

Seven

Kobarid • 8th of Tishrei, 5678 – Monday, September 24, 1917

THE ITALIAN ARMY had fought a dozen battles against the Austrians; the line between the end of one and the start of another had long since blurred. While the Italian conscripts were content to rest, an overly enthusiastic field artillery officer from Genoa kept eyeing a buildup of enemy troops two ridges in the distance and was sure that they could be hit with his 4.5 inch cannon if it were properly positioned at the top of a west-facing slope. So in a scene reminiscent of Exodus, seventy-five men pulled on two ropes, painstakingly dragging the multi-ton *artiglieria da campo* up the hill. The going was slow on the rain-slicked Alpine scrub, and there was a palpable lack of enthusiasm. The troops, mostly ex-munitions workers from Turin, had recently been transferred to the frontlines—punishment for a traitorous revolt if you asked the officers—to break a strike if you polled the privates.

The gun barrel had been forged nine months earlier at Campo Tizzoro, just outside of Pistoia. It was six meters long and carefully grooved inside such that the shell would be ejected with enormous spin, adding considerably to

the range and accuracy of the projectile. The barrel was mounted on a sled-like tripod base. Behind was a skid plate with a huge iron shovel brake, designed to dig into the earth and anchor the machine firmly against recoil. In front were two steel reinforced wooden wheels which had recently been retrofitted around the circumference with sixteen extra-wide pads—*stivali* the troops called them—necessary to keep the whole contraption from sinking to the axles in the brown Paivian mud.

Once positioned on the crest, the foot soldiers retreated back down the hill, not waiting for orders from their superiors.

What happened next could never have happened without a truly multi-national effort.

The Genovese officer looked across the valley through binoculars made in Milan under license from, ironically, Carl Zeiss of Jena, in the very heart his enemy's Empire. He consulted tables calculated centuries ago in Scotland before instructing his four-man artillery detail to make minute adjustments in attitude and azimuth.

A shell, manufactured near Stoke-on-Trent, and fitted with an impact fuse, was loaded into the breach. Artillery men braced as a captain pulled the firing cord, driving a small hammer into the igniter at the base of the shell. A small charge set off a violent chemical reaction which moved through the much larger propellant charge at hyper-sonic speed. Thanks to the work of a Swedish chemist some fifty years earlier, the main fuel, a stabilized form of nitroglycerin, instantly transformed every four moles of the solid explosive into 35 moles of gas, with little or no residue. Because there was no solid carbon produced, the explosion was almost entirely "smokeless," allowing the gunner an unobstructed line of sight to his target and, far more importantly, not advertising the location of the firing battery to a potential responding enemy.

Confined within the brass casing of the shell, the

4-becomes-35 equation created an almost incomprehensible, if momentary, spike in pressure. Seeking relief, the ten-kilogram payload accelerated away from the shell with a force several thousand times that of the pull of gravity, exiting the barrel at nearly 600 meters per second.

About a foot long, encased in pressed steel, it was, in form, a large bullet. Yet unlike a bullet, the inside was of a well-articulated and devious design. The tip was a fuse, primed to go off on physical impact, and, most specifically not from the massive g-force of firing. Connected to the fuse was a cylinder, about one-sixth the diameter of the shell, filled with gunpowder, centered, and running the length of the shell to the main charge of perhaps 200 grams, in the rear. Thanks to the imagination and inventive genius of the long since departed Henry Shrapnel, a Lieutenant in the British Royal Artillery, the space between the shell casing and the internal powder cylinder was filled with upwards of 300 pieces of irregular lead shot, each weighing about 10 grams—just like every other shell launched since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Right above the main charge was a steel plate, angled to facilitate the optimal ejection vector for the lead projectiles.

Strictly obeying laws codified by Isaac Newton some four centuries earlier, the shell traced a parabola in the sky, covering over three kilometers in about five seconds. Within a fraction of a second of impact, the fuse had ignited the central charge, rupturing the steel casing and ejecting the shrapnel. Another fraction of a second later the main charge ignited, scattering the eponymous shards in a spray of lethal arcs radiating out from the point of impact.

After communicating a small change in trajectory, the officer ordered his men to fire again. Looking through his binoculars, the enthusiastic officer noticed a small, dirty-white puff rise from the hillside in the distance.

As designed, the fuse primed the cylinder charge on

impact, dislodging a coin-sized piece of casing and hurdling it through space at hypersonic speeds. Fifteen meters later, the shard effortlessly sliced through something soft and wet before coming to a rest on a tuft of dry grass, a stone's throw from the blast site.

Elia and the dozen or so other men on a cigarette break instinctively crouched low in the trench and ducked their heads upon hearing the blast. After two years, it was an oft-repeated ritual in the foothills above the Kobarid. While the men were either lying or squatting as close to the dirt as possible, many continued conversations with unseen comrades who were likewise hiding in the trench. Elia, head down, took a deep draw on his cigarette as a second shell hit a bit further away. After exhaling, Elia spoke into the ground as the smoke from his cigarette made its way up around his helmet. "Kerensky is doomed," he said with authority. "Kornilov is marching what remains of the Russian army to Petrograd and has only Lenin to turn to for defense. Russia has turned. One way or another, the war is over when they sue for peace. The real question is who is next. My guess is France. Once the Krauts are free from the lines in the east, they will overwhelm the west. The French are tired. Whole divisions have refused to fight. It's just a matter of time before some general like Kornilov turns his cannons around and marches on Paris. Or Germany. Yes, the Bolsheviks have shown the way. An army of workers that can march on a so-called enemy can just as easily turn and march on the so-called leaders."

Another explosion nearby.

"Manes?" Silence. "Then its back home to our girls."

The shelling stopped, there was only silence.

"Manes?" Elia, still crouched, turned his head. To his surprise, Manes was standing—or rather leaning—against the leading wall of the trench. Elia could see the smoke from Manes's cigarette spiraling up over his head but Manes's face

was out of view.

“Manes, *dumkopf!*” Elia said, hitting him in the thigh with a clenched fist.

Nothing.

Elia stood. Manes’s hand rested on a weed clinging to the clay soil at the edge of the trench. The cigarette wedged between his fore and middle fingers had burned down dangerously close to the skin.

“What did I say, old friend?” Elia asked in a sarcastic tone as he reached over and slapped Manes’s cheek. “What did I say? Did I offend...?”

Elia felt eerie, wet warmth, more like a slab of bread soaking in hot soup than a man’s face. He held up his hand and watched as several crimson droplets meandered their way from the pool of blood in his palm down his forearm where they were soaked up by the rolled-up sleeve of his field tunic.

He recoiled in horror before turning to his friend. Manes’s head had rolled to the side and he was now staring at Elia, eyes fixed, lifeless. His mouth was open, frozen, in mid-sentence. Elia could see a small entry wound just above Manes’s left cheekbone and a much larger exit wound above the right ear. Through spirals of cigarette smoke on the dirt and grass beyond the bunker he could make out a trail of what had been his best friend’s brains.

“No!” Elia screamed, shaking Manes’s lifeless body angrily. “Goddamn it, no!” he yelled over and over before embracing the corpse and trailing off into mournful whimpering as they rocked back and forth.

After a long cry, Elia insisted on being one of the stretcher carriers to take Manes’s body to the morgue. Moments after returning to the trench, with sweat pouring down his face, stinging his eyes, he began a shiver that didn’t break for days.

**Przemyśl • 15th of Tishrei, 5678 – Monday,
October 1, 1917**

EVERYONE IN PRZEMYŚL, Pole, Ruthian or Jew, handled Monday morning differently. Some went about their daily routine as if nothing would ever change, walking to work, doing errands or picking through the stores and pushcarts for what fresh produce could be found. Others made sure to avoid the public posting places: *Rynek*, Plac na Bramie, the train station. But a large minority couldn't wait for news and actively sought out and confronted the newsprint as it was nailed to wooden billboards at seven every Monday morning.

Malka carried her daughter, Lea Sterner, even though at nineteen months she was an accomplished toddler. It was a constant source of humor between the Arm sisters that Eisner had encouraged Malka to work through both pregnancy and nursing. German and Austrian officers, it seemed, simply shifted their attention from her face to her swelling breasts and never tired of buying overpriced tailored clothing from Malka. Lea was a fine-looking baby. At first fat, pink and bald, but now long and trim with thin curls of light blond hair falling on her neckline. She had almost died over the winter—Gitla's concoction of boiled garlic and honey had been widely credited with saving her from the croup. She had never seen or been seen by her father, but did not want for love, having been anointed as the extended family's miracle baby, particularly by Tanchem who adored his first grandchild, the namesake of his departed wife.

Rivka and Malka were always in the group that wanted to know, and know right away. They joined the small crowd of mostly younger Jewish and Polish women milling around the billboard at the east end of the Plac na Bramie. The faces, after four years, were familiar, if aged. To Rivka, the worst were those fellow seekers who had gone missing—a mother whose son had shown up on casualty lists, a wife or lover

who had broken down in tears on the previous Monday after seeing name of their man in fresh, typewritten black ink.

As the bells tolled seven, two smartly dressed Austrian officers marched toward the billboard. Rivka imagined them as some giant cuckoo clock with tin soldiers announcing the hour, parting the gathering. On the worst days they would hammer up three pages of casualties; today a single page with only a few names brought a momentary elevation to the otherwise somber mood in the square.

After nearly two hundred weeks of rehearsal, the ritual was precisely choreographed. Rivka was to wade through the crowd to the post where she'd scan the newsprint before shooting a glance at her sister. Only then could both start their day, heading off to their jobs.

Rivka waited as the more aggressive in the crowd made their way to the front to look for familiar names, then walk away only to be replaced by slightly less anxious neighbors. No one smiled. A few had tears. The worst part to Malka was that it was never clear if the tears were for themselves or because they now knew something that soon would destroy the life of someone waiting in line to read the list.

There was a gap near the front and Rivka made her move, leaving Malka and Lea behind. She read to herself, "Rancewicz, Łukasz—Redka, Myroslav—thank God." Rivka exhaled then continued, "Siebert—Siekierski—Sterner—Tarka—T..." Blood stopped flowing while she reread the entry, "Sterner, Manes – killed in action: Kobarid, IX 24." A shiver moved up her spine and exploded in her head. "No!" Rivka shrieked. "Why? Damn it all, why?"

Rivka turned, looking for her sister, oblivious to the consolations of those gathering around her. In the distance, Lea began to cry.

"Rivka!" Malka screamed, pushing toward her, the child in her arm gulping for air between wails. They embraced with all their might. "Which one" Malka whispered into her

sister's ear.

“Manes.” Malka's eyes closed tightly. She did not cry, but then Malka almost never cried.

The sisters held each other up as the crowd dissipated. Horses, wagons and pedestrians of all persuasions steered a wide berth around them while offers of condolence went unheard or unacknowledged as they rocked gently in front of the billboard.

Przemyśl • 20th of Adar, 5678 – Monday, March 4, 1918

MEYER LOOKED ABSENTLY at the board, working through a last gambit to see if he could force his queen's pawn to the eighth rank. “Fourteen articles in the Brest agreement, fourteen points in Wilson's speech. What is it about fourteen anyway, Jurek?”

“From this point the winner is the last to blunder,” Jurek offered, the upward inflection of his voice matching the movement of his eyebrow. “Draw?”

Meyer had a pawn advantage, but it was a doubled, frozen in place by a solid phalanx of opposing pieces and no matter how he played it, the gambit ended up in stalemate. “Draw,” he said, extending his hand across the board.

They shook. “I don't know about Brest, but I can tell you every Pole I know has memorized the thirteenth of Wilson's points.”

“Not the Jews. Please, have a go.”

Jurek set his cigar down on the ashtray and straightened up in his chair. “I think this is how Article Thirteen goes: ‘An independent Polish state should be erected which should include the territories inhabited by indisputably Polish populations, which should be assured a free and secure access to the sea, and whose political and economic

independence and territorial integrity should be guaranteed by international covenant.”

“Well done, and oy vey,” Meyer said, shaking his head.

Jurek puffed on his cigar as Meyer emptied his tea cup and took up the newspaper with “Armistice in the East” splashed across the masthead.

“So Lev caved,” Meyer said in German, scanning the text of the article.

Jurek exhaled, trying to make rings in the air.

“Listen to this, ‘The contracting parties will refrain from any agitation or propaganda against the Government or the public and military institutions of the other party.’”

“I give Lenin about two weeks on that one,” Jurek commented.

“Or this, ‘The territories lying to the west of the line agreed upon by the contracting parties, which formerly belonged to Russia, will no longer be subject to Russian sovereignty; the line agreed upon is traced on the map submitted as an essential part of this treaty of peace. The exact fixation of the line will be established by a Russo-German commission. No obligations whatever toward Russia shall devolve upon the territories referred to, arising from the fact that they formerly belonged to Russia. Russia refrains from all interference in the internal relations of these territories. Germany and Austria-Hungary purpose to determine the future status of these territories in agreement with their population.’ So Kuhlmann wins,” the Jewish banker continued.

Jurek leaned over the board and spoke in hushed tones, “Better you should start working on your Polish, my friend. The Central Powers have let the pawn pass. Brest-Litovsk is a dangerous gambit. All Germany’s pieces are now flung at the west in a final attack. It’s mate or resign.”

“I don’t see mate.”

“Trotsky’s no fool. If Germany wins, he has a defensible border, if they lose he takes back what he just ceded.”

The Pole tapped his cigar on the dish to the side of the board. A barrel of ash broke off and came to rest, fully intact, in the glass tray. “And we both know—”

“That when Austria is done, the Poles will get a nation and when Russia recedes, the Ruthians will get one too. So where does that leave the Jews? I’ll tell you where, with—” he put two fingers briefly over his lips. “I’m sorry Jurek, what were you going to say?”

“Just that the central powers are finished and Russia will be at war with itself for some time. There is a vacuum, and we both know that history, like nature, abhors a vacuum.”

Meyer sat back in his wicker chair, stroking his grey goatee absentmindedly, “*Tsurus* for the Jews, and *tsurus* for me.”

“Don’t be such a pessimist, old man. You’ll be fine. The color of the uniforms changes, the language goes from German to Polish, but otherwise, it’s business as usual. Money is still money.”

Meyer flagged the waiter, “Schnapps for me. Mister Styfi?”

“It’s midday, I... oh why not. Schnapps for me too. Oh, hell. Schnapps for everyone!”

“Damn, you’re good, Jurek,” Meyer said, tipping his head, thinking, “So typical, buying a round for the house when the house is deserted.”

“So are you, Meyer,” Jurek said, tipping his head back, thinking, “So like you, crying over impending ruin even as you’ve moved all your assets to Zurich.”

When the drinks arrived, a table of mid-level German officers and a handful of scattered locals acknowledged their benefactor with loud shouts and raised tumblers. Jurek raised his glass toward the officers and spoke in German, “Here’s to von Kühlmann, to the treaty of Brest-Litovsk, and to the victory in the west!” He then turned to the locals and addressed them in Polish, “Here’s to the treaty of Brest-Litovsk, and to foreigners out of Poland!”

Everyone in the Hibler enjoyed their schnapps.

**Przemyśl • 20th of Tishrei, 5679 – Thursday,
September 26, 1918**

“SORRY, SILVER ONLY,” Isidore said to the old woman trying to pay for a loaf of dark rye with Franz Joseph paper.

“Usury, I say, its usury. Not just the silver, the price is up every month for a year.”

“Are you buying or not?”

“With paper money I buy, with coins I—”

“Next,” he snapped, snatching the brown paper bag from across the counter.

The woman mumbled an epithet and turned to leave just as the next person in line, a well dressed man with his hat pulled low over his brow, tossed two silver coins on the counter. “Allow me, madam.”

Icing a babka in the back room, Rivka’s ears perked up. The voice was a familiar, but she couldn’t quite place it.

Isidore picked up the coins, assayed them with a quick bite, and then handed the goods to the woman before tossing the coins into the till. “Pleasure, Missus Granatenstein,” he said.

She took the bread. “That was a real *mitzvah* and you are a true *mensch*. Thank you,” she said to the stranger before turning to the baker, “There really aren’t any gentlemen left in Przemyśl.” The door chimes rang as she found her way out.

“Next,” Isidore said even though he was already face to face with the gentleman.

The man removed his hat. “Two sacks of *semmels* for the forts.”

The corners of Isidore’s mouth pushed up hard into a wide smile. “Rivka! Get out here. Bring the sacks for the forts.”

“I’m busy. What is it?” came from the back, followed by an inquisitive, “Forts?”

“*Semmels*, bring out the *semmels*.”

Rivka dropped the icing sack and headed toward the front counter. “Have you gone soft, Izzy?” She stopped walking as soon as she could see the back of Isidore’s head. “We haven’t made *semmels* since—” she moved from Isidore’s bald-spot to the face of the customer he was waiting on. “Tomas?”

The baker and the baker’s assistant came around to the front of the counter and embraced the Hungarian until the next customer in line complained. Isidore told her to wait while they hugged a little longer.

“PROFESSOR! OVER HERE,” Rivka called, waving at Tomas as he walked across the Plac.

“Professor?” he asked. “I can’t remember the last time anyone called me that.”

“This is my sister, Malka.”

He took her hand and kissed it. “Enchanted.”

The three sat, drank, and talked. Tomas related what happened to him after the siege—the march to Mosciska—the camp outside of Lemberg—the train to Omsk—the hunger—the hope-crushing winters of Siberia. “I pretended to be a Professor of Engineering and got assigned to the factory across in town, across the river, fixing German diesels left over from the war. I’ve always been good with my hands and besides, the food was better there. After Brest, they set all the prisoners free. I was excited to get to home and find Jonas. Unfortunately, the train to Budapest never got out of Russia. They dumped us in Kiev and there were no other trains.”

“Jonas?” Malka asked.

“Son. My first wife died and her father took him. But that’s another story altogether,” he said, his eyes taking in just how beautiful she was. While she was clearly Rivka’s sister, he couldn’t help but see that down to the smallest feature, everything about her was just slightly more feminine, more

perfect. “In any case, I found work in Kiev with the Putilov Company. They were desperate for anyone who could make sense of their engines. Once I had saved up some money, I made it to L’vov and was hired on by the Fiat agent who offered me a position in Przemyśl. I figured it was a step towards Győr and in the general direction of Palestine. Besides, I have friends in Przemyśl.” He nodded at his two companions, “Tomas Lenard, automobile mechanic. At your service.”

Malka cocked her head, “Palestine?”

Tomas glanced at Rivka before responding to her sister, “What else is left? All of Europe is coming apart at the seams. And I’ve had a lot of time to think about the larger issues these past few years.”

“What do you mean?” Rivka asked him.

Tomas took a long, slow sip of beer before continuing, “I suppose you could say it took a few Russian winters, but I managed to reconcile God with science and reason.”

“You, a rabbi?” Rivka scoffed.

“Not quite. I said I reconcile, not capitulate. Technology is all the time built on science we don’t fully comprehend—just because we do not fully understand the underlying dynamics of luminescence doesn’t mean we can’t construct searchlights. We don’t need to know the absolute truth about the nature of God to build a world around His laws. We don’t even have to believe in God. So it is in science, so it is with God and the Jews.”

“That doesn’t explain Palestine,” Rivka said, tersely.

“Well—”

“Yes it does,” Malka interrupted. “What I think Mister Lenard is saying is that building a society based on class is all well and good, but it’s doomed unless there’s some common underlying morality. And at the root of all morality is God, or at least the possibility of God, just like I’ve been telling you, sister.”

Rivka looked at Tomas with disbelief.

“That’s one way to put it, Malka,” Tomas said. “Quite insightful, actually, though I probably would have said that Jews have tried living under everyone else’s system and in the end, it’s never worked.”

“I too am training to make *aliyah*,” Malka said, with the Herzl Organization.”

“Really?” Tomas adjusted his chair so he could lean closer to Malka.

“Yes, mostly agriculture, orchards and the like. The pruning and grafting of apples, pears, you know.”

“I don’t know, but it sound interesting,” Tomas said.

“There is more to it than you would think. Pruning alone is as much art as science.” Rivka stood up. “Rivka?”

“Sit, sister. Four comes awfully early and I need to get some sleep.”

Tomas stood. “I’ve been so rude. All this talk must bore you to death, Rivka.”

“No, it’s all right. Someone like me is always going to be the third on a match with a couple of die-hard Zionists.” Rivka smiled at Tomas, “It’s wonderful to see you again. And I really am tired.”

“Shall we walk you home?”

Rivka pecked him and Malka on their cheeks. “It’s not like the town’s invested anymore, Mister Lenard.” She let out a small laugh before heading toward home.

Alone at a table on the Plac na Bramie, they told each other everything. Tomas explained about his wife Vilma and their son Jonas, and about how he’d lost them both. Malka told him about her husband Manes, interred somewhere in the Alps, and their daughter Lea, at home sleeping under the watchful eye of her father.

They talked until the barman turned the lights off at half past midnight. He walked her to her door-stoop and kissed her briefly on the lips. After exchanging parting words, Malka

and Tomas stared at each other in utter helplessness as their bodies pulled together like two powerful magnets and their lips met again and remained locked for a very long time.

Eight

**New York • 18th of Cheshvan, 5679 – Thursday,
October 24, 1918**

JULIA AND MARTA left Milton in charge. They dressed in their most respectable clothes, then strolled the five blocks down Delancy to the subway stop for the quick ride to City Hall.

The two women had argued for years over the best way to get to this day. Marta favored leaning on one of the judges or aldermen who frequented the house. Julia, rarely opposed to the judicious use of chits, muscle, or blackmail, and well connected at the Essex Market Court, would, in this and only this case, have none of it. Marta thought Julia insane; but Julia loved her adopted country and wanted to become a citizen fair and square. So she filled out her “Declaration of Intention,” certifying to the Clerk of the Court that it was her intention to become a citizen of the United States, to reside permanently therein, and to renounce all of her allegiances to other nations. Five years and a day from her landing in New York City she petitioned the court for American citizenship, presenting affidavits vouching for her high moral character from Marta Miller, a business woman, and William Donovan,

a well respected captain in the metropolitan police force. It had taken twenty-six months, but eventually the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization completed its investigation and reported its findings and recommendations back to the court. A judge would rule based on these results at nine forty-five in the morning in Hall 1 of the courthouse. He would administer the oath to Julia and issue her an order of admission and a certificate of citizenship; or order a continuance of the investigation; or, worse, he would deny the petition outright.

The women chatted back and forth as they paid their way past the booth and through the turnstiles to the stairs that led to the train platforms. Marta talked about her journey from Riga as a child while they waited for the train. Once on board, she related how her family name was changed from something unpronounceable and Russian to the simple-to-say and ubiquitous Miller by an inspector at Ellis Island. As the train jerked to a stop and as they stepped onto the platform, she told Julia about going before the judge with her family. Leaving the station and walking down the broad sidewalk to the courthouse, she explained the almost intoxicating feeling of joy she had as the judge's gavel hit the desk, announcing that after five long years, the Muriechowski family of Riga was now the Millers of New York.

"Everything is going to be all right, Julia dear. I can feel it in my bones," Marta said, grabbing and squeezing her hand as they walked up the marble steps of the courthouse.

On the short journey from Ridge Street to the courthouse, both woman had touched innumerable surfaces, exchanging germs with the countless others who had also happened to touch them: the wrought iron door knob leaving home, a wooden banister at the train station, the conductor's hand, the metal pole in the car, the train seat, the glass window, the bumper of a Ford blocking the sidewalk, the marble wall of the courthouse. Perhaps it wasn't a surface at all, but

rather something in the air. Untold numbers of people had sneezed along their route, sending out clouds of germ-laden water droplets in every direction. While the heavier drops would fall quickly to the ground, the smaller ones might remain aloft for minutes, and even hours, wafting from person to person, indistinguishable from everyday air. Even an act as innocuous as talking was enough to transmit the unseen malady, riding on the smallest bit of saliva, ejected accidentally and usually unnoticed by both speaker and listener.

Somewhere between Ridge Street and the Courthouse, a small but virulent colony of viruses found its way from the throat of an infected person onto the knuckle of Marta's right forefinger.

"Congratulations, Miss..." the judge looked down at the papers and located her name, "Miss Harmon. Now repeat after me. I hereby declare, under oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty..."

Marta welled up and wiped a tear from her eye with her right forefinger. The judge signed several papers and handed two of them to Julia without looking directly at her. He glanced up at the line queued behind Julia and absently intoned, "Next."

As night fell, Marta's throat began to feel scratchy. The next morning her breathing became labored and she had spiked a fever. That evening, her lungs began to fill with phlegm. By Sunday morning American citizen Julia Harmon was making arrangements to bury her partner, best friend, and lover, Marta Miller.

Theories abounded. Some scientists believed it jumped to city dwellers from farmers who caught it from birds or swine. Many of the elderly believed it to be a return of the deadly pandemic of 1890, spread far and wide by the constant movement of army men. A vocal minority blamed nefarious

foreign agents; anarchists, hell bent on destroying America, or the Bolsheviki and their ilk, all notorious foes of both decency and hygiene. But in the end, none of the reasons mattered to Julia. Her Marta was gone.

**Kobarid • 19th of Cheshvan, 5679 – Friday,
October 25, 1918**

“YOU KNOW, *SIGNORE* Corporal, for a place housing a quarter of a million Italians, the architectural detail of this camp is awfully disappointing,” Virgilio said, still shaking, trying to smile. “Is no Genoa, yes?”

“Have some more tea,” Elia offered, “It helps me when I’m with the ague. Not that I’m an expert or anything, but I have lived through, what, four attacks. You have to drink warm liquids, no matter how hot you feel.”

“And what about your eye, *Signore* Nightingale?”

“It was just a simple misunderstanding with some Austrians. The working class debating the issues of the day.”

“With their fists?”

“Some people are less eloquent than others.”

“Or just plain stupid.” Virgilio sat up and forced down the lukewarm tea. “Like Cardorna’s master plan. He knew the Austrian’s had built camps for only fifty thousand so he brilliantly led his entire Second Army into the hills with no bullets, no shells, and no plan, knowing that the sheer number of surrendering men would overwhelm your prison system, thus bringing the Empire to its knees.”

Elia chuckled and offered his prisoner a cigarette. After lighting it, Elia spoke as the Italian coughed out his first draw, “You are the funniest man I’ve ever known. But you’re not altogether wrong—we all get to go home next week.”

“God willing.” Virgilio crossed himself, smoking mechanically. “I know you think the war’s ending because the soldiers

are tired or revolting or something in Germany. There may be something to that. Or America coming in. Or everyone's just tired. Who cares? I get to go back to Bobbio. You get to return to your unpronounceable Eden—what, *Pishmal?*—in Galicia, Austria, Russia, Poland, Germany. Say, what is it going to be anyway?"

"Yes, that is the question, isn't it?" Elia lit a cigarette. "My town is," he paused, looking at the mountains on the horizon, "simmering."

"So now that the Austrians are through, the simmering pot, it boils over?"

"The war isn't yet over and each side is here, organizing for the next one. Jews with fifty different political agendas, each organizing a militia. We're going to wear blue and white colors after Armistice Day. Poles already declared a country with flags and armies in red and white. Ruthians have the same idea, only in yellow and blue. It seems that Poland and Ruthia or Ukrainia or whatever it is overlap when drawn on a map."

"Piedmont and Lombardy they're not."

"And best of all, both think the Jews owe allegiance to their side. One particularly adamant Polish captain expressed this very opinion with his fist on the chin of a Jewish soldier, setting off the brawl in the mess."

"Thus the plum under your eye."

"I tried to argue that all of us should pull together to assure a new order directed by and for the working class. That this is an opportunity to cast off our capitalist masters, like the workers in Russia, and establish a Soviet Galicia, for the people. 'People.' That's the last word I remember saying. I woke up a few hours later, sore as hell, with this."

"It should be a wonderful train ride home."

"Home is home, no matter who's in charge."

"Not for me. Did you know I was born in America?"

Elia raised his eyebrows. "You moved from America to

Europe?”

“We moved back when I was a baby. Papa traded a store in the Promised Land for a farm in the hills. We were landed but far from rich. I was drafted and went to war. Papa went back to America. After this mess is done, I’m moving to America, to Philadelphia with the love of my life.”

“Name?”

“Luisa. You?”

“Rivka.”

“This is life and this is joy: an hour of embracing and then to die.”

“Amen.”

“And your family?”

“My sister’s in New York.”

“Married?”

“Uh... widowed.”

Virgilio crossed himself. “I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s all right. She’s fine, probably remarried by now.”

“Still—family—nothing more important.”

“Once everything’s settled, Rivka and I are going to America to visit my sister.”

“Then I must insist that you look us up!”

“Philadelphia, right?”

“Correct, *Signore* Corporal.”

Elia smiled. “Here’s a happy thought: by the time you awake, I’ll no longer be *Signore* Corporal; I’ll be Elia Reifer again.”

“Joyful indeed. In any case, you and Rivka will be our guests. Our sons will play baseball together.”

“Perhaps, my friend, perhaps. Now finish your tea and sleep. You need your strength. Tomorrow, I’m on a train home; you’re walking.”

Virgilio finished drinking and lay down. He closed his eyes and whispered, “*La pace è con lei*, Elia.”

Elia covered him with mosquito netting. “Shalom, Virgilio.”

**Cracow • 27th of Cheshvan, 5679 – Saturday,
November 2, 1918**

FOR A TOWN already on edge, divided into three armed camps, the news of the train's imminent arrival spread through Przemyśl like yet another vicious rumor. At first, each faction saw the arrival of large numbers of loyal, battle-hardened troops as a boon, tipping the scales in its favor. But as the day wore on the kin of those lost to war perseverated on thoughts of undeserving survivors alighting from the railcars and falling joyously into the arms of their sworn enemies. Like petrol on a fire, the missing souls stoked the flames of hatred in a deep and visceral way that no speech or poster could ever hope to match.

In spite of the underlying dynamics of the coming train, the sheer sum of human desire for reunion with loved ones managed to overpower the unfocused fears of the people gathering at the station. Mothers baked pies and cakes, wives and lovers brushed hair and rouged lips, children were dressed in Sunday or Friday best. The priests and the rabbis would be there, but there would be no formal reception, no speeches, and no triumphal music welcoming the men home after four years on the march.

The train was due in at five in the afternoon. For the first time since the Legions disarmed the Austrians and took control of the town, Poles, Ruthians, and Jews congregated in one place without shooting at each other. The three peoples coalesced into distinct groups, with only a few people on the fringe of each crowd interacting with the others. The train was late and the crowds grew restless. Some of the younger children began intermingling as priests and rabbis led small groups of girls in songs.

ELIA LOOKED AT the blue and white armbands on most of his men, thinking it absurd that a unit's allegiance could be changed by tying a scarf of a particular color around one's bicep. A few hours before, just past Ostrava, there had been a bloodless coup as the German Lieutenant who was in charge was politely tossed off the train, replaced by a Polish Captain sporting a red and white armband. As the train pulled into Cracow station and disgorged the men in the rear six cars, a uniformed man sporting the blue and white sash boarded and identified himself as Wolf Blusztajn. After a long winded lecture exhorting the Jewish soldiers to fight for a Socialist Poland, he asked for volunteers.

When few were moved, Elia took up the cause, making an impromptu speech, moving about half of the Jewish men to join with him. Blusztajn conducted the initiation like a priest giving communion. Each man's Austrian cap pin was removed and replaced by the pin of the *Soldatenrat*, a small brass menorah with the word "Forward" inscribed in tiny Hebrew lettering. An armband was the final piece before the swearing of allegiance to the *Volksrat* and to Poland. A detachment of Jewish women, with blue and white kerchiefs on their heads, boarded the train, offering thick, hot bean and beef soup with black rye bread to everyone in the coach, regardless of armband. The boys of Przemyśl were finally in Galicia; to a man, it was the most delicious meal they had eaten in years.

Blusztajn made his way over to Elia, who sat on the wooden bench with a bowl in one hand, using a thick piece of bread to scrape the last few beans into his mouth. The line of men made a space for Wolf, who plopped down, straddling the bench, facing Elia.

"Thanks you, Corporal."

"It's Elia, Elia Reifer," he said, extending his hand after wiping it on his trousers. "Tell me, what's the news from Przemyśl?"

Wolf leaned in, “An agreement was signed yesterday establishing a National Council. Five Ruthian, five Polacks, and one lonely Jew.”

“Who?”

“Rosenberg.”

“The attorney?”

“Yes.” Now that the food was gone, everyone’s attention turned toward Elia and Wolf and they were soon surrounded by ex-soldiers, hungry for news of home. “Poles have the center and Zasanie. We control Franciszkańska, Jagiellońska, Słowackiego, and part of Mickiewicza. Ruthians have the rest.”

Someone pulled his service revolver, yelling out, “We have only these; how can we defend our homes?” There were mumbles from the Jewish troops.

Blusztajn stood to better address the men, “It was the good wisdom of the Austrians to place the main weapons storehouse on Mickiewicza. Report to the gymnasium in the morning, we’ll issue real guns then.”

After two days of passing through territory with nothing but alien names, the train now rolled through familiar territory. Someone in each train car had a relative or friend in every station they passed. Bochnia, city of the salt mines, was the hometown of a Jewish soldier’s grandfather. Tarnow, from where they had launched the attack to liberate Przemyśl, was a Polish lieutenant’s birthplace. There was Rzeszow, the city Rivka’s mother was from, and then Jaroslaw, a stone’s throw from Medyka, still a pile of rubble years after the fighting was over.

Elia felt the first chills just as the train turned south, making its final run into Przemyśl. “Please, God, not now. Not today. Please.”

As the train slowed into a wide turn left, crossing the San over the new steel trestle, the chatting stopped and Elia, shivering violently, passed out.

**Przemyśl • 29th of Cheshvan, 5679 – Monday,
November 4, 1918**

RIVKA WAS KNEADING over-boiled potatoes and meal into dough destined to become several loaves of corn rye when the bakery's door flew open and Isidore came running in. He bolted the door behind him.

"What?" she asked, rolling off errant pieces of dough from between her fingers.

Her boss ignored her and pulled the roller-shades down over the windows, then peeked out at the street from the thin sliver between the shade and the window frame. "Shut the lights, now."

Isidore went to the back room and sat in his chair, his face red, his brow damp with sweat. "I was delivering to the City Hotel when I heard them. They smashed windows, carts, they, they..."

She poured him a glass of water from the pitcher on the kneading table. After a few gulps, he had calmed enough to resume.

"Riots. They're breaking down doors with their rifles, cleaning out the shops, smashing anything they couldn't carry."

"Where?"

"All up and down Franciszkańska to *Rynek* and the Plac. A few places are on fire."

"Polacks?"

He took another sip of water. "Ruthians, I think. They invaded, took over the center. I ran into Morrie. He said they're disarming the *Soldatenrat*, arresting the leaders. Even arrested the Polish General in charge, what's his name?"

"Puchalski"

"The mob's heading toward the station, looting the Jewish establishments. Everyone's hiding." Isidore gestured toward the basement door. "Come, we need to lock ourselves in the

cellar.”

“The station?”

“Come on, Rivka. No time to lose.”

Her brow furrowed. “Oh God, Daddy and Izac,” she said, heading toward the door.

He reached out and grabbed her arm, holding tightly. “Sweetheart, they’ll hide too. Now let’s—” He was an old man, but his grip, born of decades of kneading, was vice-like. As strong as it was, Rivka’s quick glance at his hand followed by her unwavering stare into his grey eyes, rendered Isidore’s grip utterly limp. “Be careful Rivka. Please be careful.”

A few moments later she was out the door, heading toward her home in full run, oblivious to the rioting, swerving in wide arcs to avoid any congregations of people between her and her family. Rivka approached from the far end of the station, staying in the shadow until she could see the factory. The door was ajar and a small mob of people, Ruthians judging by armbands, had gathered in the street and were pointing into the factory, screaming with hysterical anger. She pulled her scarf over her head and face and ran across the street into her house, unnoticed in the commotion three doors down at the factory. Passing through the kitchen, she grabbed hold of the largest butcher knife at hand and headed to the basement and the passageway.

GITLA PREPARED A strong tea from the roots of wild Artemisia she had found growing in the turned earth of a shell crater up the hill from the Castle. “Get up Elia, before your rear becomes part of the bed,” she said, taking his temperature with the back of her hand on his forehead. “Better.”

“How long have I...”

“Two days.”

Gitla propped him up with an extra pillow, “Drink, Elia.”

Elia blew across the tea cup then took a sip. Realizing it

wasn't hot at all he drained the cup. When it was empty he looked up at his aunt. The lines on her face were deeper and the bags under her eyes were darker. She had aged, but not in a completely unnatural way. If anything, her face had become more angular, more defiant than ever. "Aunt Gitla, it's so good to be back." She reached out and they embraced tightly. "Aunt, I need to—"

"*Pish?*"

He chuckled. "Well, yes, now that you mention it." Gitla left the room and Elia dressed in the clothes Gitla had laid out for him. His uniform, into which he had slipped every morning for four years, was nowhere to be seen.

The front door slammed hard. Elia instinctively dashed for the entry, almost knocking Gitla over as she came from the kitchen.

"I'm all right. Get into the cellar," Juda said, sliding the iron bolt to the locked position, blood oozing from his nose. "Good morning, Elia. And welcome home." The growing blood stain on his graying beard made it sound a bit ironic. Gitla pulled out a handkerchief and applied pressure to his upper lip, stanching the flow of blood.

"What's happened?" Elia asked, using same tone he would have used in asking a returning patrol what the situation was over the next ridge.

"I'm not sure. There's a mob moving toward the Plac from *Rynek*. I was running up Franciszkańska when I saw four or five men attack Mister Hartman. He tried to fight them off with his walking stick and they shot him. A gentle old man whose worst crime was kibitzing over chess. They shot him dead right there in the middle of the street."

"Rivka," Elia said quietly, disappearing back into his room.

"To the cellar, now," Juda tried yelling.

Elia reappeared, holding his service revolver.

"Gitla, Elia—now," Juda said with finality.

Gitla took her husband's hand and lead him toward the

cellar stairs as Elia headed for the door.

The bakery was locked and the shades drawn. He hadn't seen his Rivka for what seemed like a lifetime, and wished he were bringing her flowers, not his Steyr-Pieper semi-automatic. He tapped on the side transom with his knuckle then hit the door with the butt of the pistol. The shade moved just enough to make him visible from inside. Just as Elia was ready to give up, the door cracked and a hand reached out and pulled him in. The door slammed shut behind him.

"Elia, my boy, welcome home," Isidore said, throwing his arms around him and squeezing tightly. "I tried to stop her, really I did," he said. "She's gone to look after her father. The mob was headed that way."

Elia shot out the door, covering the route he had taken to work in another epoch faster with a pistol than he ever had, with or without a football.

TANCHEM AND HIS son were working on a rocking chair in the front room of the factory when a rifle butt rapped heavily on the wooden doors.

"Go away!" Izac yelled, in Polish.

Another loud rap. Then another. "Open this door, bastard Jews! Open now or we burn your treasonous nest to the ground!"

The woodworkers looked at each other. Izac, his foot accidentally mangled two summers ago at Gorizia by the wheel of a *Schlanke Emma*—an Austrian howitzer—limped to the door and lifted the thick plank holding the double doors fast. A soldier in an Austrian uniform, denuded of rank and regiment insignias, pushed the door open with his rifle.

There were two uniformed soldiers with rifles and fixed bayonet at the door and perhaps another dozen civilians milling around in the street, most armed with clubs and cudgels. Most sported Ruthian colors.

“Where are the Jew soldiers?” one of the Ruthians asked as he and his compatriot pushed into the factory, shoving Izac aside. “In the back perhaps,” the soldier said, answering his own question, moving toward Tanchem while the other one went to check out the back room. Izac limped over to his father as the second soldier came back, shaking his head. The one in front of Tanchem, the senior of the two, put his booted foot on the top of the two fluted, lathe-spun horizontal supports of the rocker they had been working on before looking at Tanchem.

For a moment, the Ruthian and the Jew studied each other, registering distant traces of recognition, their mouths fixed in contempt.

“No one here,” Tanchem said.

“Really,” the soldier said, bringing all his weight to his right foot, snapping the top balustrade. Izac made a move for the intruder but Tanchem reached out and halted him with an outstretched arm.

“There is no need for this.”

The bottom balustrade shattered.

“I told you, there’s—”

Tanchem had not finished his sentence when the quiet soldier’s rifle butt found his temple. He collapsed in the doorway, drawing the laughter of the mob on the street watching the events unfolding through the open doors.

Izac had been in the artillery corps and had spent most of the war fixing the wheels on the barely mobile cannons; he had seen enough action to not freeze under pressure. Reaching into the scrap bin to his right, he found a meter-long dark oak spindle that would have ended up as a post for a fine bed had it not cracked at a knot. Bracing with his good foot, he swung with all his might at the junior soldier’s head, finding it with a deep and satisfying thud. Izac had a second or two to enjoy the moment before a bayonet ripped his work shirt, entered his ribcage, and severed his aorta.

He was dead before he hit the ground.

Rivka watched in horror from the top of the ladder leading to the trap door in the back room. She had lifted the hatch only to find the carpet drawn over the secret passage and had bunched it back just in time to witness the events unfolding in the front of her father's factory. As soon as her brother hit the ground, she began to shimmy up through the carpet, the knife held so tight that her knuckles looked as white as fresh snow on coal.

The crowd called out for vengeance and formed an increasingly tight semicircle in front of the factory. The soldier pulled his rifle out of Izac and dropped it on the floor; sawdust soaked up the blood dripping from the bayonet. Bending over and pulling a trench knife from its scabbard, he grabbed Tanchem by his beard and pulled him to his knees.

Many in the mob shrieked, "Shave the yid!" as the Ruthian began cutting his whiskers.

"The Jew attacked Iwan, just as all the Jews attack our soldiers."

"An eye for an eye!"

Rivka cleared the carpet and, knife in hand, ran frantically at the back of the man holding her father by the beard.

"An eye for an eye, Jew!" the soldier yelled, sliding the blade from just under Tanchem's bearded chin to just below his ear, completely severing his carotid artery. Blood sprayed out of the wound, some reaching all the way out the door to the edge of the street, causing the mob to recoil backwards for a moment before they let out a hearty cheer.

To the mob, the expression on the face of the executioner barely changed. Several people lobbed congratulations his way, which were returned only with a blank, somewhat surprised stare. A moment later, a small trail of blood appeared at the corner of his mouth then his eyes rolled back into his skull. He collapsed forward, on top of Tanchem. Suddenly revealed, there stood Rivka, a young woman in a

grey dress and shirt, wearing a well soiled apron, with dashes of flour in her dark hair, holding a bloody butcher's knife. A thundering silence filled Czarneckiego as the mob and the woman contemplated each other.

A moment later, an old woman on the street pointed and yelled, "It's the baker's girl!"

ELIA CAME ACROSS the tracks just in time to hear a club wielding man in front of the factory yell, "Murderess! Kill the murdering Jewess!" The next few seconds elapsed as if Elia were watching a malfunctioning kinescope.

The knife Rivka held slipped from her hand. The only thing he could hear was the pounding of blood between his ears as he studied the definitive contrast before him: the sheer beauty and overpowering humanity of Rivka and the horror and gore of the pile of corpses, one of which was undoubtedly Tanchem, his benefactor, boss, and his father-in-law to be. As she disappeared from the light, back into the factory, he became furious this his first glimpse of her after the ordeal both had been through over the past several years was to be in a milieu of tragedy, not of joy.

Elia stopped and brought his Steyr to eye level, fixing the man with the club in the sights before gently squeezing the trigger. The pistol's report froze everyone except the target who dropped to the dirt clutching his shin, screaming inconsolably. Elia dashed toward the entrance just as someone threw a smoking bottle into the factory. There was a small explosion and flames shot from the woodshop.

"Rivka!" Elia screamed over and over again, slowing to a trot as he neared the threshold before coming to a complete stop as the heat from the fire became unbearable. Brandishing his weapon to keep the bloodthirsty mob at bay, he once more yelled her name into the inferno.

Half a try at a word, half uncontrolled sobbing, it came

from her vocal cords, but it wasn't really speech, yet it was indisputably Rivka. He glanced at the mob, and then turned to the fire. Taking a deep breath, Elia closed his eyes and dashed through the doorway, leaping over corpses, into the abyss. Three strides into the fire, his foot caught on a wood scrap and he fell forward, landing hard on the floor, losing the pistol. The room was rapidly filling with smoke though there was some breathable air on the ground.

On his stomach, face pressed to the floor, he frantically reached in large arcs for his weapon, calling her name as he searched. By the time he found the smooth metal of the barrel, it was becoming increasingly hard to breathe. As he tucked the pistol into the back pocket of his trousers, he got up on all fours and tried to call her name but took in too much smoke, breaking into a violent hack instead. As he rested back on the floor, there was another cough, not from him. Elia crawled toward the sound with an urgent competence, another field to cross, barbed wire to breach, murderous live fire to duck. He reached her in seconds.

She lay on the floor next to the hatch, head down. "Rivka, thank God. Come on, we need to get out of here. Down the ladder." She was shaking violently, not moving and the flames were advancing toward them. Elia picked up her head and turned it so she would see him. "Now." She went limp, crying in short, barely audible waves. He pulled the wooden hatch open and swung his legs around into the hole, finding a rung on the ladder. Grabbing Rivka like a sack of flour, he dragged her across the floor and off the edge, bracing himself as he lowered her down the ladder, sitting her on the floor of the crawlway. He scampered back up the ladder and pulled the hatch shut. It was pitch black, but at least the air was better in the cellar. Elia put Rivka over his shoulder and carried her to the ladder that led up to the Arm residence.

Two members of the mob were badly burned and the adjacent building was set ablaze when the flames in the

factory found the solvents closet, igniting a huge fireball of benzene and toluene. As the rioters chanted for revenge against the treacherous, murderous Jews, a wind shift pushed black billows of smoke into the street in front of what had been the Arm Furniture Factory, dispersing the mob.

THE CAMP BY the river had been evacuated by the Germans weeks before the armistice. In their zeal to get home, they had left tents, benches, and piles and piles of garbage. Since the withdrawal, the site had become something of a transient's camp, occupied by a mixture of army deserters, the homeless, gypsies and hordes and hordes of rats.

Elia pulled Rivka close enough to wrap both arms around her. "Sweetheart, we're safe here until dark." Still, she said nothing, crying gently into his chest. In time, she fell asleep.

Elia watched Rivka sleep as the daylight waned, burying his nose into the side of her neck, her pulse shallow and her skin clammy. Still asleep, she wrapped her arms around Elia's head and pulled his face into her chest, his chin resting on her bosom.

Rivka's eyes opened a few hours after sunset. "I'm scared," she whispered. "I've nothing left." She began to tremble. "Nothing..." A tear escaped from her eye, clearing a path through soot and dirt as it raced down her cheek.

"I know, sweetheart." Elia tightened his hold on her. "You have me. And I have you." His lips easily found hers but she quickly turned away.

"This isn't exactly," she managed, fighting back tears and gulping for air, "what we had in mind for our reunion." They both managed weak smiles.

"Not exactly. I figured we'd meet at Antmann's. Embrace in front of everyone, take a walk down by the river and talk politics or arts. Then we'd make love all night long on your feather bed."

“Light a match.”

“What?”

“Strike a match, Elia; I want to be sure it’s you.”

He dragged the head of the match across the striking side of the box, illuminating both faces in warm, yellow light. And for the first time in thousands of days, Elia and Rivka were face to face. They studied each other carefully.

“It’s really you, Elia Reifer, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sweetheart. And we’re never going to be apart again.”

“Elia,” she said, voice raised. “Elia.” It lowered again to a whisper, “They murdered daddy and Izac. And I—” she paused then and began to gulp for air. “I killed the soldier.” She cradled her face in her hands.

Elia put his hand on her shoulder, “Rivka, now listen carefully. War is horrible for many reasons. But the worst part—”

“Shut up!” she shouted. “Shut up, shut up, shut up!”

“Rivka! Grab hold of yourself.” He blew the match out and wrapped her in his arms, stroking her hair with his open palm, rocking her gently, for a short eternity.

“I’m sorry, Elia.”

He squeezed her. “It’s all right, sweetheart. It’s horrible what war does to men. To women. It—”

“Stop.” She pushed back from him and put her hand over his mouth. “Not now. No words; just hold me. Please?” They embraced, wordlessly.

“Rivka?” Elia whispered.

“Elia?”

“We need to get out of here.”

“They think we’re dead.”

“I know. So we can’t stay in Przemyśl.”

Rivka sighed. “Or Galicia for that matter.”

Elia nodded. “We’ll need papers, and a place to hide.”

“Gitla will help us.”

“We can’t go there, it’s too dangerous”

“Lenard,” Rivka said, thinking about how two days ago the prospect of Tomas and Elia meeting was the cause of almost endless concern.

“Who?”

“I’ll explain later.”

Sometime after midnight Elia and Rivka left the tent city. They climbed the railroad berm just before the quay and walked across the San on the railroad tracks, camouflaged on all sides by the bridge’s thick steel box girders. Emerging on the Polish controlled side of the river, they were just another disheveled couple hurrying to safety after the most tumultuous day in Przemyśl since the Russians breached the fort’s defenses, some five years earlier.

They reached Tomas’s apartment on Kraszewskiego, next to his machine shop, a stone’s throw from the Zasanie synagogue, without incident.

Zasanie • 1st of Kislev, 5679 – Tuesday, November 5, 1918

MALKA SAT AT the small wooden table, half-awake, while Lea ate oatmeal from a wooden bowl, managing to get most of the cereal into her mouth. The remainder formed a trail from the bowl, across the table, up her bib and ending in small globs on her chin. An electric hum accompanied the harsh light coming from the nouveau light fixture that was hung crookedly over an old couch and chairs. Tomas snored loudly in the sleeping nook, hidden behind floor-length burgundy drapes embroidered in floral damask. A sliver of dawn’s light squeezed in a window between the back door and the coal brazier, lost in layer upon layer of varnish on the dark oak floorboards.

Lea ate and Malka daydreamed until three sharp knocks at the front door interrupted them. Startled, Lea dropped

her spoon and looked at her mother. Malka stared at the door, confused. Lea began to cry.

Three more raps, this time with muffled crying.

When Malka picked her daughter up and headed for the sleeping nook she stopped crying. Pulling open the drapes, they saw Tomas, dressed from knees to elbows in a gray union suit, pulling his revolver from its hiding place under the mattress. He handed the gun to Malka, who held it over her head at arm's length, as far from Lea as was possible. Tomas headed for the door.

“Who’s there?”

“Mister Lenard, let us in. Please—”

“It’s five in the morning. Who’s there?”

“Elia Reifer and Rivka Arm. We’re in trouble. Please.”

Two deadbolts clicked and the door swung open. Malka peeked out from behind the drapes, and then rushed to Tomas’s side. Elia and Rivka entered and the door was bolted behind them.

Elia’s face was a bloody mess and his hair was singed, with one spot burned down to a coin-sized scab on his scalp. They both reeked of smoke and garbage. Rivka was shaking, supported by Elia’s arm around her waist. Blood, now dried, had wicked its way up the arm of her linen blouse and onto Elia’s shirt where he held her to his chest. She lifted her head, revealing wet, swollen eyes sunk into deep, purple sockets. Covered in oily black grunge, the only visible flesh-tones to be found were in the tracks that her tears made meandering down her cheeks.

“They’re gone!” Rivka cried as she was embraced by her sister with all her might. “Daddy and Izac, murdered; dead.” Lea began sobbing along with the Arm sisters as they clung to each other, slowly rocking to the beat of their broken hearts.

Elia collapsed on the couch as Tomas drew a bath for Rivka. After a short soak, Rivka crawled into the bed nook and curled into a fetal position.

It was well into the afternoon when Elia woke and climbed into bed with Rivka, carefully embracing her so as not to bump a bruise or pressure a cut. “Rivka?” Elia whispered. “You awake?”

“I am now.”

“Sorry, but we need to talk.” He stroked her hair.

“I’ve got a headache,” Rivka said. “About what?”

“We need to talk about our plans, our escape.”

“My daddy and brother are dead, the factory is burned to the ground and I murdered someone yesterday. I’m a goddamned orphan.” She rolled out of Elia’s arms. Turning her head toward him, she spoke, eyes tightly focused, enunciating every syllable. “Now what was it you wanted to talk about?”

She slept until morning.

“WHEN I HEARD what was going on I took the truck and drove to find Malka and Lea. Eisner had boarded up the shop,” Tomas said, pausing for a sip of tea. “I pounded on the back door until they came. They must have been hiding in the basement. On the way back, we could see the factory on fire across the tracks, from Jagiellońska. Malka was frantic to find her daddy and we were all set to leave the truck and run over when a small detachment of Ruthians intercepted us, demanding papers.”

“On Jagiellońska?” Elia asked.

“Yes. Everywhere.”

“So the agreement is dead.”

“It would seem so. They arrested the commanders, Jewish and Polish, and took their weapons.”

“How’d you pass?”

“I used my work papers, said I was on duty fixing a dynamo and started spewing out Russian technical terms from math, physics, and philosophy until their eyes rolled back into their

heads and they waved me on. I asked about the fire. They said a mob of Jews had murdered an officer.”

“What about the bridge?”

“Same game, in Polish this time.”

Elia told Tomas what he knew about the murders. “I’m not sure what happened. All I know is that Izac, Tanchem, and two Ruthian soldiers were dead when I got there, and Rivka was standing in the doorway holding a bloodied knife, about to be charged by the mob.”

“Good for her.”

Elia finished his coffee, coughing after swallowing some loose grounds that had accumulated at the bottom of his mug.

“What now, Elia? If they find out you made it out alive, they’ll hang the both of you.”

“We’re going to have to get the hell out of here. We’re going to have to leave. Now.”

“Without papers?”

“There’s no choice.”

“You won’t get far.”

“We can blend in with the gypsies and Czechs. I’ve crawled across every inch of ground between here and Tarnow. Remember?”

Tomas shrugged as Rivka emerged from behind the drapes and headed for the coffee pot. Tipping the pot over, only a few drops remained. She set it down with a metallic thud then began to cry.

Elia ran to the counter. “I’ll make another pot.”

Rivka wiped her face with her sleeve. “Thank you sweetheart. I’m sorry. I have a headache.”

While Elia coaled the stove and percolated another pot, Rivka sat and talked quietly with Tomas. A few minutes later, mood improved, she welcomed the steaming mug and glossy sugar bowl as if they were champagne and caviar.

“It’s settled then,” Tomas said.

Elia poured himself another cup. “What?”

“Gitla,” Rivka said, nodding her head.

Elia scratched gingerly around the scar on his scalp. “But how can—”

“It’s settled, all right? I know what I’m doing.”

“Rivka—”

“Trust me.”

Elia turned toward Lenard. “Tomas?”

“I need to work a few hours or else the Polacks become suspicious. I’ll stop at your aunt’s house on my way.”

Elia sipped his coffee then exhaled. “Then I guess we have a plan.” Rivka and Tomas nodded. “Oh yeah, one more favor, while we’re at it.”

“But of course.”

“Ask Gitla for my leather book. It’s in my duffle.”

Before he left, Tomas had his driver rummage through his shop to find the stencils and paint the word “Mechanic” onto the side of the truck in Polish and Ukrainian. It never ceased to amaze Tomas just how easily even the most bellicose men could be intimidated by science. While long lines of pedestrians waiting to cross the San were subjected to any number of questions and searches, just a few words from the man in the machine truck was enough to addle the bridge defenders and speed him on his way. Thomas noted that while racial and political animosity was one thing, no one, it seemed, wanted to take responsibility for the stifling of technology.

The whole south bank of the San was now under Ruthian control. The Jewish quarter was eerily calm, absent the usual gaggle of vendors and merchants pushing their wares on the street in front of their stores. Tomas saw several formations of troops, irregularly armed, wearing uniforms that were anything but uniform. Other than a few Hassids, the Jewish population was nowhere to be seen. From Ratuszowa all the way to Plac na Bramie, almost every window was

either shattered or boarded up except for the Café Hibler, which seemed to have miraculously avoided even the most superficial of damage.

They pulled over the truck a few doors up from the Malz home as Tomas instructed.

AS TOMAS ENTERED, Elia pushed the door closed and slid the bolt to the locked position, returning his Steyr to the pocket of the suit-coat he had borrowed from Lenard. Malka went back to preparing her daughter's lunch, soaking black bread in soup, while Rivka kept Lea occupied on the couch with yet another game of peek-a-boo.

"Your aunt is quite a woman. Sharp as any tool in the shed. She's as hard as—"

"She cries inside, Tomas," Elia said, curtly.

"I didn't mean it like that. It's just close to inconceivable what she did. Juda said there was almost nothing left to collect: bones and a few scraps of charred flesh." He handed Elia a small package wrapped in brown wax paper.

Rivka approached the men, carrying Lea.

"Did you see—?"

"Yes. Told her everything."

"Thank you. When are the funerals?"

"Rivka, it's not a good idea to—" Elia started to say.

Rivka jabbed her forefinger at his lips, stopping less than a centimeter away. "Don't start with me."

"Interment is this afternoon." Tomas glanced at his watch. "Right now, actually."

Rivka set Lea down on the floor and lunged at the door hasp. Elia dropped the package and locked onto her forearm just as she began to slide the bolt open. She struggled to no avail and then gave up, glaring at Elia, "You bastard. Let go of me."

"Rivka, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," Elia said, securing his

grip.

“How dare you!” she screamed.

The sound of Lea bawling immediately filled the room.

“They’ll recognize you and then they’ll kill you.”

“Let me go!” She kicked Elia in the shin. He hardly flinched, deftly moving to her side, making it impossible for her to do it again. “They’re burying my daddy and my brother!”

Malka dropped her ladle and raced toward the door.

With her free hand, Rivka hit Elia in the chest with a tightly clenched fist, crying out for her father and brother. She flailed at him again and again. Elia released her wrist and put his arms around her. She tried to hit him with both hands, but was too close. After a few more tries, she dissolved into tears, collapsing into him, all of her weight resting in his arms.

Holding Lea in one arm with Malka tightly clinging to the other, Tomas came to Elia and Rivka, forming a tight, grieving huddle. One by one, they stopped crying, first Elia and Malka, then Tomas, and finally Lea and Rivka. They stood in silence until Rivka began a chant which was quickly joined by the others. It was an all too familiar chant, repeated countless times over the past five years. And it was the same chant being intoned by Gitla, Juda, and a small gathering in front of two fresh holes in the cemetery on Słowackiego, across the river, just a few thousand meters away.