 5th of Sivan, 5675 – Tuesday May 18,
1915**

“MILTON, HERE’S A buck. Go to Saperstein’s and ask him for the magazine. The one for Harmon.”

“Um, OK, boss.”

Holding the black wooden shaft, she thumped his chest menacingly with the large brass head of her cane, “*The Illustrated War News*. Should be fifty cents.”

“OK, boss.”

“Be sure it’s the April issue, not March,” Julia shouted at Milton’s back as he crossed Spring Street. “And pick me up today’s *World!*”

“OK, boss.”

“Then meet us at the Spring Street station. And hurry!” Marta yelled to Milton.

“OK, hurry,” Milton said, without turning.

Marta turned to Julia. “Ma’am, with all due respect. He is such an idiot. How can you?”

“He’s a dear. And he’s muscle. Every army needs artillery; every business needs muscle.”

“Enough with the General Julia shtick, already.”

As they walked, Julia reached up to put a hand on Marta’s shoulder, “Seriously, Milty is like a brother to me.”

“I’ve always wondered about him.”

“We met on the Kronprinz, two days out of Bremen. Bad weather had set in and the boat heaved all night long. Now for most people in steerage, this was the first time on a boat and the waves sent many to the gunwales, puking out what food they managed to carry onboard. But not Julia, no siree! For me it was like being rocked to sleep.”

“I suppose it was nothing after what you went through getting to Germany, obtaining the papers, with the gypsies and all.”

“They were theater people, Russians.”

“Whatever. Go on.”

“I wasn’t tired so I took a walk on the part of the deck they let me walk on. I’m leaning against the railing, looking out at the mighty black nothing and what do I hear? Crying. I turn and see this huge boy, Milton, so I come up to him and ask him if he’s all right. He says he’s scared and alone, his sister didn’t make it, shit her life out in the infirmary. He doesn’t know what to do, where to go. I cuddle him and tell him it will be all right, that I’ll be his new sister; take care of him. At Ellis, I’m Mrs. Harmon going to my husband, Alan Harmon, on Spring Street. Gave them his name and some of my coins, and they let us in.”

“That’s lucky.”

“That’s America.”

“There’s Milton, by the IRT.”

“I’ll tell you the rest of the story later.”

Milton handed her a newspaper and a brown bag with the magazine sticking out of the top. Reaching into his trouser pocket, he produced a handful of change and gave it to Julia. Passing the magazine off to Marta, she eyed the pile of coins in her palm, picked up some coins and handed them to Milton. “For Cracker Jack,” Julia said, heading down the stairs.

“Three,” Julia said.

“Fifteen,” the fare man responded.

They spun themselves through the turnstile before wading into the multitudes crowding the platform. Marta eavesdropped on the conversations around her while Julia kept her nose buried in the *World’s* sports page, studying the Aqueduct race charts.

“See?” Marta said with pride. “I told you it would be all women. It’s a big day for us.”

Julia put her finger on a line on the page before looking up, first at the crowd, then at Marta. “I still can’t see what a baseball game has to do with suffrage, but what the hell; it’s a nice day for a ballgame.”

“You of all people should understand. Take the fight into the heart of enemy territory. What better battlefield than the Polo Grounds? At the game today we’ll be five thousand strong.”

A small group of women approached, handing out sashes taken from a canvas sack one of them had slung over her shoulder. Marta took two. “Here, wear this, Julia. It’s high time you got serious about politics.”

“I prefer to dispense equal rights with Ole’ Jake here.” She tapped the brass tip of her cane on the wooden platform.

“That’s fine for you and me, but what about the rest of the world? Do you really want men, and only men, deciding things? Like the war in Europe?”

Julia stared menacingly at Marta before reaching for the sash and exhaling loudly. “Bitch.”

Marta smiled as the platform began to shake and as the racket of metal on metal grew louder.

“ONE FIFTY-EIGHTH, POLO Grounds! All passengers must exit.”

The two women and Milton sat in a sea of Suffragettes nine rows up, just past third base.

“I love the double steal,” Julia said. “You take bases on guile, on confusion, and on speed. See the Cub at the back of the steal, the one on second?”

“Yeah.”

“Heinie Zimmerman. Max’s cousin.”

“No chance! Does Max have coin on this game?”

“Max has coin on every game, but not like that. Heinie’s clean.”

The crack of ball meeting bat filled the stadium.

“Damn, behind again.”

“Ah, now we know who’s got book on the Giants. You know the Suffragettes are giving Schulte and every other man who

scores today five bucks?”

“You invade the enemy, and then pay them? I thought this was war?”

As soon as Julia said the word “war,” her demeanor changed: her eyes tightened and her brow wrinkled. “Gimme the magazine,” she ordered Milton. “And go get yourself something to eat.”

The cover featured a red line drawing of the distinguished Minister of Munitions, a Mister N. Chamberlain. She ran down the table of contents, her forefinger under each entry as she tried to recognize the mostly foreign words. “Marne, Gallipoli, Ypres, Łódz, Przemyśl. What’s this say, here?” Julia said, pounding the page with her finger.

Marta scanned the words before reading out loud, “The Fall of Przemyśl. Failure of Russia’s First Attempt—Settling Down to a Long Siege—Austria’s Desperate Efforts at Relief—What the Fall of the Fortress Means to Russia’s Campaign.”

Julia rifled through the first section, looking for photos of places she might recognize. Turning a page she came on a black and white picture of a fort, not one of those near Medyka, but almost identical, completely reduced to rubble.

“Anything in there about the boat the Kraut submarine sank?” Marta asked.

“Fuck the Lusitania. And fuck the Russians. And the Germans too,” Julia replied, without looking up.

Again stamping her finger, this time at the text, she looked up at Marta, “Read. Read it out loud.”

“The fall of Przemyśl was a great blow to Germany. For months strenuous efforts had been made to relieve the fortress.”

“Hold on a sec, Doyle’s batting,” Marta said.

The crowd groaned as the umpire yelled, “Strike three, yeeer out!”

“Best man on the team, my ass. Swing the fucking bat!”

“Keep reading,” Julia demanded.

“And if the men created and helped to retain this feeling of confidence, how much more so did the attitude of the Austrian officer! The Austrian is a fop and a great patron of English tailoring. His well-fitting uniform, his spotless gloves, his polished patent boots, have formed never-failing subjects for the caricaturist’s satire. And here he was in his element, with his frogged jacket, his speckless coat and his jingling silvered scabbard. He filled the cafés, made himself and his kind an excellent circle, took his coffee and rolls in the great dining room of the Café Sieber, and the tatterdemalion children of Przemyśl could watch him through the big plate-glass windows, open-mouthed and a little awe-stricken, and receive to their shrunken frames a reflection of the luxury and glory of that far away capital of which they had heard – Vienna.

Through the streets by day the officers rode and walked. Such as were mounted were astride those thoroughbred horses which it was Austria’s pride to contribute to the world. The war held no more gallant or wonderful sight than Przemyśl presented, even in its darkest days. General Kusmanek, commanding the garrison, represented the culminating point of military magnificence. Riding through the streets with his 70 staff officers, a brilliant cavalcade with flashing accoutrements and flawless uniforms, he brought back to war something of its departed glories.”⁶

“Here, boss,” Milton said, handing Julia change first, then a hot dog in a bun with onions and mustard wrapped in wax paper. Next, he presented a bag of salted in-the-shell peanuts to Marta. She lobbed a perfunctory “thanks” his way before setting on the bag, neatly cracking open the shells, allowing the empty husks to fall on the picture of General Mackensen, the victor of Przemyśl, standing in front of a hotel, flanked by his staff.

Balancing the hot dog on her thigh, Julia picked a nickel from the pile of change in her hand and presented it Milton.

“Wud I miss?” he asked.

“Nut’in. All quiet on the baseball front,” Julia said, sweeping the small pile of shells off the magazine onto Marta’s lap.

“Get ready,” Marta said as Cy Williams’s fly out to shallow center ended the Cub’s half of the seventh. She reached into her canvas bag and produced two American flags, each stapled to a wooden dowel. “Here, take it.”

“For what?”

“Now.”

Marta stood, followed by Julia and each raised her flag overhead, whooping loudly, joining about 5,000 other women, clustered on the third base side but sprinkled throughout the Polo Grounds.

“Suffrage now, votes for women!” the women chanted, drawing an occasional male heckle.

Banners began to replace the American flags.

“Lunatics and convicts can’t vote! Are women to be grouped with them?” Marta read from a sign about ten rows up.

“What’s that one say?” Julia asked, pointing.

“Kaiser Wilson, remember your sympathy for people of Europe not self-governed? Twenty-million American women are not self-governed. Take the beam out of your own eye!”

Milton ate Cracker Jack as the demonstration died down and the Giants came up to bat in the bottom of the inning. Marta continued reading.

After the Giants made their first out, a group of women a few rows down began chanting suffragette slogans.

“Go back to the kitchen,” an older man yelled from directly behind Marta. “Or back to the bedroom,” the man next to him yelled, his diction slightly slurred. “I ought to teach you some respect, ya’ stupid bitches.”

“Respect?” Julia said to herself several times. Normally she would have let such drunken ravings pass. After all, this was a ball park, not the parlor of her house. But not this time, not those particular words. She stood and turned,

cane in hand. “I’m sorry, were you addressing me?”

Milton and Marta turned without standing.

“I’m thinking that you’ll want to apologize to the lady,” Marta said.

“Like, now,” Milton added.

The two men stood and looked down contemptuously at the two women and the man-boy holding a box of Cracker Jack. The men’s height and the number of beers each had drunk imbued them with overabundant self-confidence.

“I got a better idea. Why don’t you kike quiffs just shut the fuck up.”

Milton set his box down. Julia moved the brass knob at the end of her cane to his chest, “Easy, Milty, easy. They called us Jew whores, not you.” In a flash, Julia gripped the shaft of the cane and with all the strength in both arms, swung the club, deftly guiding the metal knob into the groin of one of the men standing above her. As he doubled over in pain, the other man reached for Julia’s arm only to be intercepted by Milton. A quick twist and a pull accompanied a sickening snap, and the other man was on his knees, wailing over his dislocated forefinger. He collapsed onto the sticky wooden plank in front of his seat.

As Julia raised her weapon, preparing to club the prostrate hecklers, Marta tugged on her sleeve. “Cops. Let’s beat it.”

Other than the run the Cubs scored in the top of the first following the double steal, no other runners crossed home plate that day.

Przemyśl • 6th of Sivan, 5675 – Wednesday, May 19, 1915

“I KNOW THAT working on Shavuot is strictly forbidden but I have been up all night praying and I know you are fair and that you will understand and forgive me given these

particular circumstances,” was the last prayer Meyer Weiss said before walking over to his meeting at the Café Elite.

Meyer had no trouble arranging the meeting with General Artamonoff, the Russian commander of what was now called Peremishl, as each man’s reputation as an erudite and prosperous capitalist effortlessly spanned the battle lines.

“Bring us schnapps and canapés,” Weiss ordered, in German, “and a coffee for me.” Meyer turned to the Russian. “Forgive me, General. I was up all night. Business, you know.”

Artamonoff nodded.

The lunch became a pleasant affair once the two men discovered their mutual obsessions with billiards and modern science and their common fluency in German.

“Our Third will easily fend off the Austrian Third in the Dunajec salient,” the Russian said, selecting a mushroom pâté canapé from the waiter’s assortment. “Frankly, I’m more worried about the German Fourth breaking out to the north.” He ate the small pastry puff whole. “But the one thing we can count on is the krauts not having a clue as to what the blintzes are doing!”

Meyer joined the Russian in hearty laughter. “Then the Tsar’s victory is assured,” he said with convincing enthusiasm as he raised his opulent schnapps glass in toast to the Tsar.

Artamonoff had previously been the head of the Russian Army’s cartographic service in St. Petersburg, and was as at ease with merchants and intellectuals as he was with the finer accoutrements of privileged living. Meyer spared no expense on his new friend, serving a multi-course epicurean feast of trout, pheasant and scalloped potatoes followed by the oldest French cognac and finishing with the finest Cuban cigars. Their discussion wandered from politics to sport then settled on science, a topic both men were well versed in and with which Artamonoff seemed most at ease.

“It is a pleasure to be able to keep, how shall I put this,

cultured company.” Meyer glanced around, and then lowered his voice, “The Austrians can be so provincial.”

“Perhaps at our next lunch you will allow me to relate my experience with the Budapest Professor Baron Eötvös and his work with torsion balance surveys.”

“I’ve heard of his work,” Meyer said. “Application to underground mapping.”

“Think petroleum, my good man. Imagine pinpointing the location of petroleum pools deep in the earth before drilling.”

“I own some small tracts of land to the southeast where the occasional well yields the black ooze. Knowing where to drill, the profit implications are staggering.”

“To Eötvös,” the Russian said, lifting his glass. “To profit!” They both emptied their glasses.

“General, I hate to see the governor of our little village, a man of the world, a cultured man, living in a Hotel like a common merchant. It simply does not befit your stature.”

As Meyer poured, Artamonoff looked at his schnapps glass. “Ludmilla gives me no peace with her complaints about the barn we reside at in the village she thinks is in the center of nowhere.”

“I am a widower with but one daughter, living in one of the finest residences in all of Galicia. Will you and your lovely wife do me the honor of making my house the residence of the governor of Peremishl?”

The General looked up at Meyer and sighed. “It would be an honor, a true honor.”

“Then you accept?”

“I would be in your debt.”

“Yes...” Meyer bit his tongue. “Then it is settled, my friend. You move to my house and we have lunch every Monday.”

“Settled.” They shook hands and drank.

“About the decree...”

“The decree does not apply to obvious friends of the Tsar, like you. I shall have a word with Kiriakov immediately.”

“How very, very kind of you, Governor.” Meyer reached into his vest pocket and removed a piece of paper. Sandwiched between two fingers, he passed it discreetly to his new friend. “I have taken the liberty of listing for you a few more Jewish friends of the Tsar.”

“Why, thank you, Mister Weiss.”

“Meyer. Please, call me Meyer.”

They concluded lunch over coffee, exchanging details of the lives of their children. Right after Meyer signed for the meal, Artamonoff raced off to the City Hotel, anxious to inform his wife of this most fortuitous development.

Meyer walked back to the synagogue and spent the balance of the afternoon reading about the great-grandparents of King David, the lord’s anointed one, the beloved king of the Jews.

Two days later, at dawn, in the name of army discipline, three Ukrainian enlisted men from a small town outside of Kiev were hanged from a makeshift gallows hastily erected on the Rynek.

Dangling from nooses, the bodies were left to putrefy in the unseasonably hot Galician sunshine, an example to soldier and civilian alike.

Przemyśl • 21st of Sivan, 5675 – Thursday, June 3, 1915

A CROWD HAD been gathering at the temporary fence separating Plac Zgody from the military encampment near the quay ever since the 10th had marched through town.

Save a few young boys who tried to enter the camp only to be shooed away by baton-wielding military police, most of the townspeople were content to watch the building of the vast army camp from afar, hoping only for a glimpse of a loved one. Many had brought flowers, fruits, and cakes, both for their returning soldier and to give to the police in exchange

for confirmation that their loved one had made it home alive.

“Finally, here’s Zineman,” Elia said, pulling a rope tight between a stake and a tent pole. “Maybe we can get out of this swamp now.”

“If he holds us here one more minute, I’m going to shoot him in the back,” Manes said, pounding a tent stake into the sandy soil.

“Liberty at sixteen-hundred, assembly here at midnight, zero hundred hours, sharp,” the battalion commander said to men.

Elia stood and let out a deeply held breath. He stared at the ground, hand on his forehead.

Manes looked up at Elia and dropped the sledgehammer. “I am so...” He stood. “I can’t believe I said... in the back.”

“It’s all right. Really, it is.”

“Thanks, Elia.” Manes reached out and bear-hugged Elia.

“Thank you, Manes for being my comrade; for being my friend.”

“Thank you, Elia.”

“Manes?”

“Yeah?”

“No offense, but you’re not who I want to hold right now.”

Manes laughed. “Same for me, brother. Same for me!”

Elia turned serious, “Why didn’t I see her? Something’s wrong.”

“She’s fine, Romeo. Probably baking. Lots of Polacks and Krauts to feed tonight.”

“Did you hear what Juda was yelling at us? I couldn’t make it out.”

“No, but he didn’t look sad or anything. No black on Gitla. She’s fine, trust me, Elia, just fine.”

“But...”

“She’s fine.”

The bells of the Cathedral tolled, soon joined by a cheer that rose from the camp, passed the rail trestle, and landed

in the waiting ears of parents, siblings and lovers waiting on Plac Zgody.

By the fourth and final bell, all tools had hit the ground and every one of the sons of the city was in full flight. Soon the barricade separating the soldiers from their loved ones ceased to be a factor, as part of it was moved by the police, the rest trampled by the mob. Two masses of humanity ran at each other.

Elia dove into the front line, looking from side to side, occasionally jumping for a better view. He searched, ignoring dozens of vaguely familiar faces, oblivious to the many frantic requests as to the whereabouts of a townsman or soldier.

“Have you seen Silverberg? Shimon Silverberg? Why isn’t he your sergeant?” A hysterical woman screamed at the wave of soldiers.

The fortunate ones paired off quickly, evidenced by hugs, kisses and even small displays of dancing. The others stood around empty handed, sobbing at the fresh realization of a loss, or congregated around a bereaved mother or a heartbroken widow.

He heard hundred of voices at once, all meaningless, until a single word wafted gently across the Plac and into his ear.

“Elia!”

Suddenly the din of joy and sorrow fell silent, even though everyone was still talking. Elia heard only her, as if she were whispering in his ear as they lay on the grassy slope of the Josef quay, watched only by the stars.

“Elia!”

He saw her through a gap in the humanity as colors drained to gray, even though soldiers still wore ribbons and families were dressed in their finest clothes. Rivka’s hair was a reflective, shimmering black, flecked with a dusting of flour, like a cup of coffee reflecting moonlight.

“Rivka!” He ran at her.

“Elia!” She ran at him.

They fell into each other, arms wrapping tightly, her head alighting on his chest and neck, his lips buried in her hair. He was desperate to kiss her, but each time he tried to push back from the clinch, she tightened her grip, burrowing her face deeper into his neck, pressing her breasts more firmly into his chest, and flattening her thigh against the front of his trouser.

Elia whispered to her ear, “Rivka, I love how you sound when you breathe. I love how you feel against me. I love how you care.” He took a deep breath, “I love how you smell.”

They held each other for another silent moment before Rivka loosened her grip and both pushed back to arm’s length, face to face. “Elia, I love everything about you.” Their lips fell together and opened and their tongues danced, heads pressed firmly together by fingers nestled in the hair of the other.

Rivka pushed back and spoke, “I love how you smell too. But you really could use a bath.”

Elia laughed as the color and sound returned to the Plac.

“Let’s continue this later, where we can be alone,” Rivka whispered to him as they strolled arm-in-arm toward the Malz home.

“IT WASN’T LIKE that,” Rivka protested. “He was, he is, a Jew, just like us. And not even from Russia, from Vilna.”

“Weren’t you worried that the Germans would suspect you of harboring the enemy?”

Juda put his arm on Elia’s shoulder, “The whole Russian Army moved into homes, or at least all the officers. It was a posted proclamation. There was no choice. We were lucky. They cleaned Rothman out, all his silver, gone. Bethauer had to watch his daughter like a hawk. She’s what, fourteen? Even Meyer had to give up his house, even if it was to the Governor. By any measure, Pytor was a saint of a man. Rivka

fed him and Gitla did his washing, and he always brought more than he ate; he kept us safe from the Cossacks.”

They took a break from the conversation to allow Elia to eat. After chewing several mouthfuls, he dropped his fork, piquing everyone’s attention. He looked at Gitla, “I’ve always said it, but tonight, for the first time, I actually mean it.”

She set her fork down and looked up at him, smiling. “Huh?”

“Your *flanken* is delicious.”

Everyone laughed. Gitla rose from her seat and came around the table behind Elia and put her arms around him, squeezing tightly, saying over and over again, “Little *momzer*.”

“I hear Silverberg didn’t make it,” Juda said.

“No, and so close to home. Got typhus or something in Sanok and was gone in two days. The bravest Jew I ever met. After all the shells and bullets they fired at him, he died by, well, in the latrine. So unfair.”

“Dead is dead,” Rivka offered.

“No, dead is not dead,” Elia said, his face tightening.

Gitla watched her nephew push a slice of pickled beet around in circles. It left red streaks on the china. “What?” she asked.

“Nothing, I just feel a bit queasy in the stomach, that’s all.”

“Queasy?”

“After army rations, I guess I’m not used to such richness.”

Gitla set her silverware on the plate, “Don’t bullshit a bullshitter, mister Reifer.”

“Gitla, I just—”

“Elia...”

He took a sip of lukewarm tea. “I killed a man.”

“It’s war, Elia, everyone kills in war,” Juda offered, tenderly.

“I shot him as he ran. I shot him in the back.”

Elia spent the next few minutes relating the story of the two stretcher carriers, the rescue gone wrong, the Russian murderer and his demise, the brief celebrity and the

promotion.

“It’s war, Elia, everyone kills in war,” Juda offered, again.

Elia nodded, unconvincingly.

“Elia, my sweetheart,” Rivka interjected. “In times like these we are forced, not once, but over and over, to make the decision between the unholy and the unforgivable. In exactly the same way that the well-fed have no right of moral judgment over the starving, the civilian has no right of moral judgment over the fighting soldier.

She extended her hand across the tabletop and took Elia’s.

“What matters is not which you choose because both are unspeakable, Elia. What matters is that you feel and you know, in your head and in your heart that it is a fork in a lane with no righteous path to travel on. Feeling guilty means you feel. The real tragedy of war is not when people kill. It is when people cease to feel bad about killing.”

“I love you all so much.” Elia said, barely audible.

Gitla rose with dishes in each hand. “Juda, a hand in the kitchen?”

A fast learner, he loaded up on dishes and headed toward the kitchen.

SŁOWACKIEGO AT NIGHTFALL was bustling with an even split of Austrian and German soldiers, some marching on duty, others enjoying their first taste of city liberty in months.

Elia steered Rivka up the hill as soon as they left the house, their handhold turning into arms around waists after a few paces. As soon as they were out of eyeshot, they stopped and turned toward each other. “Where...” One word was all she got out before her lips were smothered by his. For the next few minutes they were lost to the world of here and now.

Though the sight of couples kissing and pawing each other in public was not unusual, Elia and Rivka received their fair share of hoots, catcalls, and obscene words of encouragement.

They broke the kiss but kept the embrace. “I don’t want to go to the cemetery, Elia.”

“Sweetheart, we don’t have to do anything you aren’t comfortable with.”

“No, it’s not that. It’s awful. It’s a secret, sort of, though everyone knows.

“What?”

“Zipre was attacked in the cemetery. By the Cossacks.”

“Bastards.”

“She’s going to be all right. For a moneyed girl, she’s pretty tough. Meyer had the perpetrators hanged.”

“Too good for them.”

Rivka pulled him in, burying her face in his neck. whispering, “No more sad talk. Not tonight. Tonight I want you and only you.” She pushed back just enough to bring them face to face, and then whispered, “Do you want me?”

“The world can go to hell. The world is going to hell. You are my world. Yes. Yes now. Yes tomorrow. And yes forever. I love you.”

“I longed for you, every day you were away.”

They held each other as a group of four half-drunk German infantrymen loudly suggested, in a most congenial manner, that perhaps the couple should hire a room at a hotel of their choosing.

“Castle Park?” Elia suggested.

“No. It’s not like before. The trees are gone. First Hungarians then Russians camped there. Nothing now but a sea of mud.”

“Damn.”

“We can go to my house. No one’s there.”

“Tanchem’s?”

“Father and Malka’s train isn’t in until the morning and Izac’s company is still up at Jaroslaw.”

“Could you be comfortable in your own home, your own bed?”

“I could with you.”

“We’ll be seen, Rivka. Reputations matter.”

“To hell with reputation, Elia, there’s a war on. Besides, no one will see us. I have a plan.”

“A plan, sweetheart?”

“Ancient family secret.”

“What kind of—”

Rivka put her finger on his lips. “Trust me.” She pulled her finger off and kissed him. “Now, let’s walk.” They strolled down the hill, hand in hand, following Elia’s old route to work.

“There’s a trap door in the back of the shop, on the floor, under the rug by daddy’s drafting table. It leads down to an old coal cellar shared by three buildings.”

“Czarnieckiego twenty-five, six and seven?”

“Exactly. Here’s the key to the shop.”

A few minutes later they kissed and pretended to go their separate ways. Rivka went through the front door of her father’s home, bolted the door behind her, lit a candle, disrobed, and slipped into her bed. Elia walked in circles before making his way into the Arm factory, to Tanchem’s drafting table, to the coal cellar, up the ladder, and into his lover’s bedroom. He peeled his clothes off before diving into Rivka’s open arms.

For the first time they embraced, skin to skin. Their lips met, their mouths opened, their hands explored new realms. The war never happened and there never was a siege. Only two people had ever lived in Galicia, on earth or in the heavens.

“Oh, Elia. My lover, Elia. ”

“Rivka, my beautiful Rivka.”

The moment overwhelmed Elia, silencing his voice yet elevating his senses in ways that before this night were inconceivable. Sheer force of passion, generated by a constant stream of new discoveries—the feel of her breast, the

caress of her thigh, the mutual exploration to the very core of intimacy—seemed to nullify feelings of horror, loneliness and even guilt he had brought back from the war. It was a religious awakening, a long-desired affirmation of the true plenty of life after a bitter winter of dearth and death; the quenching of thirst after giving up on the hope that water really exists.

God had finally delivered on a weapon capable of defeating the endless malevolence that encircled their lives and Elia and Rivka were determined to deploy it. They made love twice that evening; the first time furiously and to a quick resolution, the second time slower and more mutually fulfilling, ending with dreams in each other's arms.

Elia made it back to the camp with only minutes to spare. He stretched out on his field blanket in his tent and smoked a cigarette before rolling over, trying to find a comfortable sleeping position on the uneven ground.

That night he had another dream about the painting of the woman by the Spanish artist. She was the woman he had just made love to, only now seen from a hundred angles simultaneously. Rivka's body was a complex form, possessing not only length, height, and width, but dozens of other dimensions, most measured with sensation, not a rule. Liberated from spatial constraints, she leapt off the canvas, freed to explore indescribable worlds of warm, sweaty skin and pure emotion.

His dream had no plot, no beginning and no end, yet it finally made everything he had ever known, felt, or believed in make sense.

**Przemyśl • 26th of Sivan, 5675 – Tuesday, June 8,
1915**

“OF COURSE I know what happened to your daughter, Meyer,” Gitla said.

They sat in the corner booth of the woman’s salon on the well-cushioned, high-backed, wicker banquette, Meyer with his back to the wall, Gitla facing him.

He positioned his pipe, a box of matches, and a tin of tobacco on the table and began his preparations to smoke while Gitla’s eyes wandered first to the rococo silver sugar boat centered on the table, then to a painting of a heavily armed, smirking royal on a beautiful palomino horse. In the middle of his ritual, Meyer looked up at his guest and asked, “Mind if I smoke?”

She shrugged, “Mind if I fart?”

“Gitla, Gitla, Gitla,” he said, shaking his head, smiling.

“You know how much I hate this place, Meyer.”

“I’m sorry, but I really did need to talk in confidence.”

“So we couldn’t meet in the woods? Any place but the Hibler.”

“Look, Meyer Weiss, taking a meeting anywhere other than this Café is so out of the ordinary as to guarantee suspicion.”

A waiter in formal attire delivered tea and sweets. Gitla waited until he was gone before speaking, barely above a whisper, “A wolf loses his hair but not his nature.”

Meyer said nothing, knowing that as in chess, no direct response—a tempo move—was usually the best response to an unfocused attack.

Gitla focused on the barroom, off limits to women. “So I suppose these are your new friends?” The room was packed with German officers playing billiards and drinking in a fog of cigar smoke. “Eight months to find Przemyśl, a day to find billiards and booze.”

Meyer chuckled, playing with his teaspoon.

Gitla leaned over the table, “Cut the crap. I wouldn’t play your little game when we were young and I’m not about to start now.”

Meyer stared at her without blinking. “I’ve asked you to tea to seek your—”

“I know why you asked to see me.”

He leaned in toward her, lowering his voice. “I will pay you handsomely.”

“That’s so like you, Meyer.”

“And be forever in your debt.”

“Now that’s a fart in a tub.”

“If you could help me.”

“Help the mighty Herr Weiss?”

“I believe that my Zipre may be, be...” The most powerful Jew in Eastern Galicia put his palms on the table and focused on the geometric pattern embossed on the zinc ceiling. A few tears pooled in the depressions his eyes sat in. Gitla reached out and covered Meyer’s hands with hers.

“Pregnant,” she said, barely above a whisper, squeezing. He leveled his head. “How did you know?”

“When the banker buys soapwort, he’s both constipated and playing doctor or he’s a worried father pretending to be an herbalist encouraging his daughter’s womanly flow.” She let go of his hands and sat back in her chair. “I’m betting on the latter.”

Meyer smiled thinly, “You haven’t changed a bit, Gitla. You would have made a formidable merchant had fate pushed you down that path.”

“Perhaps,” she said, “but for today, your daughter is in need of an abortionist, not a merchant.”

“I often think about what would have happened if we had—”

“This you have to say now? Sometimes I forget just what a bastard you can be, Meyer Weiss.”

They sipped tea and nibbled at cakes and cookies for the next few minutes.

“Can we continue, Gitla?”

“By all means.”

“All right. How much shall this all be?”

“Money, always with money.” Gitla looked up at the ceiling. “This is so much more serious than your precious banknotes. Zipre could bleed to death. It may not work and she may end up with a mongrel or worse.”

“I understand risk,” Meyer said.

“This isn’t like business.”

“I understand the risks to my daughter.”

“Good. First, I will need four Kronen for medicine, and not a Heller more. Less than the price of a box of cigarettes. The rest I shall find in the woods.”

“Four?”

“Four. Second, leave town. Go to your flat in Cracow. This will not be pretty and the last thing I need is a squeamish father kibitzing over my shoulder. Rivka and I will take care of your daughter.”

“And?”

“Third, if it does not take, or if for any reason Zipporah decides to keep it, you will promise to love and care for both her and her child forever after, regardless of the circumstances.”

“I agree,” he said. “She has no reservations about ending this.”

“What makes you so sure?”

Meyer shrugged.

“Fourth, look me in the eye and tell me that you will not have me hanged if your daughter doesn’t make it.”

He looked at her and said, “Whatever happens, I am forever in your debt.”

“Yes, and speaking of debt, allow me to add a final term.”

“How can I object, dear Gitla?”

“I want your word, before God, that if we are successful, you will owe me one very large favor. I have no idea what it might be or even if I will ever use it. I just want you—”

“I will never, repeat, never forget this Gitla. You have my word.”

Meyer signaled the waiter with a quick movement of his thumb and forefinger then pulled a roll of banknotes from his pants pocket. Once the bill arrived he peeled off a purple ten Kronen note and tossed it on top of the handwritten tabulation resting on the small silver tray. He could not help but notice how much the Princess Rohan, framed on the right side of the banknote, resembled his Zipporah. A deep sadness came over him as the waiter took her from the table in exchange for a small pile of silver coins.

He left one coin for the waiter and pushed the other four across the table toward Gitla, feeling uncomfortable that the payment for such an important transaction should be so small.

**Przemyśl • 28th of Sivan, 5675 – Thursday, June
10, 1915**

GITLA WALKED UP Mickiewiczza toward the Weisses’ house, oblivious to the guttural laughter emanating from the two tables of German officers lounging on the terrace of the Metropol. A block later she arrived at the Weiss manse, where Rivka met her at the door, relieving her of the bundle of greens she was carrying on her shoulder.

Rivka brought Zipse into the kitchen where Gitla was drying her hands on a white linen cloth. “Sit, my child,” the older woman said, patting a chair next to her. Faded plum-colored bruises on her forearms and under her eyes were the only sign of Zipse’s beating. She appeared hale and recovered as she sashayed across the room, planting a kiss on Gitla’s cheek. “Sit, sit,” she said, gently pushing her toward the chair. Seated, Zipse’s eyes locked onto Gitla’s face and she spoke forcefully, “You are so sweet to come take

care of me. I want, no, need for this nightmare to end. I want to love my children. I, I, um, cannot, um, I.” She stuttered and began to weep, but only briefly before straightening her sitting posture and regaining her self-control. Zipre patted her stomach, “I cannot have this baby.”

“So how do you feel? When was your last period?” Gitla asked. Rivka served tea which Gitla ignored. Without the slightest hint of modesty she leaned forward and reached into Zipre’s blouse, palpating both of her breasts.

“I was due two weeks ago. My last menstruation was mid-April. It’s been four weeks since I was... twenty eight days since Mama’s *Yartzeit*.”

Gitla nodded several times before pushing her patient’s torso backwards until she was splayed across two chairs and her head rested on Rivka’s lap. In one swift motion, Gitla knelt before her, pulling her dress up and her undergarments down, positioning Zipre’s legs and hips to expose her genitals for examination.

“Esther and I were best friends growing up,” she said, keenly eyeing the telltale bluish tinge of her vagina. After a rapid but skillful probe of Zipre’s insides, she added, “You’re pregnant. There is no doubt about it.”

“Well, that much I knew. I’ve been throwing up for the past week. So how did you know Mother?”

“Before she met your father we were in gymnasium together. She taught me how to wear lip rouge; I taught her how to smoke cigarettes.”

“Impossible!” Zipre snapped.

Rivka playfully covered Zipre’s mouth with her hand. “I can’t decide which is more incredible, your mother strolling to the synagogue while smoking a cigarette or Gitla collecting flowers wearing lip rouge?”

Gitla helped herself to a biscuit, allowing time for the light mood to slip away. “Listen girls, it’s time to be serious.” She pulled Zipre back to a seated position. “You are certainly a

month pregnant. The seed in your belly is smaller than a grape. More like a raisin. And it is not,” she shook a finger at Zipre, “a baby. So let us not call it one. Babies live and breathe. This thing cannot live outside of you. It is not a baby.” She paused to sip tea and let it sink in. “From here on, we shall call it,” she stared up at the dark oak crown molding girding the ceiling, “a raisin.” The girls chuckled nervously.

“How exactly do we get the raisin out of Zipre’s belly?” Rivka asked.

Pointing to the bundle of plants on the table Gitla began to lecture, “They grow everywhere. You’ve trod on them all your life, never knowing their power.”

The girls leaned in closer.

“First, we weaken the strings between the raisin and the stomach; the bloodlines that nourish the thing. Make your womb inhospitable. You’ll drink a half liter of cotton root bark tea every three hours, day and night, fresh herbs daily. On day two, I’ll make an oil infusion using two stronger abortificants: rue and wild carrot.” She lifted a specimen of each as she spoke. “I’ll soak a wad of cotton in the oil and you will apply it vaginally. You should begin bleeding within hours.”

She paused to finish her tea. Rivka reached out for Zipre’s hand. “On day three you drink a strong tea made from tansy. One liter, all at once, followed an hour later by another liter. This will cause the stomach walls to contract and if we are lucky, you will expel the thing.”

Zipre looked at the table of herbs, “And what if I am not so lucky?”

Gitla reached into her cloak and pulled out a small amber vial. “Oil of pennyroyal,” she said. “It is poison and will make you sick. But it will expel the raisin.”

Zipre straightened her posture and lifted her head, “Very good then. Let’s get started.”

The cramps began almost immediately. Bleeding commenced during the first night. By the second day she was convulsing, vomiting bile, and bleeding clotted blood. On the morning of the third day, Gitla again poured a sample of Zipre's menstrual blood, caught in a small rubber cup inserted against her cervix, into a large clear glass jar. Taking out a large, rectangular magnifying glass, she scanned the chaotic swirls of the merging liquids. Unlike the past four times she had checked, thin yellow filaments were obvious and abundant, proof positive of pregnancy termination. She let out an audible sigh, glad to have only used two drops of the lethal oil.

Six

**Przemyśl • 1st of Tishrei, 5678 – Monday,
September 17, 1917**

THOUSANDS GATHERED ON the banks of the San a few minutes before noon on a hot, overcast day. They came from every corner of town and represented the full spectrum of the town's Jews: Orthodox, Hassidic, Progressive, Secular Atheist, and *Shabbos* Jews. Coalescing into clusters of friends and extended family, they milled about, trading vignettes—a post from a son at the front, theories about the war, or simply the latest gossip sweeping the town. Solidifying their boundaries as they engulfed stragglers from the periphery, distinct groups formed and moved toward the riverbank. After reciting the *Tachlich*, the assemblage disbanded and each member stepped to the river's edge. Following a period of silent contemplation—seconds for some, minutes for others—individuals emptied their pockets, casting the breadcrumbs, scrap paper, and lint into the eddies and currents of the San. Pockets turned inside out, flotsam washing down the stream, their souls were purged of the past year's sorrow.

Having visited the water, Rivka and her clan climbed to the top of the treeless quay, extending New Year's greeting

with all who happened by. As the haze began to lift the temperature spiked, the conversations ebbed. Alone at the edge of the gathering, Rivka watched the parade of people, considering what sorrows might have been purged from their souls as well as what crumbs remained in their pockets.

Two years on and Malka still pines for the synagogue wedding she never had—as if Manes would ever have set foot in a synagogue, even for her. Only a Feldrabiner’s blessing, a night of consummation, and Lea to rear alone. Mister Weiss has everything yet is terribly lonely. How he desperately wants to be liked. Daddy too is lonely—he wants Izac and the workers back: you can’t be king without subjects. He wants Manes back too, but to hug him or kill him? We all long for Mama. Mama. I miss you so much... Zipporah’s not hard to divine: she wants to find a caller who wants to be her husband—not Meyer’s son-in-law—and tries each day to forget the unspeakable. Gitla: the faster she delivers babies the faster the pine boxes come—she carries everyone’s pain—always sad for others, never for herself. Petra: no matter what she casts to the San she’ll never get over losing Dov. Isidore, my sweet Isidore—torn between charity and greed...

A distant rumble of thunder broke Rivka’s concentration. She looked down at her hands, “And then there’s Rivka.” She exhaled, mouth open. “So where do I begin?”

Trieste • 1st of Tishrei, 5678 – Monday, September 17, 1917

THE 10TH WAS encamped along the hundred-meter-wide rise—little more than a scrub-covered sand dune—that ran parallel to the shoreline and kept the vast coastal swamp from draining into the Adriatic.

The men from Przemyśl were exhausted from another day of hard labor in sweltering heat and humidity. As tiring as it

was unloading crates of munitions from the endless stream of trains and boats, to a man they were glad not to be idle a few dozen kilometers north at the front lines, bored to near insanity and rotting in the trenches amid the constant din of incoming and outbound artillery fire.

Manes and Elia sat naked and cross-legged in their tent, slowly pulling on the final few draws of their cigarettes. In spite of being just past 23:00 it wasn't dark. The lights of Trieste glowed through the haze, a permanent fixture in the summer night sky, and a nearly full moon hung overhead, reflecting chaotically off muted ripples in the sea; ample light found its way through the gray canvas for the men to see each other inside the tent. As one talked, the other would puff on his cigarette, the glow briefly illuminating his chapped, dirty red leather face, one of the more obvious consequences of nearly four years of war.

"It's finally happening. The revolution is at hand," Elia said.

"Russia is the vanguard. Germany is next. Just you watch. The workers on both sides of this will stop making shells and bullets and the war will end."

"Can you believe the French army? Refuses to fight."

"I hear they shot the leaders then told the families they died in battle."

"Those behind the lines judging those in the trenches," Elia said, shaking his head. "Swine."

Manes shook his head and pursed his lips, "What the capitalists finally grasp is that the troops are the workers. If we do not fight each other, we might just turn around and march on and take back our homes, our factories. What a colossal mistake they made arming and training us."

"Not only did the capitalists sell us the rope we'll use to hang them, they were nice enough to tie it in a noose."

"You speak with great wisdom," Manes said before inhaling. "For a *shtetl yid*." He blew smoke through a toothy smile.

“Bastard,” Elia answered, smiling. “You know, Manes, at some point we—you and I and everyone else in the regiment—are going to have to make a decision as to who we are fighting in this war. Sometime soon we are going to have to cast off our uniforms and turn our guns on our real enemy.”

“Like Russia. We threw the tsarists out of Przemyśl. They regrouped, changed flags and marched back to Petrograd and tossed the Tsar into the river.”

They smoked in silence.

“It’s hot as hell tonight. What the hell good is a sea if it makes no breeze?” Elia said, exhaling.

“It’s the new year. Perhaps it will bring peace and revolution,” Manes said, adding with a grin, “I mean peace or revolution.”

“Amen,” Elia said, pulling the netting aside then flicking his smoldering butt out of the tent and into the sand.

“Amen. Peace or revolution or a cool breeze.”

“I have an idea.” Elia crawled out of the tent.

He went from tent to tent, rousing the men. “Comrades! Fellow soldiers! The time has come! Join me!” In no time Elia led thirty naked men on a noisy march down the sand dune to the wet sand on the shoreline, their feet occasionally lapped by a small waves.

A ship’s light was visible on the horizon as conversations wound down and ended. The men’s heads bowed, arms dropped to their sides. One soldier bent over and scooped up a handful of sand. Someone else followed him, then another, and soon everyone. The first man stepped into the sea so the water nearly covered his shins, lifted his head, and began chanting:

Who is a God like You? You forgive sins and overlook transgressions. For the survivors of Your People; He does not retain His anger forever, for He loves Kindness.

The rest of the detachment waded in and joined the prayer:

He will return and show us mercy, and overcome our sins, And You will cast into the depths of the sea all their sins; You will show kindness to Yaakov and mercy to Avraham, As You did promise to our fathers of old.

Each man cast his handful of sand into the waters of the Adriatic.

An hour later, after a rowdy moonlight swim, Elia, Manes and the rest of the 10th were back in their tents sleeping.

Early the next morning, a female *anopheles* mosquito alit on Elia's arm. Piercing his skin with her proboscis, she injected a miniscule amount of saliva into the wound before sucking his blood into her abdomen. In addition to anticoagulation proteins, the saliva contained sporozoites of the parasite *plasmodium falciparum* which had been growing in the intestine of the mosquito for weeks and had recently been discharged into her salivary glands. Within hours the sporozoites congregated in Elia's liver and began to multiply. Three weeks later, long after the itch caused by his body's immune response to the mosquito saliva had abated; the sporozoites would metamorphose into merozoites and attack Elia's red blood cells, triggering a release of toxins causing paroxysmal chills and violent fevers.

Elia awoke the next morning and scratched the itch on his arm, hale and refreshed after the midnight swim and a good night's sleep.

**New York • 1st of Tishrei, 5678 – Monday,
September 17, 1917**

THE ODEON THEATER

58 Clinton Street

Presents

Arbuckle and Keaton in:

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**“Coney Island”**

**Shows 10:00 am to 11:00 pm**

“Been ages since the last post from Elia,” Julia said, turning away from the movie toward Marta.

*Fatty drops his head and cries by the turnstile as he watches his girlfriend enter the amusement park with another man. Just as he loses all hope, he notices a dustman bringing a half dozen or so recently emptied trash barrels back into the park one by one on a small hand truck.*

She continued, oblivious to the multiple calls for her to “Shut the hell up!” from darkness of the audience behind them.

“Something must be wrong—what do you think?”

“I’m tryin’ to watch a picture, Julia. All right. What? Don’t you like ‘em anymore?”

*With unexpected stealth and agility, Fatty climbs into the last barrel and after a brief scratch of the head by the confused dustman, is chauffeured onto the Midway in the style to which he had become accustomed.*

“I like a lot about New York—my house, my girls, the subways, Coney Island—but most of all, and you know it’s the truth, I love Buster and Fatty.” Julia reached for a handful of popped corn from the oil-stained brown paper bag lodged between Marta’s legs.

“If something was really bad, you would have heard by now,” Marta said before stuffing her mouth with her own

handful.

*Arbuckle struts off triumphantly with the girl but as he passes Keaton who is swinging a mallet on the ‘Test Your Strength’ machine, he gets whacked in the jaw and is knocked over. Buster, sitting on the tester’s platform, breaks out in laughter. Arbuckle picks up the sledge hammer and crowns Keaton so hard that the metal rabbit rises to the top of the scale and sounds the bell and the attendant awards Arbuckle a cigar.*

Marta laughed so hard that she sprayed half a handful of partially chewed popcorn from her mouth. Julia took another handful.

“You all right, Julia?” Marta whispered, handing the nearly empty sack to her.

*Fatty can’t find a bathing suit to fit his girth and ends up in a woman’s one, with a hat and wig to boot. Keaton enters, laughing hysterically at the big man in drag.*

The theater rang with laughter as Julia sat plucking out the un-popped kernels from the bag, putting them into her vest pocket. “Down in front,” someone yelled when she stood up.

“I’ve got to go. See you at home,” she said to Marta as she brushed by her knees on the way to the aisle.

“But don’t you want to see the end of the movie?”

The man at the end of the row began to stand but before he could get up, she had shimmied by him and was up the aisle toward the lobby.

Leaving the theater for Broome Street, cool darkness gave way to blinding sun and stifling heat as butter and corn yielded to garbage and horse-waste. She kept her eyes nearly shut, mostly to shield them from the sun, but also to try to fight back the first tears.

Reaching East River Park, Julia found a shady stretch along the heavy wrought iron fence that separated the cobblestone walk from the river. Eyes fully open and only the slightest bit



damp, she chanted barely above a whisper,

*Who is a God like You? You forgive sins and overlook transgressions*

*For the survivors of Your People; He does not retain His anger forever, for He loves Kindness; He will return and show us mercy, and overcome our sins—*

“Who am I kidding?” She stared at the water. “This doesn’t mean I believe in you, God. Or whatever, whoever you are.” The water smelled of dead fish and sewage. “But that doesn’t mean that you and I, we can’t understand each other. You give me nothing and I ask for nothing for myself.”

Julia reached into her vest pocket and came out with the scant handful of corn pieces that she cast onto the brown water. The kernels swirled in the turbulent water and floated out of sight, downstream, toward the ocean.

“But just in case I’m wrong about all this and you really are the God everybody talks about, please look out for my Elia. Please. Okay?”