

## V

Madison found an apartment through the university, where he was known by his real name and didn't have to show papers. Meanwhile, Marta sold the Alamut knife to an antique dealer -- not obtaining its true value, but still raising enough money to buy new clothes and food for a week. Once Madison had signed their lease, he found Marta at an arranged meeting place. She stood between two baroque saints on the humpbacked Charles Bridge, watching the dark Vlatava pass beneath. It was chilly now in Central Europe, so she wore an open tan trenchcoat, a felt hat, and a black suit with broad shoulders. In every direction, steeples, parapets, and lofty statues reached into the gray sky, and crows flapped past, looking larger and somehow older than the birds of other cities.

They walked to their apartment. Although it was ten minutes away, they never seemed to leave the damp porticoes that lined almost every street. On higher floors, muscular stone figures, blackened by soot, strained to support great baroque entablatures. Madison watched his companion covertly; her raincoat billowed behind her as she strode and her eyes flitted from face to face, door to door.

They entered their apartment through an open courtyard and a wide marble staircase, but the rooms themselves were modest and bare except for a single narrow bed, some rustic furniture, and several crucifixes. Madison peered through wooden blinds at a narrow street: the facade opposite was covered with Victorian frescos.

"I couldn't find Rabbi Halberstam in the phone book," said Marta. She was a study in black and tan against the plaster wall. Not for the first time, Madison was startled by her shortness; she always grew in his recollection.

"Then let's visit what they call the Altneu Synagogue," he said. "There's no more important site in all the world for Jewish magic. According to legend, the golem itself lies in pieces in the attic."

"You'll have to explain to me about that."

"I'll tell you the whole story on the way."

Soon they were back on the street, heading toward the old Jewish quarter. Madison began, "In the sixteenth century, a great

rabbi lived in Prague. His name was Judah Loew, and he was a theologian, a moral philosopher, and a master of the kabbalah. You should picture him as he looked around 1600: a tall man with stern eyes, a great, flowing beard, a black, wide-sleeved cloak, and a red cloth hat whose flaps covered his ears."

"He sounds faintly ridiculous to me."

Madison had been imagining a very distinguished figure, but he ignored Marta's interruption. "The fame of this rabbi spread far beyond the Jewish community," he said. "The astronomer, Tycho Brähe, was Loew's friend, and he moved in the most sophisticated European humanist circles. But some Christians weren't as tolerant or enlightened. They still believed that the Jews killed gentile babies every year on Passover and mixed their blood with matzohs. Rabbi Loew disputed this charge in a great debate with 300 Christian clergymen, most of whom accepted his arguments. Nevertheless, his people were often prosecuted for ritual cannibalism."

Marta said, "I know all about that. In fact, I remember a murderous riot in Kiev that began when a mad priest claimed that the Jews were putting babies' blood in their matzohs and frying the consecrated host from Orthodox churches."

"You remember that?" said Madison. He had read all about medieval anti-Semitism, but the living version chilled him.

"Well, I was a little girl when it happened, and my parents told me about it. They were socialists, so they didn't believe in such nonsense. After the Revolution, of course, anti-Semitism was banished from the Soviet Union."

Madison snorted, and Marta looked temporarily uncomfortable. He decided not to press the point, returning instead to his story. "Despite his own cosmopolitan views, Rabbi Loew had to struggle against hateful superstition all his life. In fact, there's a story that his mother went into labor during a Passover seder. A servant ran to fetch a midwife, but just outside the door, she found a man with a dead baby under his arm. This fellow had planned to leave the body in the ghetto as evidence against the Jews. If little Judah hadn't chosen that moment to come into the world, there might have been a terrible pogrom."

They emerged from a crooked little street onto the embankment of the Vlatava. Across the river, the royal castle --

Kafka's sinister inspiration -- crowned a massive hill. Light rain began to fall as Madison said, "The golem, according to legend, was Rabbi Loew's defense against a particularly dangerous charge of human sacrifice. The villain was a certain Czech count who had gambled and drunk away his whole inheritance. One day, he went into the ghetto to find a Jewish banker who might bail him out. Most of the Jews were desperately poor, but there was one banker, named Eliezer Polner, who had enough capital for a substantial loan. Still, the count was obviously a terrible risk, so Polner turned him down. The count spat in Polner's face, called him a Jewish blood-sucker, and threatened to kill him.

"It happened that this count was a widower with a small daughter, and she had an inheritance of her own that he was not permitted to touch unless she died before she turned eighteen. A few days after his loan was rejected, the count announced that his daughter had vanished, kidnapped in the middle of the night by the Jewish banker. The police seized poor Polner and tortured him until he confessed that he had killed her to use her blood for matzohs. At one stroke, the count had won a fortune and taken his revenge."

Madison and Marta entered the area that had once been Prague's ghetto, but its wretched streets had been transformed decades earlier into an imitation of fashionable Paris. Far from romantic or dismal, it was now the most conventional part of Prague -- a district of solid Edwardian apartment buildings inhabited mostly by Catholics. Here, for the first time, they walked on broad, straight sidewalks.

Madison continued, "Rabbi Loew felt terribly sorry for Polner, and he also feared for the whole community. A single lynched Jew was rarely enough to satisfy an anti-Semitic mob. All he could do, however, was to pray and fast. One night, as he read Mishnah and prayed most piteously, an old man knocked on his door. Rabbi Loew let him in, and was immediately struck by his kindly eyes. Loew would have shown hospitality to any stranger on such a cold night, but this man simply radiated wisdom and compassion. He wouldn't sit down, but only said, 'Ato Bra Golem Devuk Hakhomer V'tigzar Zedim Chevel Torfe Yisroel.'

Marta raised her eyebrows to request a translation. Madison said, "Those words were arranged in alphabetical order, but Rabbi

Loew easily reshuffled them in his head to form a sentence: 'Make thee a golem of clay and thou shall defeat all the haters of the Jews.' Before the stranger left, he handed Loew an ancient book, saying only, 'Thou shalt use this power for holy purposes, and none other. If thou misuse it, woe onto thee and thy people.'

"Do you think we've come to Prague to find that book?" asked Marta.

"In my superstitious moments, yes. But usually I can't bring myself to believe that there was any such thing. Rabbi Loew was real; the golem is just a fairytale."

"Well, this is a fairytale city. Tell me what happened next."

"The good rabbi used all his learning to understand this strange book, which was probably written in a kabbalistic code. Meanwhile, he told his loyal sexton to bring mud from the Vlatava -- great quantities of mud. He bathed himself ritually and sang psalms until a huge pile of silt lay on the attic floor of the Altneu Synagogue. Then he dismissed the sexton and formed the mud into a very crude human figure, seven feet high. He walked seven times around this body, moving counterclockwise and reciting charms from the holy book. As he walked, the body turned fire-red and coalesced into a realistic shape. He circled it seven more times, now moving clockwise, as hair and fingernails sprouted from the clay. Finally, he wrote the true name of God in tiny characters on the golem's forehead, so small that no one could read it but the Lord Himself. As he wrote, he recited from the Book of Genesis: 'And he breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living thing.'"

Marta stopped walking to listen better. She pulled Madison away from the pedestrian traffic, so that they stood alone under a modern portico. There, Madison continued his story: "Judah Loew trembled when he saw the golem lift its great head off the floor. Summoning his most forbidding voice, the Rabbi said, 'Golem, thou shalt be called Joseph. Thou wast made for one godly purpose, and shall do no other thing. When thy work is done, thou shalt return unto the mud from which I have made thee. Blessed be the Lord our God.'"

Madison said, "Come, let's look at the Altneu Synagogue, where all this is supposed to have happened." They turned the corner and came upon a complex of religious buildings, including

one narrow synagogue that looked just like a Gothic chapel, with a high stepped roof and pointed windows. "Up there," said Madison; "that's where the golem was born."

They circled the synagogue complex until they found a cemetery gate. Inside, humble tombs and headstones were jammed between narrow alleys. More than 100,000 bodies had been buried in this tiny place -- the only area reserved for Jewish burials -- and the jumbled gravestones resembled raised hands, each demanding notice from the living. Madison led Marta down one path, speaking in a low voice. "On the day of Polner's trial," he said, "a bloodthirsty crowd came to watch him confess. Polner was led trembling and manacled from the dungeon. Five witnesses all solemnly swore that they had seen him kidnap the little countess -- had seen it with their very eyes. Each one told the same story, verbatim, and every time the mob would gasp and mutter curses. The chief prosecutor banged his gavel down and said, 'Eliezer Polner, Jew, you are charged with slaughtering a Christian innocent to use her blood for your wicked rites. How do you plead?'"

"Just then, the courtroom door flew open, and there stood a giant in tattered clothes, cradling a small child. He plodded up the aisle and put her down on the ground. She looked straight at the count and said, "Daddy, why did you lock me in that horrible cellar?"

"Just in the nick of time," said Marta, steering Madison past a hasidic rabbi who was reading tomb inscriptions.

"Of course. It's a fairytale."

Madison led Marta around a corner and pointed to an unusually large tomb. The front was a crude Renaissance architectural facade, crowned with a pomegranate. Behind was the vault, covered with so many pebbles that some had fallen to the ground. Notes had been stuffed under some of the stones.

"Here he lies," said Madison: "Rabbi Judah Loew. The orthodox -- especially hasidim -- they honor him with pebbles."

"What happened to the golem once it saved the day?"

"That's the sad part of the story," said Madison. "Are you interested?"

"Of course." She lifted the collar of her coat to protect her neck from the fine rain and tightened her belt around her waist.

"Well, Rabbi Loew would have destroyed the golem

immediately, because he remembered the stranger's warning. Unfortunately, everyone was talking about the sensational trial, and soon even the Holy Roman Emperor, who lived right over there in Prague Castle, wanted to see this creature. Rabbi Loew had to keep the golem alive until a royal audience could be arranged.

"Now, Loew had married his wife Pearl for love, despite many obstacles. She was a kind and charitable woman who supported every Jew and gentile in need, but she was especially interested in the kind of poor girl who could not afford a dowry to marry her heart's true love. Pearl used to raise money for these girls and organize their weddings; but she would only help if the groom was very nice and scholarly. He had to remind her, at least a bit, of young Judah."

"You're making this part up," said Marta.

Madison confessed, "It's impossible to retell a fairytale without adding a *few* details of your own. Call it informed speculation."

"I understand," said Marta, with her teasing smile. "Go right ahead."

Slightly self-conscious now, Madison continued, "It so happened that a wonderful wedding had been planned for the week after Polner's trial. Pearl had arranged everything, and it was all perfect. The only task that she had left for the day of the ceremony was to buy fish, because it had to be fresh. After all, the honored guests had traveled from as far away as Worms and Venice, and fish was to be the main course. Alas, melting snow from the Alps caused the Vlatava to flood on the wedding day, and no fisherman would go near this raging torrent.

"Pearl thought to herself, 'What could be more holy than a union of love?' She called the golem to her and said, 'Joseph, fetch me a bag of fish from the river.' He went away willingly enough, and quickly returned with many of the biggest fish anyone had ever seen. But Pearl immediately noticed that her husband's strange servant -- who had always been docile and dignified -- had changed. He wouldn't put the fish down. He wanted to play with them, and he sulked and cried when he was told to leave the kitchen. The wedding was no disaster, but it was marred by the golem's behavior at the banquet table. He bellowed and threw food and wanted to dance on the table.

"In fact, it soon became clear that this seven-foot high, three-hundred pound robot had the brains and maturity of a toddler. He wasn't evil, but he couldn't control his emotions and he wasn't very smart. Even though Rabbi Loew had been ordered to take the golem to the Castle, he decided that it would be safer to destroy him, rather than risk a terrible scene before the Emperor. Wanting to erase the name of God from the golem's forehead, he commanded, 'Joseph, bend thy head.' Until now, the golem had done everything Rabbi Loew had asked of him. He had even allowed the Rabbi to erase the Holy Name temporarily. But this time, he shook his huge head and stormed away.

"The audience with Emperor Rudolph was a catastrophe. The golem wanted to play with the guards' swords. This started a fight, and practically the whole palace brigade was injured. Rabbi Loew managed to get the golem home, but now he feared that there would be serious trouble for the Jewish community. To make matters worse, Joseph started to play freely on the streets of Prague, picking up oxen, climbing steeples to ring the church bells, and otherwise terrifying the good burghers of the city.

"Not only did he behave like a toddler, but there was something very sad about him. One night he entered Loew's study and said, 'Golem grow up?'

"'No, Joseph,' said the Rabbi. 'Alas, that willst not change.'

"And another time, the golem pointed to the Rabbi and asked, 'Golem daddy?' Since Loew never lied, he answered, 'No, Joseph, thou hast no father.'

"What a horrible man," said Marta, hotly.

"Well, it's OK," said Madison, "because the golem asked Pearl whether she was his mother, and she answered 'Yes.'"

"You're improvising again."

"No, you can look it up," Madison lied. "Anyway, the golem did many other embarrassing things and caused a great deal of trouble for poor Rabbi Loew. He used to try to join Bible classes and play with the Jewish boys, but they would run away from him in terror. Above all, he liked the Rabbi's teenage daughter, Miriam. Although he was generally rambunctious, he would follow her around like a lamb. Once he even said, 'Miriam lovely.'"

"Uh-oh," said Marta.

"Actually, Miriam liked him too: they used to chat and sing

in the kitchen as she worked. Noticing this, Rabbi Loew told her to make the golem lie down so that he could erase the Lord's Name. This request grieved Miriam deeply, and at first she refused. But one day, when she was pouring spirits for a cake, the golem asked to taste some. He loved the alcohol and demanded more. Knowing what would happen, she gave him many bottles of Passover wine to drink. Sadly, she watched him sink into a stupor. Then she called her father from his study. After she had left the house, the Rabbi erased the Holy Name. He and the sexton and several other servants carried the golem's body to the Synagogue attic -- over there -- where they performed the creation rite in perfect reverse order, until Joseph was just a crude mud figure again."

"What happened to poor Miriam?" asked Marta, in a quiet voice.

"She ran to the river to drown herself. But years later, peasants claimed that they saw a giant running through the hills by night, and in his arms was the body of a young girl. According to some, she lay dead in a sodden nightgown. But others said that she still clung fiercely to the giant's trunk. Even today, peasants see this strange couple on moonlit nights in Bohemia."

After a moment's thought, Marta said, "That shows that the love between two mortal souls has more power even than the Name of God."

Meanwhile, the hasidic rabbi had moved within earshot. Now he said, in accented English, "You have made the golem story very romantic. It is really a parable about piety and learning."

"I like it your way," Marta told Madison.

"Do you know a Rabbi Halberstam?" Madison asked. "We've come to Prague to see him. We have an introduction, but no address."

"I know Halberstam," said the hasid, with an enigmatic look that could have signified disapproval. "He lives at President Wilson Prospect, number 16. You can't miss it."

They thanked the rabbi, consulted a tourist map, and located Wilson Prospect in an outlying suburb. They rode city buses into a neighborhood of large houses, which seemed to have been built since the turn of the century. Wilson Prospect turned out to be a broad and quiet avenue, much like a suburban street in Connecticut. Most of the houses were classical- or baroque-revival



buildings, sprawling and comfortable. At first glance, number 16 looked neo-baroque, too, complete with ornate cornices and lintels and a peaked roof. But there was something odd about this house. It was sleek, clean, and perfectly symmetrical, yet the details were bizarre. The window frames, for example, formed patterns that suggested linear perspective, except that the vanishing points were in completely unpredictable places -- up to the right, straight down. Similarly, the cornices were composed of block-like shapes whose lines receded in all the wrong directions. As a whole, the house looked calm and ordinary, but the details produced an almost queasy feeling.

Madison opened a wooden gate whose cast-iron slats formed parallel sine waves. Then he and Marta walked up a gravel path and rang the bell.

An elderly butler in black tails opened the door.

"Do you speak English?" asked Madison, who knew no Czech.

"I do, sah," said the butler, in the accent of Kensington or Belgravia.

"We would like to see Rabbi Halberstam. My name is Madison Brown -- Professor Brown from America. We have an introduction from a man named Nathan, of Istanbul."

"I shall endeavor to ascertain whether Dr. Halberstam is at home," said the butler, walking away silently.

Madison and Marta stood in the vestibule beneath a quartz chandelier. The wallpaper had been printed in a heavy geometrical pattern, full of tricks and visual paradoxes. To make matters even more unsettling, several conventional Victorian mirrors hung on the wall, reflecting odd patterns from the opposite corners of the room. Marta, irritated by the decor, made a face.

"Madison Brown, the California linguist?" A slender, stooped man stood to their right, wearing an elegant pinstriped suit. His hair was cut very short and his clean-shaven face was chalky white, although he wasn't old. He wore small, oval-framed glasses.

"Dr. Halberstam," said Madison, "it's a pleasure to meet you." He offered his hand. "And this is my friend, Marta Khatchaturian."

"Welcome. Jascha Halberstam. Will you join me for tea?"

They entered a somewhat calmer drawing room, in which angular chairs of leather and steel tubing surrounded a wooden table.

"Tell us about your house," said Marta.

"Do you like it? It's an extravagant hobby of mine -- architecture."

"So you designed it?" Madison asked.

"Oh yes. Of course, I owe everything to Chochol and Janák. Do you know the Czech cubists?"

Madison and Marta shook their heads.

"I'm not surprised; we're provincial. Still, art historians may someday conclude that Janák was to design what Braque was to painting; the man who turned rational space inside out."

He crossed his thin legs and accepted a teacup from the butler. "What brings you to Prague, if not cubist architecture?"

Madison gave a brief but essentially accurate account of events since Mongolia.

"I see," said Halberstam. "And now you'd like me to give you this book, the *Ma'yenot ha-Hakhmah*?"

"Well," said Madison, "we'd like to see it. You don't have to give it to us permanently, although I'd advise you to send it out of harm's way."

"You realize," said Halberstam, "that it's an esoteric text. I mean that in the original sense of the word -- it's a book reserved for initiates, for faithful members of the sect. As far as I know, neither of you are devout Jews, learned in the kabbalah. Dangerous as such works are for the faithful, they are pure poison in the hands of skeptics."

"You don't believe in this magic business, do you?" said Madison, surprised.

"That was the wrong thing to say." Despite his words, Halberstam smiled benignly and signalled for more tea, while Marta glared at Madison. "It would be out of the question, of course, for me to show a sacred work of kabbalah to an atheist."

"Well, now, I'm no atheist. I'm a good Quaker. A righteous gentile, you could say."

"But kabbalah to you is just hocus pocus?"

Madison looked uncomfortably at Marta. After a minute, he said, "Look, I'm not going to pretend to be what I'm not. I find

mysticism fascinating, I respect the mental labor involved, but I don't think it's valid in any sense."

"Why not?" Halberstam recrossed his legs and sat back to listen.

"For one thing, the notion that there was an original language is nonsense."

"Please, explain."

"Language developed as human beings evolved. If you travel back through the primeval history of speech, you won't recover Adam's tongue; you'll just hear the sounds that they chatter today in the monkey house at the Prague Zoo."

Halberstam shook his head. "Leave aside your scientific data; they only tell us about average things and ordinary processes. Couldn't there be an *ideal* language, one that did not evolve naturally but was discovered deliberately -- or perhaps it was somehow disclosed to men?"

Marta asked, "You mean, a language in which all the nouns were the true names of things?"

"Exactly."

Madison said, "Words are arbitrary sounds. *Chambre* is no more true than *Zimmer* or *room*. I could have been called Charlie or Jean-Claude as well as Madison. The relationship between words and things is simply conventional."

"Yet even you rationalists can never resist trying to tidy up our ordinary languages until they're perfect. Replace everyday grammar with logic. Substitute scientific formulas for the arbitrary names of things. Reduce complex phenomena to individual sense-data -- minuscule points of color on a cartesian grid. In an ideal language, everything you said would be true, and whatever you couldn't say would be manifestly foolish. This is what some of our best philosophers tell us."

"But they don't promise to conjure up golems by intoning the right words."

"No, they can unleash forces far more powerful than the poor golem. In fact, one reason that I disdain your reason is that it's so destructive. Think of the Great War: tens of millions slaughtered without purpose because we've learned to make machine guns and gas, and we're able to manipulate men bureaucratically like columns of numbers. You rationalists want a reason for everything.

What reason have you for reason itself? The burden of proof lies with you. No pious mystic ever ordered a million men to die."

Madison said, "What about the mystics who are threatening Czechoslovakia from every side today? I mean Hitler; Mussolini -- that crackpot; Admiral Horthy in Hungary; Stalin."

"Wait a minute," said Marta. "Stalin's a beast, but Marxism is science, not mysticism. It's the enemy of all superstition."

"Of course," said Halberstam, with a thin smile. "That's why the Bolsheviks have formed themselves into a secret society with a high priest and an obscure sacred text that explains everything in history. Who wrote this book? -- a bearded Jewish prophet. Nothing can disprove his theory; everything confirms it. The worse things appear, the closer we must be to the apocalypse: the great revolution, after which every man will be a Michelangelo. Please, you and I are on the same side in *this* debate."

Madison said, "You didn't answer my question. In 1937, aren't mystics and irrationalists the greatest threat to peace on earth?"

"Perhaps," said Halberstam, "but these dictators are inevitable. If all our traditions and customs -- our very language -- turns out to be arbitrary, as you scientists say, then we can have no community. And if we have no community or tradition, then we're just rootless individuals, living pointless lives until some mad new myth gives us an alien enemy to hate. Reason, whether you like it or not, is dead in politics. It has subverted everything holy until the time has finally come to strip away *its* mask."

Marta was shaking her head, almost imperceptibly. Madison said, "But even if I concede that reason has had harmful effects, how can I renounce it if I happen to believe in it? How can I affirm what I know isn't true?"

"Tell me, what's so true about reason? Here is my tea cup. I want to describe it -- the simplest possible thing. What is it to have an object in my hand? Does it really exist? How can my mind know it? Is my idea of it also an object, just like the tea cup itself? Or is there no tea cup, but *only* an idea: perhaps a sensory impression? These words, 'object,' 'exist,' 'real,' 'idea,' 'impression' -- we try to describe the world with them, and we are baffled. Such words come between us and creation like a veil. The ancients knew better how to let nature disclose itself to them. I mean the Greeks, before

Socrates invented his rationalistic jargon, and the Hebrews of Moses' day. For them creation was not yet an It, to be manipulated; it was a Thou, with which they conversed."

Marta said, "And all that has something to do with kabbalah?"

"My dear lady, it's the essence of it."

"You know," said Madison, "all this talk about reason is sort of beside the point. I'm a man of faith, too. My real complaint against kabbalah is theological, not scientific."

Marta gave him another irritated look, perhaps thinking that he should curry favor with Dr. Halberstam instead of debating him. But the rabbi said, "Wonderful, let's talk about theology."

Madison began, "Kabbalists want religion to be pure and abstract; they hope to grasp the true structure of the cosmos, the perfect reality that lies behind the illusion of suffering and disorder that we see down here on earth. But what's the Bible? It's a motley collection of stories, dietary rules, statistics, tedious genealogies, poems -- much of it concerning foolish mortals and an erratic God. How can this be The Truth? Kabbalists reply that its literal meaning is trivial. It's really a great allegory or an elaborate code, perhaps even an anagram of God's full name. For that reason, they are often most interested in the really minor passages. Do you happen to have a Bible handy?"

Halberstam pulled a German translation from a nearby bookshelf. Madison opened it, flipped the pages, and read almost at random: "'And they cast lots, the small as well as the great, according to the house of their fathers, for every gate. And the lot to the east fell to Shelemiah. Then for Zecharia his son, a wise counselor, they cast lots; and his lot was to the north. To Obed-edom, the south; and to his sons the house of Asuppim.'

"Now, what kind of religion is this? The division of lots alone goes on for *pages*. What can it tell us about the perfect Author of the universe? If you want to understand justice, beauty, and truth, you'll be tempted to throw this whole book away and become a speculative philosopher. Or else you might conclude that the text contains a *secret* message. Maybe these tedious names would mean something if we translated them into numbers. That's the impulse behind kabbalah."

Halberstam replied, "According to Torah, 600,000 Jews

heard Moses first recite the Bible at Sinai. Each one, I think, could find a different meaning in the text. The words are the husk, within which lie countless seeds. Even the literal text has probably been reshuffled several times -- without dropping a single letter -- so that it used to say something quite different in Adam's day, or Noah's. Some believe that God first wrote Torah before Creation, using black fire on a background of white fire. What we see is some version of the black letters, but the real meaning was disclosed in the white. In that case, the letters on a Torah scroll are just a commentary on the white margins."

"This is exactly what I mean," said Madison: "the Good Book's not good enough for you. Now, for me, it's fine as it is. Sure, it's the story of ordinary people, terribly fallible. It was written by authors who sometimes lapsed into irrelevant detail. Meanwhile, the God who appears in it seems to struggle to understand His own creation; He makes mistakes and changes His mind. All of this speaks quite forcefully to me. There are times when my life resembles those of the biblical characters, especially the more ordinary ones."

"In other words," said Halberstam, "you read the Bible as literature. Why not read Dickens or Mark Twain instead? What do you expect to learn about God, the immortal creator?"

Marta was following this exchange like a tennis spectator, except that she seemed more amused than absorbed by the debate. Madison -- too engrossed to notice her -- answered: "When I think that God has a place in my life, I don't perceive the perfect author of creation. I experience a powerful and sympathetic *person*, one whose early history is told in scripture. He's a figure capable of grief and sorrow. That's the God to whom I pray."

Halberstam propped his chin on two bony fingers and contemplated the wall, which was made of poured concrete. After a while, he said, "Very well, let's see whether this personal God of yours wants you to see the *Ma'yenot ha-Hakhmah*."

"What do you mean?" asked Marta.

"I don't have it here, but I've seen it. It was not really written by Mordecai Buzaglo, of course. Abraham himself read it, and Joshua; then Judah Loew. Finally, the Besht studied it, but when he finished he hid it in a cave that sealed itself magically behind him. He placed a guard outside and left. If the Lord wants you to enter,

so be it."

Marta asked, "Who's the --?"

Madison explained, "The Besht. That's an abbreviation for the Ba'al Shem Tov. A ba'al shem is a possessor of the Holy Name - Rabbi Loew was one, I suppose. But the Besht was the *good* ba'al shem, a beloved figure. What was his real name?" he asked.

Halberstam answered, "Israel ben Iliezer."

Nodding, Madison added, "You could call him the St. Francis of Judaism. He was a great mystic, a cherished saint, the kind of charismatic who breaks the bonds of law and infuses people with ecstatic love. Birds and small animals flocked to him, as did the poorest of the poor. He left no writings, just a host of tender legends and sayings. The hasidic movement was his creation."

"What can you tell us about the location of his cave?" Marta asked Halberstam.

"In all versions of the hasidic tales, we read that the Baal Shem Tov began his career in the city of Okopy. That's where a mysterious figure called Rabbi Adam gave him the secret manuscripts. The problem is, Okopy appears in no atlas."

"But you've found it," said Marta.

"That's right. Now listen. I shall send a letter to the post office in that town, addressed *poste restante* to, say, Ján Kovac. The letter will contain an address to which you may send the manuscript, assuming that you are permitted to see it. I'm not just playing games with you," he added. "The fact is, right now I don't know a safe place to send the manuscript. I'll find one while you search for that cave. Don't come back here or try to contact me; it's too dangerous. If the Lord wants you to find the Besht's manuscript, that will come to pass. If not, heaven forbid that I should divulge its location to you."

"You can't give us any more clues?" asked Madison.

"No," said Halberstam, "but here's some advice. Remember what made Rabbi Loew lose control of the golem. These manuscripts are meant only for the holiest purposes. Nathan gave you a task -- to save the text. That is all. Do not try to use it in any way. Recall, Rabbi Loew's wife meant to do good, not harm, but she still succumbed to temptation. In your case," he told Madison, "I know what the greatest temptation will be."

“What’s that?”

“Scholarly curiosity. Resist it.”

It was late in the afternoon before Marta and Madison returned to Prague’s Old Town. On the bus, she said, in a low voice, “What will you need to find this place -- Okopy?”

Madison thought for a minute before answering: “An excellent atlas of Eastern Europe, preferably a historical gazetteer, with an index of old place names. Also, books about the Ba’al Shem Tov, and everything that Rabbi Halberstam has written.”

Marta said, “Perhaps tomorrow you can use the university library. For now, let me find you an atlas. We’ll meet at the flat.”

So Madison waited for her in the austere apartment, beneath lofty ceilings of cracked rococo plaster, playing combinatorial games with the word “Okopy” in various languages. Night had fallen before Marta returned. She carried a brown paper parcel full of books.

“I found a superb map shop,” she said. “It’s amazing how much information these bourgeois countries are willing to release to the general public. Anyone can buy military-quality survey maps of Czechoslovakia. Just out of habit, I almost bought a set for the NKVD.”

She unwrapped the parcel and handed Madison several atlases. She also gave him a book called *In Praise of the Ba’al Shem Tov*. This turned out to be a collection of Yiddish legends and sayings.

“I’ll buy food; you keep working.” She was gone before he’d had a chance to say anything, let alone touch her. Left alone, he made himself reasonably comfortable at a plain table, which he positioned beneath a bare electric light. Knowing that the Besht had lived in Western Ukraine, he drew a rough circle, about five hundred miles in diameter, that encompassed parts of Ukraine, Byelorussia, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia. He was especially interested in Slovakia, for the name Ján Kovac was the Slovak equivalent of John Smith. Still, there were hundreds, if not thousands, of villages in Slovakia alone.

He started working on the word Okopy. The Besht had been born inside the Ottoman Empire, had lived under a Czar, and had spoken both Hebrew and Yiddish; so Madison wrote “Okopy” in Latin, Hebrew, Cyrillic, and Arabic letters. Then he rearranged all



these characters, looking for significant sounds. He also wrote out the Hebrew alphabet, assigning numbers to the letters by various methods. Once he had worked out several systems of numerology, he rendered words into numbers, then back into letters. Whenever he discovered a meaningful word, he translated it into other languages, only to start the combinatorial process all over again.

Before Marta returned, he had filled a notebook with methodical notations in four alphabets. She gave him black bread, cheese, and beer to eat; then settled on the bed with a stack of newspapers. These she read with careful attention, nodding and clucking as she interpreted diplomatic communiqués from all the great powers. At last, Madison's eyes and head hurt too much to continue. He said, "I've gotten somewhere. Let's go to bed."

An hour later, they lay nestled in a narrow cot. Light from a street lamp left white stripes on the dusty floor. The only sound was an occasional car or the clack of shoes on stone. Madison said, "What did you read in the news?" He held Marta's warm waist in his right hand.

"It's all bad, of course. Hitler wants to gobble up Czechoslovakia, so every day his press claims that Germans are persecuted in this country. What total rubbish."

"With all these lies and blood-lust, what will happen to Europe, do you think?"

"There will be war. Capitalism has collapsed; it's really been out of fuel since the Wall Street crash. The Western powers still cling to their global empires, but at their heart, they're rotten. I'll tell you a secret. The population of France has fallen since 1930, while Germany's has grown by 30 percent. To make matters worse, a third of all French draftees are rejected every year: they're physically unfit for service. That country will be crushed, utterly crushed. And England, too."

"Which leaves the big boys," said Madison: "Hitler and Stalin."

"Exactly. The only living ideologies of the twentieth century are fascism and communism. They will claw each other until just one is left standing."

"Does it make any difference which one?"

Marta said, in a very soft voice, "Perhaps not. Not anymore."

He held her tighter under the thin blanket. A car passed,

sending its light across the ceiling, then back in a slow arc. She said, "Is there anything to hope for from America?"

"I doubt it," said Madison. "If there's another war, we may sit it out -- we're awfully self-absorbed. Until then, I don't know if Roosevelt can hold our domestic fascists at bay. 'They must to keep their certainty accuse / All that are different of a base intent; / Pull down established honour; hawk for news / Whatever their loose fantasy invent.'"

"It has the feel to it," said Marta, "of the end of time. Don't you think?"

"Oh yes. 'A blood-dimmed tide is loosed.'"

He pulled her even closer. She twisted her arm behind her to grasp his neck. "We'll stick it out together?" she said.

"To the end."

He watched the shifting light on the ceiling while he summoned the courage to continue. "Marta," he said, "I think I love you."

There was a long silence. "Oh," she said, "then everything's all right. That makes everything all right." But her tone was opaque, and he couldn't see her face as she spoke.