

VI

Madison had managed to transform "Okopy" into "rumex," using laborious kabbalistic computations. He didn't know what this meant, but it looked like an authentic word, unlike most of his other results. In the morning, he discreetly consulted a dictionary at a nearby bookstore, and thereby discovered that "rumex" is a genus of sorrel plant. He still suspected that Okopy lay in modern Slovakia. The Slovak word for sorrel, he learned, is *šťiav*. Back in the apartment, he scanned the index of his atlas until he found a Slovak town called Banská Štiavnica (pronounced "banska shti-AHV-neetza"), whose etymology, he guessed, was "sorrel mine."

His historical gazetteer told him that this town had been founded as Schemnitz, a medieval German mining camp. Most Germanic settlements in Eastern Europe had included large Yiddish-speaking populations, so Madison assumed that Schemnitz had once possessed a Jewish ghetto. Moreover, this town had evidently been very large at the time of the Ba'al Shem Tov -- indeed, it was then the second biggest city in Hungary. But perhaps the mines had run out subsequently, because the modern population was just a few thousand.

Madison told Marta that they ought to explore Banská Štiavnica. However, before they left Prague, he wanted to spend a day in the library of the Charles University, reading Halberstam's publications. These might contain clues to the location of the Besht's magical cave, and they might also help Madison to interpret the mysterious manuscripts. Marta observed that they were in no hurry to leave Prague, since they would have to wait for Halberstam's letter to arrive in Banská Štiavnica -- assuming that it was the right town. So Madison got to work in the library, while Marta busied herself with mysterious errands.

They met for lunch at a cafeteria in the university neighborhood, where students ate at long tables, drinking Czech beer from mugs. Madison had asked Marta to buy the most detailed available map of the Štiavnica hills. Once they had finished eating their sausages and soup -- and most of the other customers had left -- Marta spread a surveyor's chart on the table between

them. They examined a small town sprawled in a hollow among low but rugged mountains.

Madison said, "Good, there are lots of altitude markings. These contour lines mean nothing, of course, because they're measured in meters -- and what were meters to the Ba'al Shem Tov?"

"What did he use instead," said Marta: "cubits?"

"Probably reeds. The Book of Ezekiel, chapter forty: 'And behold, there was a man, whose appearance was like the appearance of brass, with a line of flax in his hand, and a measuring reed of six cubits long and an hand breadth.'"

"What is a reed, in units that I can understand?"

"It's just short of twelve feet, or three point three-five meters. Let's see if we can mark a contour line at about one hundred reeds above sea-level: that would be three hundred and thirty five meters."

They worked together, drawing light pencil lines on the map. In most places, the lines were meaningless squiggles, and sometimes they could not decide where to draw them at all. But suddenly Marta said, "Look!"

She had connected dots to form a regular image of a head, an arm, and a leg. Very excited, she continued working until she had drawn a whole man. It was a symmetrical figure, spread-eagled so that each limb could touch a point on an imaginary circle. Just as in Leonardo's famous sketch, the head lay precisely at the center.

Madison said, "This must represent *Adam Kadmon*, the perfect image of man that God created at the beginning of time. Where would you say the mouth is?"

Marta pointed to a gully on the map.

"That's our cave. Out of the mouth comes the word. Are you ready to do some spelunking?"

They paid for their meal and walked outside. Marta wore her trenchcoat with its collars raised, and a wide-brimmed hat. To Madison's surprise, she approached a black BMW 328 convertible that was parked on the curb opposite. Although it was small, it cut quite a figure with its insouciant Art Deco lines. A wave of metal crested over the bare front wheel, then swept under the door. The radiator grills were cat's-eye slits in the aerodynamic prow;

concentric circles of steel sheathed the back wheels. Marta opened the passenger door with a key, then jumped into the driver's seat.

"Where did you get this beauty?" asked Madison.

"We have a mole working under deep cover in a Czech agency. I assumed that Moscow wouldn't risk contacting him just to say that I'd defected. So I ordered him to find me a ministry car with untraceable plates. Make yourself comfortable; it's ours."

Before they left the city, they paid their rent, packed their possessions, and bought rope, spikes, hammers, backpacks, and lamps. With Marta at the wheel, they sped through the Bohemian hills, across the industrial and agricultural plain of Moravia, and finally into the foothills of the Carpathian mountains, where the shop signs were printed in Slovak. As dusk approached, the roads began to wind and climb as the forest thickened and turned coniferous. Marta, undeterred by narrow, looping roads, maintained a high speed. She had taken off her hat, and the wind played with her hair. "I love driving," she announced as they barrelled past a honking truck.

Ramshackle prospector's cottages appeared occasionally beside the road, with wooden sluices for panning minerals. But there couldn't be much left in these hills, for the houses looked terribly poor. Once they saw a broad-backed old lady in a head scarf, trudging uphill with water buckets. Here and there a brick chimney, a rusted crane, or an artificial lake suggested a history of industrial mining. The combination of rugged hills, dense pine forest, and hardscrabble villages made Madison think of West Virginia. Only the castles that topped some hills would have looked out of place in Appalachia.

They followed the river Hron toward its source in the high Carpathians. At last, the car rounded a tight corner and descended into a hollow toward twinkling lights.

"This should be Banská Štiavnica," said Madison, who had been navigating. Street lamps illuminated a fine church with a rococo onion dome, a substantial town square, and a Renaissance fortress. The terrain was so rugged that many streets turned into flights of steps, or ended altogether at cliff faces. But most of the town was spread out along the main road toward Zvolen.

Marta parked in the main square, where their car was by far the most impressive. They got out and stretched, and Madison

examined an elaborate baroque column that had been erected to celebrate the end of a plague. Nearby, they could see the warm lights of an inn. They bought a meal of carp roasted with onion and caraway seeds, and then slept upstairs -- in a bed so high that they had to duck the exposed timbers -- until the bells of Saint Catherine's church awakened them.

There was no letter for Ján Kovac at the town's tiny post office, but a helpful (and curious) postmaster promised to keep his eyes peeled. After a hearty breakfast at the inn, Madison and Marta set out for the hills, looking like a pair of vacationing hikers with their backpacks and boots. Under a canopy of pines, the cold air was steamy but fresh. At first they followed a marked trail out of town, but soon they had to strike off on their own. After crossing a muddy patch, they mounted a fairly steep hill, sometimes scrambling to remain afoot on a damp carpet of pine needles. But they could see their way easily, since no underbrush obscured the random pattern of trunks. Occasionally they saw a sign of human industry: the abandoned foundation of a building or an old well. Crows warned the forest of their approach.

They crossed a ridge, descended into a valley, followed a stream to its source, struck across a hillside, and finally reached a kind of plateau. Behind them, the spires of Banská Štiavnica looked tiny and quaint. Madison had been using the map to orient them; now he spread it on a fallen tree to locate their position more precisely. "Up that rise, past an abandoned mine shaft, then left into a gully. There we should find the cave."

Marta confirmed that he'd read the map correctly. After five minutes of strenuous climbing, they found the entrance of a little ravine, which was choked with rhododendrons and other bushes. Madison led the way in, steadying himself by grasping at tree limbs. Since much of the undergrowth was thorny, he soon became badly tangled; and Marta complained when he released a spiky branch into her face. He fell on the muddy slope and scrambled toward the bottom of the gully, with Marta behind him.

They found themselves at a stone opening that could have been a natural cave, although it was square enough to be artificial. Madison stepped inside, disturbing a bat, which flapped away into the forest. He walked a few paces and came face-to-face with a solid stone door.

Marta joined him, putting her arm around his waist. They pushed, with no effect, until Marta noticed a slit in the door, through which they could read a string of Hebrew letters engraved in silver on an iron background. Each letter had been etched on a separate segment of metal.

With a snort, Madison said, "Can you read this?"

Marta shook her head.

"It says, 'Halberstam.'" He fingered one of the letters. Although stiff, it turned to reveal other characters -- the whole Hebrew alphabet. "A combination lock, apparently. The good rabbi wants people to know that he was here."

"Any idea what combination will open the door?"

"Unfortunately, I have too *many* ideas. It could be the Name of God, in which case we're in trouble, because I don't know it. Or it could be an attribute of God, such as Almighty. But if it's something as obvious as that, it's probably been kabbalistically scrambled. Of course, it could be random."

"Well, get working," said Marta, sitting on a rock.

Madison tried many combinations, working for an hour or more. He borrowed paper from Marta and made elaborate calculations, which he tried on the lock. Bored, Marta stood up and explored the immediate vicinity. When she returned, Madison was staring at the door.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"I'm running out of ideas."

"Who wrote that book that's supposed to be inside?"

"You mean Mordecai Buzaglo. But I don't think he was a real person."

"All the more reason to try it."

Madison tried to spell "Buzaglo," which didn't fit, and then "Mordecai." When all the letters were in position, he heard a soft click. Marta pushed the door and opened it easily -- as if it were on a spring. After she had lit a lamp from her backpack, they stepped inside, finding themselves in a tunnel lined with evenly cut stones. They walked a few paces further. Suddenly, the door slammed shut behind them as if it had been kicked. The noise of the impact reverberated for several seconds.

Madison ran to the door. It was closed tightly and there was no handle or keyhole on its smooth inside face. He pushed, but to

no avail.

Marta said, "I shouldn't have stepped on this paving stone. It's some kind of trigger."

She raised the lamp to her face, looking dejected. Madison said cheerfully, "Well, let's worry about getting out of here once we've found the manuscript."

He followed her down the tunnel. After a few more paces, the flame in their lamp flickered, flattened, grew brighter for a moment, and then snuffed itself out. In total darkness, Marta said, "There's a strong draft in this one spot. It's coming from over my head."

Madison found her in the dark and held her by the waist. "Keep moving. When the draft stops, we can relight the lamp."

He could feel a chill breeze on his forehead. They shuffled ahead until Marta stopped and reached down. "What's this?" she asked.

Fumblingly, she handed Madison some kind of smooth pole. He said, "Can you light the lamp now?"

It took her a long time to find a match in her bag. She bent down and gave a fleeting shriek.

"What do you see?" asked Madison

Calmly now, she replied: "A skeleton. Human. You've got his leg."

Madison dropped it as Marta struck another match, then lit her lamp. By its flickering light, they could see quite a pile of bones in the corridor, some still dressed in tattered clothes. There were cobwebs everywhere. A rat scampered away in the distance.

"Apparently we're not the first to enter here," Marta said in a small voice.

"Halberstam got out."

"So he says. Maybe he never got in. Just left his name on the door."

She proceeded down the hall, picking her way over skeletons. Madison followed, first looking warily into the darkness behind them. He could hear shuffling and scraping sounds, and Marta's lamp briefly reflected a pair of beady eyes.

The hallway opened into a larger chamber. In the center was an iron figure of a man, two feet high. It stood on a stone pedestal, covered with cobwebs. There didn't seem to be any exit other than

the closed one behind them.

Marta approached the statuette and touched it gingerly. Meanwhile, Madison removed a large spider from his neck and felt something else crawling down his back. After looking behind him again, he joined Marta by the pedestal.

"This must represent Adam Kadmon," he said. "I'll bet we're standing right at the brain of that large figure that you traced on the map. This statuette is sort of a homunculus, standing for Adam Kadmon's soul."

"Aren't Jews forbidden to make graven images?"

"We're in occult territory now," Madison said. "The normal rules don't apply."

Marta ran her hands over the iron body. "There's a seam down the middle, but I can't see how to open it. The only orifice is the mouth."

Madison also searched the surface of this figure, which appeared to be perfectly smooth. They could lift it off the pedestal, but it was so heavy that they put it down immediately. The pedestal itself was solid, and the room was otherwise empty, except for a human skeleton curled in the corner.

"What else do you know about this Adam Kadmon?" Marta asked. She had just seen the skeleton, and Madison noticed a tremor in her voice.

He said, "At first, there was only God, a perfect, simple, undifferentiated, infinitely large, atemporal being. That was all there was to the universe. Somehow, this *Ein Soph* turned into the creator of a world full of variety, change, and imperfection. How? Not by lessening its extension, for it is infinite; and not because of an evil force, because evil cannot affect the *Ein Soph*."

"How then?" said Marta, evidently impatient and anxious.

"Some say, by inhaling. Like a man who draws in his breath, so that the smaller contains the larger, God contracted His Being until it was an arm's length, leaving everything else dark. He was now Adam Kadmon, and in the dark space around Him, He made all things."

"This is about an arm long," Marta observed of the statue.

"It has inhaled. It needs to breathe out." Madison found his own words eerie; he hadn't exactly planned to utter them.

"Should I?" said Marta.

"Should you what?"

"Help him to breath out." She put her lips to the statuette's mouth and sucked in stale air. Immediately, the figure split open and its two sides clattered to the ground, revealing an intricate, watch-like mechanism and a parchment scroll. Madison reached down and unravelled six inches of the parchment. It was in reasonably good condition, but he could make no sense of the text, an unbroken string of Hebrew letters.

"You can look at that later," said Marta. "Let's leave this place."

Wondering if she had a plan in mind, Madison followed her back up the corridor. Her lamp began to flicker, so she put it on the ground far from the draft. It threw trembling shadows of skeletons onto the corridor walls.

"Let me climb onto your shoulders," she told Madison.

He bent down so that she could clamber onto his back.

"Now, walk under that draft."

Once he stood in the breeze, she reached toward the ceiling. "It's coming from here. Move a step forward. Now right. There, a narrow opening. I think I can climb into it."

After a few moments, Madison asked, "What's the matter?" Marta hadn't moved.

"I'm claustrophobic, and I completely detest rats. Give me a moment to collect myself."

In a voice full of concern, Madison said, "I could go."

"Nonsense, I'm smaller."

He helped her to pull her knees and then her feet onto his shoulders. The weight lessened, and then she was gone.

"God, this is tight," said a muffled voice above. Madison watched the dark ceiling, trying to ignore the skeletons around him.

After a long while, Marta's distant voice said, "It's awfully dark, and I can hear scratching noises."

"They won't hurt you."

More silence. Finally, Marta said, "Madison, I'm stuck."

"Wiggle backwards. We have plenty of time. We can start over later."

"No, I'm *stuck*. I really can't move." He had never heard such fear in her voice.

"How far along are you?"

"I don't know." She was crying, he thought.

"If you could get in there, you can get out."

"But my shoulder's jammed. And there's definitely a bloody rat up the tunnel. He thinks I'm dinner."

"Easy does it. Relax; work your shoulder out."

Madison didn't hear anything for a long time. Swallowing to control his fear, he wished fervently that they had never entered this cave, and that Marta had never climbed into the air hole.

He started when he saw a rat standing brazenly by the lamp. He tried to shoo it away, but it just watched him. He removed a coil of rope from his backpack and threw it toward the rat. But he couldn't tell whether he'd hit his target, because the rope struck the lamp and knocked it out.

They were back in pitch darkness.

"What's happening down there?" said Marta. "Are you all right?"

"Sorry." Madison walked gingerly through the skeletons. He groped at bones and skulls, shuddering, until at last he found the lamp. "Shoo!" he barked, in case the rat was nearby. There was now a spider on his hand. He brushed it off, only to discover a centipede under his ear. Shaking, he struggled to find and light a match, with which he relit the lamp. He turned around and was immensely relieved to see Marta's boots hanging from the hole in the ceiling.

He reached up and helped her onto his shoulders.

"I'm so glad you're safe," he said, trembling. Her body felt marvelously warm and alive.

"I wouldn't call us safe," said Marta, glancing toward the locked stone door.

They spent at least an hour poring over the surface of the cave, pushing the door, moving the stone pedestal, and tapping the floor. Finally, as hope ran out, they squatted together in the statue room.

"Well, we can conserve the lamp oil and eat rats," said Madison. "At least there's air."

"What a way to go."

"I guess there are worse."

"Stop trying to be so damned chipper. You bloody

Americans -- always optimistic."

"Let's not fight," said Madison.

"Why not?" Her tone suggested resignation, not anger.

After a pause, Madison said, "I have suicide pills."

"You do? Why?"

"In case you Russkies decided to torture me. One sharp bite, and I go to my reward."

Marta said, "It may be better than eating raw rat."

Madison sprawled on the cold stone. Marta stood up and paced, kicking the scroll when it got in her way. "All right," she said. "We'll get to work. You start reading that manuscript. Maybe it explains how to get out of here. Meanwhile, I'll look for the door mechanism. There has to be some kind of spring that releases it."

She delivered these words like an order, so Madison got immediately to work. He crouched over the vellum scroll, baffled by the letters, which seemed entirely random. Nevertheless, he was soon engrossed. When his knees and neck were stiff from concentrated attention, Marta said, "Any luck?"

"Not yet."

"Me neither. But I've just realized that there's a draft in here, so the air must be able to escape somewhere. It can't just come in. All I've found is a narrow slit between two paving stones. I'm convinced that there must be space under there."

"Have you tried to lift the stones?"

"Oh yes: they're solid. But I think that if we hammer a spike into the crack, we may be able to get somewhere."

They took turns pounding. They had brought hammers for rock-climbing, but these small tools seemed inadequate to cut the granite, which shed chips no thicker than paper. Madison gave up pounding and hauled one half of the statuette down the corridor. Marta held the figure's head; Madison, its feet; and they brought the whole object down on the spike. Again and again they struck, until the spike had lost its point altogether and glowed from friction. With a new spike, they returned to work. For the next several hours, they stopped only occasionally to rest their aching arms. When they had just one spike left, they finally broke through to darkness below. Marta tied a rope to a hammer and lowered it into the small hole that they had made. Then she tugged until the tool caught on the bottom of the paving stone.

"Let's pull," she said.

They strained on the end of the rope, but the stone wouldn't move.

"We need a better angle," Marta said. She scanned the murky walls and ceiling until she found an outcropping, over which she flung the rope. Then they pulled downward with all their might, and the stone rose an inch.

Marta said, "Let's tie the statue to the end of the rope. Its weight will help us."

This was no easy task, because the iron figure must have weighed well over 100 pounds, and they were weary. But at last they managed to attach it to the rope and add their own weight. The stone rose majestically and fell on its side, exposing a dark cavity.

Marta peered in. "The space is fifty centimeters tall -- at most," she said. A note of discouragement had returned to her voice.

"I think I hear water," said Madison.

Indeed a faint gurgling sound emerged from below. Marta lowered the lamp into the cavity and bent over to see.

"The floor slopes down to the right," she said, "and there seems to be a stream of some sort."

"This place could have been a mine, originally," Madison suggested. "In the old days, I think they used water to flush out minerals. So maybe the stream is artificial."

Marta wriggled, face down, under the pavement. When only her feet were visible, she said, "There are a few centimeters of headroom above the water." Her voice echoed in the rocky cavity.

She clambered back to the surface, and they wrapped the vellum manuscript in every scrap of cloth that they could find, including their outer clothes and both knapsacks. They tied the whole parcel to Madison's belt. Then Marta crawled back into the hole and inched toward the water.

Madison followed, squeezing his body between the horizontal layers of rock. He found that he could not reach the stream without first removing his sweater. In shirtsleeves, he managed to wiggle all the way to the bank of the rivulet.

Marta lay there already, one hand in the water. "It's bloody, bloody cold. Let me go alone. If I make it, I'll open the door and let

you out.”

“I’m following you.” He clasped her hand, and she gave him a tight squeeze. Then she rolled into the water and shrieked. She lay on her back, her feet pointed downstream, and scrambled away with the current.

Madison followed, trying to hold the manuscript above his chest. He used his elbows and feet to propel himself. The water was shockingly, frighteningly cold -- so cold that it seemed to burn. It penetrated his clothes immediately and numbed his skin. He slid downstream, rough stone battering his whole body. The water level rose until he could barely keep his face above the surface. He tried to wriggle back upstream, but the current was too strong. For a moment he remained in place, struggling frantically. Then he took a deep breath and let the water sweep him downward.

He was completely submerged now in the icy stream, hurtling through a tunnel whose walls beat him like blunt axes. His skull seemed to fill with a mute scream; lights flashed in his closed eyes. Beneath all the other sounds, he heard a deep, rhythmic pounding: thump-THUMP, thump-THUMP, thump-THUMP.

And then the rock seemed to collapse below him. He opened his eyes to see a dizzy gyre of pines and evening sky. The next thing he knew, something had walloped him from below. He raised his head and saw that he lay in a muddy pond. A small waterfall poured out of the mountainside behind him. It was dusk, and birds chirped obliviously.

Marta lay nearby, with only the back of her head above water. Madison felt a surge of fear as he grabbed her shoulders and pulled her bruised and swollen face to the surface. She was limp. Blind with panic, he carried her to the shore and shook her. Her hair was matted with mud, her eyes were closed, and her mouth sagged.

“Marta!” he shouted.

He turned her upside down and poured water out of her mouth. Then he put his lips to hers and blew air into her lungs. He slapped her cheek.

“Marta!”

Her eyes fluttered open.

“Oh, Marta!”

She grasped him feebly. Her clothes were sopping wet and

scarlet fluid had soaked her collar and back. She shivered uncontrollably.

Madison carried her to higher ground. The bundle of knapsacks and clothes was still attached to his belt. He tore it off and lay the drier inside layers over Marta's body. Her eyes closed. He said, "Marta, stay awake," and shook her again; she gave a feeble smile. He propped her head on his knee and stroked her hair. When her eyelids shut, he opened them with a gentle finger.

"Don't sleep now, Marta, don't sleep."

The last sunlight had faded away and a few stars appeared overhead. Madison noticed that he was awfully cold; his clothes were wet and there was a brisk wind. If they stayed in the forest all night, he thought, they would die.

He lifted Marta as gently as he could and hobbled into the woods with his arm around her waist. She could hardly move her feet, and every once in a while she would mutter something nonsensical. Madison had no idea which way to go. He decided to climb the hill, hoping to see lights in the distance. "Help!" he shouted, in case there was anyone in earshot.

Marta was almost a dead weight, so he slung her over his shoulder and staggered uphill, the manuscript in one hand. Everything was dark behind him, but when he reached the crest, he could see Banská Štiavnica in the distance.

"There we are, honey," he said: "there's a warm bed."

They stumbled onto a road fifteen minutes later, and soon a passing army van picked them up. At that point, Madison succumbed to pain and fatigue. Completely passive, he allowed the Czech officers to take him and Marta to the inn, where a doctor set his broken arm and treated Marta for shock, concussion, and surface wounds. The innkeeper lit a raging fire in their room, and they slept until late the following morning.