

HUNTING TOBIAS

BY

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And

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*The book of words shall be brought forth,
in which everything is contained
whereby the world is to be judged.
Therefore, when the Judge is seated,
all things hidden will appear,
nothing shall remain unpunished.*

Verdi's Requiem

Chapter 1

Cambridge, Massachusetts

7 January 1968

CRACK! Never a happy sound. The crack of a rifle, crack of a whip, crack of breaking glass. All portents of panic. But the fear that instantly suspended all rational thought, that blacked out all other reality but that single, horrifying sound, was a primal fear: a fear of dying. They all heard it; they all shuddered to a frozen halt, but only one of them, John Foxx, disappeared through the ice. It was as if some monstrous claw had reached up out of the river that dark, snowy night and pulled him down into the depths of the underworld. The four schoolmates stood in shock, staring at the black empty hole. The only sound they heard was the rippling of the fast current underneath.

Professor King was about half across Anderson Bridge when he saw the gray silhouette of someone in a great coat slip through the ice on the river just below him.

“Oh my God,” he gasped out loud.

With a new fear overtaking the old, without a word and without much thought, the four-remaining ran under the bridge and out of sight. By the time King made his way down to the spot on the ice, there was nothing but a stapled packet of papers near the jagged-edged hole. He picked it up and was surprised at his discovery.

It took maybe ten minutes for the Cambridge Fire Department’s River Rescue units to arrive. All the commotion had drawn a small crowd on the bridge. In the gray-blue light from the bridge, their heads lowered as if in prayer, the firemen, the professor, and a policeman looked like mourners gathered around an open grave.

“Currents got ’em. Won’t find this one for a while,” predicted one fireman.

“Yeah, sometimes never if they wash out to sea,” added another.

” What did you see, professor?” asked the policeman.

“Just someone falling through the ice.”

As he crossed back to the Cambridge side of the river, Professor King was not sure why he did not tell the officer about the other boys or why he did not show him the exam papers he had found. There was no name or other identification on it. There couldn’t be. The question was what was his final exam doing in the middle of the Charles River tonight? And who were those others that ran?

From Brendan Flood's room in Eliot House, he saw the end of his life unfolding in real time. He quietly pulled up the window sash an inch so he could hear. The only light in the room was the wash of an intermittent red flash from the rescue truck below. His heart pounded in his chest. Had anyone seen him climb the front gate? Was he recognized anywhere near the bridge?

An insistent rapping on the door made him jump. His head swam. What should he do? Pretend to be gone? Asleep? Maybe it could be his alibi.

"Brendan," came a hoarse whisper. It was Frank. He rushed across the room and opened the door. Frank stumbled in and slouched on the bed, out of breath. The steam rising from his heavy coat glowed red from the flashing light.

"Where're the others?" Brendan demanded in a whisper.

"God, I don't know. I ran up the riverbank to the boat house and went along Plympton toward the Yard and then back down Holyoke. I lost Richard at the Anderson Bridge. I thought Joe went with you."

"I ran right up to the front gate and climbed over it. I didn't see where Joe went."

"Oh man, poor John," Frank wept. "We should've saved him."

"How the hell could we do that? Jump in? You saw how fast that water was moving. Hell, he never came up. We'd have drowned."

"We shouldn't have run."

"We had to run; you dumb son of a bitch."

The door suddenly exploded open as Richard burst into the room. He slammed the door shut and bent over with his hands on his knees, heaving, gasping for breath.

"Shit," was all he managed to say between gulps of air.

"Where's Joe?" Brendan demanded.

"I thought he was with you," Richard said between breaths.

Frank carefully stepped to the window to watch the rescuers outside. "Oh, shit!"

"What, what?" Brendan joined him at the window. In the dim light from the porticos below, barely discernible movement caught his eye. A shadow of a human shape in the snow, under the hedge.

"Damn, that's Joe!"

Not eight feet away from him, on the other side of the fence, on the curbside of Memorial Drive stood three policemen talking next to their squad car. Joe was lying on the ground regaining consciousness and moaning.

"Hear that?" asked one officer.

"What?" asked the other.

"That noise."

"What noise?" They stood silently, looking toward the hedge.

Upstairs the three watched in terror as one of the policemen walked directly toward Joe.

"My God, they'll see him," Frank warned.

Joe had become hung up in the points of the fence and fallen into the hedge, nearly knocking himself out. He was woozy, but he was aware enough to sense the approaching policeman. He carefully drew his legs up under the hedge and froze. The officer tried the front gate. It was chained closed. He tried to squint for a better view of the courtyard of Eliot House.

"Bob," called a voice from the curb.

"Yeah," responded the officer.

"We've got another call. Gotta get goin'."

The three sighed in relief as the policeman walked back to the car and it drove away. After a minute, the shadow in the hedge emerged and walked quickly toward the residence hall's entrance below. In two minutes, he was at the door of the room.

"Man, I thought you were a goner. What the hell happened?" asked Richard.

"I banged my goddam head on the fence. Nearly conked me out," Joe said as he rubbed his right temple. "What's happened out there? Did they find him?"

"I've been watching since they came, and there's been no body yet," offered Brendan.

"What do we do when they find him?" asked Frank.

"They'll never find him," said Richard, "Didn't you see that current?"

"It doesn't matter if they find him. He's dead. No way he could have survived this long," Joe muttered, still rubbing his head.

"What do we do now?" Frank asked as if about to begin weeping.

"Do? Do?" What the shit do you think we do," Richard demanded, "We do nothing."

"What if they find out?" protested Brendan.

"Find out about what...from whom?" Richard shot back.

"Some bonehead falls through the ice... It was stupid to be on it... Surely in the last 300 years some other nitwit student has done this before...Maybe many. How the hell do we know? So, this guy falls through the ice, drowns. How's that a federal offense?"

"You forgot something, Richard," Joe said, sitting by the window with his head in his hands and elbows resting on his parted knees, as if speaking to the floor beneath his feet.

"What's that?"

"The exam. The damn exam. John had it. They find John; they find the test. They find the test...big investigation, maybe witnesses, maybe one of us was recognized by that guy on the bridge, and I don't have to tell you what they do to cheaters at Harvard."

There was a long, sullen silence. And in that silence Frank's mind drifted back to the blue, watery pools of his father's eyes when he had learned that his son, the first in generations of both his and his wife's families to go to college, was accepted to Harvard. St. Joseph's, teetering on the edge of the southern tip of Texas and northern Mexico, may not have been an Exeter Academy, but the people who called it home were proud to point out that their valedictorian of 1964 got a full scholarship to Harvard. Frank shuddered when he imagined the disgrace upon his family if he was kicked out for cheating.

Richard did graduate from Exeter. That is where he first met John. Both were scions from old money, though he thought John's family was from Connecticut. Richard thought how this was all probably just deserts in his case; he should have been thrown out of Exeter and never been here in the first place.

Richard's father's influence and generosity as an alumnus of not only Harvard but Eliot House as well, got him into the class. He was a legacy. To Richard, Harvard was no big deal. He wanted a party school. He tried everything he could to avoid it, but he finally accepted the fact that if he did not make it into and out of Harvard, his father would kill him, or worse, disinherit him.

Brendan was no Brahmin, but he was a townie. The Floods were Irish Catholics who immigrated to Boston during the Potato Famine. Policemen, firemen, carpenters, and one city councilman were among his close-knit family members. His mother had always hoped he would become a priest and was at first strongly opposed to her son attending that Protestant school up the river. Those heathens would ruin her son's character and fill him with Liberal heresy, she feared. But he promised her he would go to the seminary after graduation, and she reluctantly relented when he pleaded with her. "What would she say now?" he wondered.

Nowhere else in the world was Joseph Miller known as “Joe,” but in his freshman year Richard decided that he could not room with a Biblical character, much less a Jew and a foreigner. It would cramp his amorous ambitions around campus, so half out of contrariness and half out of flippancy, Richard called him “Joe,” mostly because he had a dog at home by that name. Within a year they were as inseparable as brothers, but the name stuck. Joe thought of himself as something of a disappointment to his father. Why else would he send him as far away as possible? This episode would just confirm his father’s opinion of him, he thought, and he couldn’t stand proving his father right.

The four of them had been together as roommates since the beginning. John Foxx was from Dunster House, and while in some of their classes, he lived in a completely different society. It was an accident they came upon him at the river at all.

The four of them were coming back to Eliot House from a tavern near the stadium when they suddenly found John rushing out of a walkway near Hamilton Hall. John had nearly knocked Brendan to the grimy slush. John was jubilant and could not contain himself. He had told them that he had found Professor King’s final exams sitting on the top of some papers in a secretary’s office and had taken one. He had pulled it out and showed it to the four.

Brendan swung at him and missed. “You crazy bastard!” he yelled, “You know what this means, you idiot; now you’ve got us tangled up in this mess too.”

“How’s that?” Frank asked.

“It is as much a violation to condone cheating as to do it,” Joe explained.

“What are you saying,” John nervously asked.

“I’m saying you have got us forced to either turn you in or risk being caught for the same crime,” Brendan said.

“You’re not gonna snitch, are you?” John was now agitated.

“We can’t do this,” Richard protested. “We can’t turn this guy in. It would be stupid. Let him go. What’s the big deal?”

“That’s wrong, damn it, Richard, there’s no way I’m going to risk everything I’ve worked for, all these years, because of this numbnut’s mistake,” Brendan protested.

“Are you sure about this? Can we really get expelled?” Frank asked urgently.

“Fraid so, pardner,” John smiled with a new confidence, “and do you think they’ll believe you over me? You’re in this now, like it or not.” By this time the five had walked together to Anderson Bridge and had started up when Richard noticed, through the falling snow, the barest form of someone coming from the Cambridge side.

“Quick, down here,” he warned as he jumped down to the bank and started across the frozen river. The others automatically followed. “We can’t take a chance of being seen with this guy,” he argued.

“We’ve got to turn you in, John. There is no other way,” Brendan announced mid-way across.

“Bullshit, you will,” John challenged, “you think you’re hot shit, don’t you. Well, it’s a stinking world and you’re in it too, goddammit, so get used to it.” John ran up to Brendan who was now marching with resolve to Harvard Yard and grabbed his shoulder. Brendan swung around, slapping John so hard on his shoulder that it knocked him backward, landing on his elbow. It must have been a bubble or weak spot on the ice, and it was the instant the ice broke through.

The sound of a tailgate slamming closed on a rescue truck brought the four back to the present.

“Maybe we should have stayed there and told the whole story,” Frank lamented.

“And what if they didn’t believe us? Think about it, Frank. Five guys walking together across the Charles in the middle of the night, one guy drowns, and the remaining accuse him of stealing a final exam?” Richard postulated.

“He’s right,” reluctantly joined Brendan, “that’s why we had to run. I see that now.”

“Even if they wanted to believe us, his family wouldn’t. They’d raise a stink for sure. We’d look like thieves; worse, we’d look like thieves who tried to pin it on a dead man.” Frank admitted sullenly.

“But what if they find the body...or the test? Then it will be too late to come forward. They might find some connection. We’d be dead. At least we have some chance if we do it now,” Brendan tried one more time.

“And if they don’t find anything...then how stupid would that be?”

“Well,” said Joe, “I guess we are going to hope they don’t. But there is one other thing, friends,” Joe said in firm and measured words, “we must swear here and now that no matter what happens, we will promise our lives and honor that we will stand together and remain silent. Only then can we all survive this.” Joe put his hand out palm up and looked to Brendan. Brendan stared at the open hand for a moment, looked up into Joe’s eyes, and then slowly placed his own right hand on Joe’s and squeezed. They both then looked at Frank. Frank placed his hand on top of Brendan’s. Richard followed, placing his down on top of Frank’s.

“We promise, then?” Joe asked in a prayerful tone.

“We promise,” they all responded solemnly.

Chapter 2

Cambridge, Massachusetts
7 February 1968

The provost rubbed his chin as he walked back and forth in front of the mantle, clearly deep in serious concentration. It had been a month since the accident. Across from his cherrywood desk, that was at least as old as Massachusetts Hall, one of the school's original buildings, sat the dead boy's family attorney. It was a delicate situation. The heavy paneled door to the office opened, and Professor King entered.

"Come sit here, David," beckoned the provost, much relieved to see his colleague arrive at last. "David, this is Mr. Irvine Ross, the Foxx family's counsel. Mr. Ross, Professor King." Ross reached up to take the outstretched hand without rising.

"David, thank you for coming. Mr. Ross has been visiting with me about the unfortunate matter regarding one of your students, John Foxx," explained the provost.

"Tell me, sir, have they found the body?" King interrupted.

"No, no, I am afraid not, David, but Mr. Ross here wanted to ask you a few questions about the night of the accident since you were actually there."

"Of course," said King, turning to the lawyer, "how may I be of assistance?"

"Professor King, the Foxx family has asked me to look further into the accidental death of their son, and I am hoping you will be able to fill in some of the facts," began the lawyer.

"I'll do what I can."

"Thank you. Now professor, as I understand it you saw John fall through the ice, is that correct?"

"I saw someone fall through the ice. I didn't know who it was at the time. We only later realized it was John when he was reported missing from Dunster Hall."

"So, professor, you admit you can't be sure it was him, then. Couldn't John have been off campus, somewhere else? How could you be sure that it was John Foxx who went into the river that night and not someone else?"

"Well, for one, no other student was missing from any of the halls that was not accounted for, and the boy was never again seen. And for another, there was certain other collaborating evidence."

"What was that?"

King looked down at his hands, then looked up at the provost.

“Go on, David,” urged the provost.

“Two pieces of evidence. You see Mr. Ross, when I reached the hole in the ice, I found a copy of my own Ethics class final examination lying next to it.”

“Was there a name on it?” immediately queried the lawyer.

“No, no name; there couldn’t be.”

“Why is that sir?”

“Because I had not presented the exam to the class yet. The exam was stolen.”

The attorney raised his eyebrows in surprise. “How do you know it had not been there much longer?”

“It was snowing heavily, yet the paper was dry and had very little snow on it. It had to have been just dropped,” the professor said.

“But is that in itself proof that John had taken the papers?” the lawyer demanded.

“Not in itself, no, but Mrs. Baxter, that’s my secretary over at Hamilton Hall, later told me she had seen young Mr. Foxx in the hall just outside my office earlier in the evening. She typed and copied the exam, as she does all my tests, and placed it on the edge of her desk. She was called away to another office briefly. She thought nothing of it at the time, but she later recalled to me that when she returned Mr. Foxx was no longer there. I put one and one together and added one more,” the professor said.

“Three?” snapped the lawyer, “how so, professor?”

“What only I and one other person in the world knew was that Mr. Foxx was precariously close to failing the course and needed an A in the semester final to pass. Failing it would mean missing graduation. I suppose the pressure was just more than he could bear.”

Ross sat quietly in his chair and began to tap his lower lip pensively with his forefinger. “Have you told anyone else about this, professor?” he asked quietly.

“No, Mr. Ross, I have not. Up to now no one has asked me to report my thoughts in any detail. I am sorry, provost, if I have not been forthcoming enough...”

“Under the circumstances,” responded the provost, “I can understand your reluctance. The circumstantial nature of the information, the boy lost...”

“...and may I add one other feature?” interrupted the attorney, “Is there really any point to dragging his family through a scandal now? It would be most distressing for them and something of an embarrassment for the school, I imagine.”

“The school, Mr. Ross, has survived more than 300 years of worse,” the provost cut back, “I assure you, sir, that we are interested only in what is for the best in this matter.”

“Of course, of course,” the attorney tried to calm the situation, “I meant no disrespect, provost. My only concern is for the welfare of my client, nothing more.” Ross turned to King and asked in a final tone, “So, professor, there is no doubt whatsoever in your mind that it was John Foxx who fell through the ice and drowned that night?”

“The evidence speaks for itself, so yes, I am sure, Mr. Ross,” King responded definitely. An awkward silence came over the room.

“David, is there anything more you would like to add?” the provost asked. Professor King was now in his 34th year as a professor at Harvard College. He had seen his boys come into the school as frightened rabbits and go away as men, some too soon, some to war, some never to return. He had watched the struggle of these young men against the tremendous pressures brought upon them by their families, especially their fathers. As a professor of ethics, he had anguished over the pressures he himself added with his rigid discipline and demanding class work. He was not sure why he was not going to mention the other boys he saw run away that

dark night of death in January. He really did not know who they were. He did not want to know. Perhaps he was just getting old. He certainly wasn't going to throw them to this shark of a lawyer who might very much like to push this tragedy onto the back of anyone else. He took some consolation that he did not recognize Ross as a graduate from his school.

He heard himself say, "No, provost, I don't believe I have anything else to tell Mr. Ross."

"Thank you very much, David."

King rose from the chair, turned briefly to Ross, and nodded perfunctorily without looking at him and left the room.

"Provost, may I have your assurances that this matter is closed?" asked Ross.

"I believe it has been closed, Mr. Ross, for some time."

"Thank you, sir, for the Foxx family."

Alone again in his office, the provost felt it odd and sad that the Foxx family would send their attorney on, what seemed to him, a mission to make sure and that there was no further investigation into the loss of one of their own. Then again, he knew that John Foxx had a troubled history at the school. Perhaps it was a chapter best closed.

Chapter 3

Cambridge

June 1968

He could feel his lungs about to explode. His fingers scratched in desperation at the solid ice above him. His throat burned and his eyes bulged in hunger for air. He slammed his fist up against the ice to try to break out, but the thrust pushed him deeper and deeper into the freezing black water. Brendan bolted upright in his bed gasping for air, nearly in tears. He sat for a while then slowly laid himself back into his covers and fell to sleep, hoping the nightmare would not return.

Even if there had been a memorial on campus, Richard was sure that he would not go. He had heard that some of John's friends from Dunster had driven down to New Canaan for some sort of ceremony his family held there, but he wasn't sure. It bothered him a little that the whole matter seemed to fade so quickly. It was as if time had closed around John as fast as had the icy water that night. One moment he was there; another he was gone. Life seemed fragile, fleeting. Was it all just that easy? At twenty-one, death and its inconsequentiality to the ebb and flow of the world seemed incomprehensible to him. He had never known anyone who had died.

All winter, Frank found himself drawn to the window of his room in Eliot Hall, overlooking the Charles. Every day he expected the ice to break and reveal its awful secret. Sometimes he was sure he saw something, a shape, a shadow, but there was nothing but the ice, the snow, and the naked trees standing impassively on the bank. Then came the thaw and the sludge. Winter abandoned its siege of Cambridge by the middle of March. And one morning, Frank looked out to see a stream of slate colored water flowing through a Swiss cheese of ice. By afternoon, the ice was almost completely gone.

The four never said anything to one another about that night. It was as if they were holding their collective breath, waiting for the body to turn up, perhaps spotted by strollers out on spring walk, or children playing in a park by the river's edge.

A body was found near the weir that emptied the Charles into Boston Bay. But the newspaper reported that it was an older male, identity unknown, probably a homeless man who had frozen to death in that winter.

The final exams rushed toward the students like ground to a novice parachutist. The senior thesis was due. Much harried work, too little time: this was the opiate that the four needed to cope. In the blink of an eye, in that fog and vertigo of sudden endings of familiar things, they were packing boxes, loading car trunks, saying goodbyes, disappearing into “The Real World.”

Joseph struggled to grasp hold of the fleeting moments. Since the drowning, the four had been more distant from one another. Joseph thought that all were reinforcing their denial by disassociating themselves from anything that would remind them of that night. He understood. He felt the same way. Brendan hugged him tightly when last he saw him. Richard jokingly warned Joe that he would have to change his name now to make the “Joseph” official. Were there “Joes” back in Austria? Joseph thought that Frank had taken the whole thing the hardest. He seemed to be most torn between his fear of failing in his family’s eyes and his sense of loss of innocence over John’s death. When Frank came by to say goodbye, he had tears in his eyes.

Finally, inevitably, the last of the days at Harvard began to fade and each of them seemed to grow more and more transparent as if deliquescing slowly away. The last thing Brendan remembered was the sound of the bells from The Yard.

Chapter 4

Berlin

16 April 1933

Tobias Miller stood at the open window of his library idly watching the busy activity in the Lenzstrasse below. Herren Schmidt seemed to be consulting with Herr Einrich, seeking his opinion for a floral arrangement, probably a centerpiece for dinner. Across the street, he could see the Fazl sisters peeking in the window of Gorishes at the hats, chatting enthusiastically. Farther in the distance he could see the traffic was heavy near the Brandenburg Gate.

The air was April crisp and redolent with the irises in the flower boxes. He sipped a little brandy and drew luxuriously on his Cuban cigar. Rebekka didn't like him smelling up the house with the things, but she wouldn't complain if he stood on the little balcony outside his library casement window. He didn't step out on it though unless he heard her coming down the hall.

It had been a wonderful Seder last week. Rebekka was the consummate hostess and each year he valued her more and more. Perhaps it was because he appreciated his family more. At previous family gatherings, Uncle Aaron would bore him to tears with his endless repetition of his soldier days in the Argonne.

"I'm here to tell you," Uncle would begin each slightly different rendition of the same tale, and Tobias would cringe. But it was different this year. He was glad to see his uncle, and the usual stories felt warm in their familiarity. There was a comfort in their predictability. Tobias noticed for the first time the gleam of nostalgia dancing in his uncle's eyes and that pleased him.

How things had changed, he thought to himself. As a young aggressive entrepreneur Tobias had no time for looking back. He was too busy looking forward. He had a youthful anticipation of the future and all the symbols of success that would mark the way. Old men and their tales were silly. Yet on this day, now at forty-one years of age, he could not help looking back a little.

For more than twenty years he worked every day except the Sabbath, slowly making his way up to full partner in the AuerWerx. In 1912, at the age of twenty, he was an office accounting clerk in a small work clothing manufacturing company on the outskirts of Berlin. Sure, there was some luck too. The death of the owner in 1914, the fact that the owner's son was yet too young to assume the reins, and the consequential promotions of managers above him. All these made his

ascension through the thin ranks of the little company go faster than he would have dreamed. But that is how small business goes for the patient and the diligent.

And it was luck that an old classmate had become a procurement officer in the Wehrmacht in the early days of the Great War. That led to Tobias convincing the rest of the AuerWerx management to convert from work clothing to military uniforms. Tobias' connections with the army quickly provided huge contracts to supply army uniforms, blankets, tents, canteen covers, webbing, insignia, badges, flags, and other military textile assemblies. Almost overnight AuerWerx quadrupled its sales volume. By the close of the war in 1918, it was the second largest provider of military soft goods in Germany.

The Auer family made Tobias a full partner in the business. The last dozen years had been difficult, but Tobias had always been resourceful, ever alert to opportunity in times of trouble. While most everyone was struggling, Tobias managed to achieve substantial wealth and social stature. He was able to buy this very house on the Lenzstrasse from a business acquaintance who had gone bankrupt during the hyperinflation. More than a beautiful home in the center of Germany's greatest city, it was a symbol of his success.

As he stood twisting his cigar in his fingers, gazing down the street, he felt a certain pride in himself. He was proud and thankful to Rebekka for supporting him when he had to give so many hours to his work at the expense of the time with his family. But all that had paid off and now he reveled in it. Tomorrow, instead of going in early to work, he would take the children to the Zoo. He could do that now. It was part of the prize.

"Tobias?" he heard Rebekka calling him from the hall.

"Yes, dear," he replied turning towards the door.

"There you are," she said finding him at the window. "Not that ugly cigar, again, Tobias, honestly, must I police you?"

"I have the window open," he protested weakly.

"You'll smell the house, Tobias," she admonished him.

Tobias came across the room and took her in his arms. "It was a wonderful Seder, Rebekka. Thank you."

"Oh, it was nothing," she purred into his shoulder. "But you were very kind to your uncle this year. I was very happy."

"The old fool."

"He is a gentle soul, Tobias. He just wants attention."

"What are the children up to this afternoon?" Tobias asked.

"They're playing games in Gretl's room for the moment. I think they'll nap a little later. What about you?"

"I'm going to go for a beer at the Rathskeller. George and Simon are going to be there."

"How is Simon's arthritis?" Rebekka asked.

"He complains but I think it comes and goes with the weather. It's from the war, you know. That terrible wound. I don't think he's ever fully recovered.

"Poor Wala," Rebekka said softly to herself.

"Poor Wala!" Tobias shot back.

"She has to put up with his complaining about the war; how he never got his fair pension."

"It was the inflation, Rebekka. Everyone lost their pensions," Tobias explained.

"Well, we didn't lose," she replied.

"We, let me remind you, have a business that services the government. We simply got paid more. Simon and those like him were on fixed payments. We were lucky."

“We were not lucky, Tobias. It is that you are so clever,” she said hugging him tightly. “You have always taken such good care of us. I love you so much.” Rebekka turned her face up to his and smiled into his eyes. He lowered his head and tasted her lips. She melted into his arms and kissed back passionately.

“Mama!” a small voice called out in disgust from the hall. Tobias and Rebekka pulled away, startled.

“Daniel, you shouldn’t sneak up on your father like that!” she admonished him, blushing. The boy smiled and ran off down the hall.

“You better be going,” she said to Tobias, smiling demurely. “There’ll be time for a proper thank-you later.”

§

It was cool but sunny, so Tobias did not feel the need to take his *mantellum* for his walk to the Rathskeller. He tipped his hat to Herr Kaufmann as he passed his shop, but Franz, busy arranging items in the window, did not wave back. Tobias had noticed that over the years as he and his family did better, there was a hint of resentment from some of his friends he had known coming up. He understood. Life had been hard since the war. The reparations had been crippling on top of runaway inflation. All of Germany suffered but not everyone suffered equally. Some worked harder. Some were lucky. That was the way life worked. He felt bad for his friends but unapologetic for himself. Tobias worked hard for what he had. He earned his just deserts.

In less than twenty minutes, Tobias was craning his neck, searching for his friends, as he stood just inside the door of the Rathskeller.

“Tobias!” he heard a familiar voice call out through the din of noise and to his right he could see a waving arm. It was Simon and next to him at the table was George.

“Gentleman!” Tobias greeted them in a feigned formality as he joined them.

“Are you talking to us?” George kidded him as he shook Tobias’ hand.

“I do use the term loosely,” Tobias reposted.

“We know,” George added, turning to a passing bar maid, giving her a signal for a round of lagers.

“So how was your holiday, Tobias?” Simon asked.

“Very fine, and yours?”

“Exhausting. I’m not sure I can take the parade of characters anymore.”

“Family,” George concurred.

“Is it the same for you gentiles at Easter, then, George?” Tobias asked curiously.

“Easter and Passover are really the same holiday. Two ends of the same loaf,” George joked.

“Yeah, one end leaven, one just puffery,” Simon laughed.

“Family is the same all over,” Tobias observed, smiling. “I have this uncle...”

A loud, raucous explosion of laughter broke out at the long table next to theirs, drowning out Tobias’ sentence.

“Goddam kids,” Simon growled, “Let’s move to that table over there.”

“That’s a little better,” Tobias said as they sat down now five tables away from the loud group.

“No respect,” Simon complained.

“They’re just boys,” Tobias explained. “We were like that once.”

“Not like that, exactly,” George said staring across the room.

“Oh, don’t you remember, George, when we used to storm and occupy the taverns as young men, for hours and hours?” Tobias cajoled him.

“Yes, Tobias, I do remember. I remember that we would argue about women and sports, and we’d see who could drink the most without falling down. These days they talk politics, for god’s sake. Politics!”

“Well, perhaps that is their ‘sport’ then,” Tobias replied.

“It’s a blood sport, then,” Simon said distractedly.

“How so?” Tobias asked.

“Have you been hearing what they are talking about? This Adolf Hitler fellow.” Simon explained.

“Oh, it’s just politics, Simon. These types come and go. It’s like fashion.”

“I’m not so sure about this one,” George said. “This feels different. I see the kids in my neighborhood getting into this Hitler Youth thing. It looks all patriotic, but it has a certain, I don’t know, darkness about it.”

“Yes, and since he’s been appointed Chancellor in January, well, it all seems to be moving so much more quickly now. It seems as if everyone is joining this National Socialist party. I don’t think you see what’s going on, Tobias.”

“Oh, I see what’s going on,” Tobias replied. “I saw how frightened people were when they couldn’t earn enough money even in our factories to keep up with the prices. My cousin, Joshua, was a teacher. It got so bad that his wife would come at lunch time with a wheelbarrow and collect his half day’s wages and then try to run to the bakery to buy bread before the money became even more worthless.”

“It was ridiculous,” George agreed.

“And von Hindenburg and the government seemed helpless in the middle of it all. It pretty well scared all of us. I mean, who was in charge? Why wasn’t anyone doing something about it?” Tobias argued. “I don’t like this fellow Hitler either, but you have to admit, at least someone is taking the bull by the horns. I say, if he can straighten out this economy, get this country back on its feet again, all power to him. It breaks my heart to see the Monday morning line of sad cases I must hear every week when my employees come in asking for a loan because aunt so-and-so is sick and there’s no money for a doctor.”

“That’s all well and good, Tobias,” Simon allowed, “but what about this anti-Jew talk Hitler is so full of?”

“He’s just playing to his base to whip them up. When was there not anti-Semitism out there? It is an old story. Politicians play to the votes. Hitler’s party has been building support for years, ever since the putsch that landed him in jail. He’s just another politician pandering for votes. I can see that.”

“Beats me how some people will follow a felon, no matter what,” George grumbled. “It’s like he’s a Messiah, for god’s sake.”

“I feel uneasy about it,” Simon responded.

“I can understand that, Simon,” Tobias assuaged him, “but von Hindenburg is just giving Hitler enough rope to get the country turned around and then he’ll rein him in. Hindenburg is no Jew-hater. I’ve met the man. You are worried about nothing.”

The bar maid arrived with three brimming steins. George snatched his up and raised it high, "To better times!"

"Hear, hear," both Simon and Tobias harmonized just before drinking thirstily.

"And on a brighter note," George began, "how's business, Tobias?"

"Much better," he replied cheerily. "I don't mind telling you I was worried at the end of the war. The armistice treaty had nearly put the Wehrmacht out of business and us with it, but we were able to switch our production into other textiles, linens, and more blankets, and now the army is ordering larger quantities of uniforms and gear again. We were also able to get a contract with the navy, which was new for us. We are hoping to rehire a few of the workers we had to let go."

"You have been lucky, Tobias," Simon offered.

"By the grace of God," he agreed.

"And von Hindenburg," George added, laughing. They all laughed.

"To von Hindenburg, then!" Tobias shouted out, raising his stein.

"von Hindenburg!" they echoed and drank.

"von Hindenburg is a dinosaur!" called out a voice from the group they had moved away from. Another added, "And a big one!" There was loud laughter.

"You should respect your superiors!" George called back.

Dead silence fell across the room. Two of the young men looked at one another and smirked, then rose up and staggered up to the table. "Who said that?" one demanded,

"I did," George answered back boldly, rising to his full six foot three inches.

"George," Tobias entreated him quietly.

"I did and I say it again, you should respect your superiors."

"We have no superior other than Herr Hitler," the boy shouted into George's face as his friend drew closer in a menacing posture. "von Hindenburg is the past. Our Fuhrer is the future, and anyone who doesn't see that is an enemy of Germany."

"Calm down, now boys," Tobias interceded. "We are all Germans here. Deutschland uber alles!"

The boy looked at Tobias, then back into George's face.

"Bar maid," Tobias called across the room, "a round for everyone at that table," he said pointing to the group now turned attentively to the confrontation.

"Heil Hitler!" one of them called out, repeated by the whole group.

"Heil Hitler," Tobias repeated to the boy.

The boy's friend pulled on his arm to urge him back to the group. In a moment the matter was diffused, and peace returned.

"Heil Hitler?" Simon said incredulously when the boys had gone. "Are you now a National Socialist, Tobias?"

"Hardly, Simon, I'm just a German living in interesting times, waiting for better times to come. In the meantime, I adapt, like all smart people do. Adapt and wait. Eventually, all will be back to normal. It's nature. Eventually, all returns to equilibrium."

"And in the meantime?" Simon said half to himself.

"In the meantime, we do what we must," Tobias said seriously, "and wait for 'eventually'."

"Eventually," George observed, "we'll all be dead." They all laughed.

"Eventually," Tobias agreed, "but now we drink!"