Skeletons at the Feast

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Extract

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PROLOGUE



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THE GIRL—A YOUNG WOMAN, REALLY, EIGHTEEN, HAIR the color of corn silk—had been hearing the murmur of artillery fire for two days now. Everyone had. A rare and peculiar winter thunderstorm in the far distance. Little more. The sconces in the living room hadn't twitched, the chandelier in the ballroom (a modest ballroom, but a ballroom nonetheless) barely had trembled. The horses, while she was harnessing them and helping to load the wagons—short trips with bags full of oats (because, after all, so much would depend on the horses) and longer ones with some of the clothes and the silver and the jewelry they were going to take with them—had looked up. But the animals hadn't expressed particular interest. If, Anna surmised, they had thought of anything they had thought of the cold: It was one of those frigid weeks when the days would alternate between whiteout-like snowstorms and periods so still that the smoke from the chimneys would rise up into a slate gray sky in lines that were perfectly straight.

These shells, however, the ones that were falling this afternoon, were great concussive blasts that had the people and the horses—a seemingly endless caravan of strangers that clogged the road and crushed the snow and ice along the sides, and had come almost to a

complete stall now before the river—fretting and fidgeting in place. At each explosion the animals whinnied and the babies, hungry and chilled despite the blankets and furs in which they were swaddled, cried out. If they managed to free one of their little hands, the blue fist would lash out, a small, spring-loaded paddle. Clearly, however, the artillery had leapfrogged over them. Passed them. Hours earlier it had been many kilometers to the east. Now it was ahead of them to the west. Some of the shells were falling so nearby that they heard the screech—a strange foreign animal, something that might exist in a tree in Africa or South America, the girl thought—before the reverberant burst left them crouching, anxious, in their places in line. At first she presumed the Russians were trying to hit them, this long line of families trying desperately to flee to the west, to take out the carts and the wagons and the walkers piecemeal, but then she understood their real intent: It was the river itself. They were trying to smash the buttress-thick ice that coated this stretch of the Vistula from shore to shore like a skating rink and was serving as a bridge, because the nearest stone and cement overpass was twenty-five kilometers to the north. Along the shore she saw soldiers and Volkssturm teenagers—boys who were easily two and three years younger than her twin brother and her—funneling the refugees across what they believed was the safest part of the ice, but she had the sense that any moment now people were going to start leaving the queue and fanning out into the woods, where they would cross the river wherever they could.

Or, at least, believed that they could. The girl had heard stories of wagons and families disappearing yesterday and the day before through the ice to the north and the south. She wasn't sure if they were true, but so much of the last month had been a study in how things she had once thought were inconceivable were actually happening. They'd all heard what had occurred three months earlier in Nemmersdorf. The Russians had captured the East Prussian village in October and held it for five days. When their own soldiers recap-

tured the small town, almost all of the civilians were dead. She had heard tales of girls her age (and younger) nailed naked to the sides of barns and farm carts, their arms spread wide as if they were being crucified but their legs splayed open so that even in death the men could violate them. There were the stories of small children flattened into the main roads of the village by the treads of tanks. Of live babies held by their ankles and swung like scythes into stone walls while their mothers were forced to watch, their children's own blood and brains splattered like so much butcher's waste onto their overcoats. Of the French prisoners of war—some people claimed as many as forty of them—who had been executed by the Russians for reasons that no one could fathom.

And then there were the stories of what her own people had done. BBC propaganda, maybe. But probably not. She knew people who knew people. Her older brother, whom she hadn't seen now since October, told her of an SS officer he had met who—supposedly—had served inside Treblinka in 1943. When her twin, Helmut, was on a hike with his Jungvolk friends last summer, the last they would take before the drills grew serious, he told her there were rumors (implausible and offensive, in his opinion) that some of the less committed boys would share when they thought no one was listening. Rumors of what really went on in some of the camps. And, of course, there was what their English POWs had claimed was occurring, stories that Helmut would dispute as half-truths and cant spread by the Allies to further demonize the Germans. It got to the point where he threatened to tell his father on them if they uttered so much as one more syllable.

She tensed when she heard the high-pitched whistle of another shell, and saw her mother once again pull little Theo, the youngest of her children, against her. Then there was the blast. Ahead of her there was shouting, screaming. She couldn't tell whether the explosive had landed on the road or the river, whether people were wounded or merely panicked. More panicked, actually. Because

certainly numbness had not completely subsumed the animal panic that coursed just below the skin and behind the bloodshot eyes of this long and plodding throng of parents and children and very old people. Only as Anna watched the nearest soldiers and Volkssturm recruits trying to prevent the line from spreading north and south into the woods—here is that panic, she thought, we are like desperate beetles scurrying from a giant's boots—did she understand. The bomb had created a great spider's web of cracks in the ice.

For a moment her father and Helmut conferred, the two of them murmuring softly into each other's ears. Their army uniforms were still crisp. Then each of them walked to the front of a wagon—they were traveling with two—and her brother ordered her to come help him with the horses. After all, he muttered, they were more her horses than his. She thought he was being needlessly bossy, but she also knew that she didn't dare question him now. It seemed that their family, too, was going to leave the caravan and trek into the woods, and he was going to run ahead and find a spot along the river that looked suitable for a crossing.

Beside her, beneath the blanket in the wagon filled with oats, their sole remaining POW cleared his throat.

THE PRISONER, a twenty-year-old Scotsman named Callum Finella—a name that initially had made both Anna and her younger brother giggle, but struck her now as infinitely more lyric than the suddenly wolfish-sounding names of most of the males in her family—had been with them since September. He was one of seven British POWs who had been sent to the Emmerich family estate from the prison camp just outside of Thorn to help with the harvest. When the other six men—older by four and five and six years than Callum, but still he had called them his mates—had been returned to the stalag in mid-October, the family had used their party clout and simply kept Finella since their Polish servants had fled or been

put to work in the coal mines in Silesia, the oldest of their three boys was fighting somewhere far to the south on the outskirts of Budapest, the middle one had been pressed into service in the Volkssturm, and Theo, at ten, was barely beyond short pants.

Now Anna removed her glove and snaked her hand between two of the burlap sacks, searching for Callum's fingers. She found one of his thumbs and the fleshy pad of his palm just beside it and thought, much to her surprise, of his penis. The sudden way it would grow in her hand, a dangerous but irresistible animal wholly independent of him. Then he whispered her name. At least it sounded to Anna like a whisper. But, perhaps, it was actually more like a stage whisper. Beckoned by her hand, his head emerged from beneath the bags of feed like a chick from a shell, his sunset red hair only partly smothered by one of Helmut's knit caps. From atop the driver's box her mother glared at them both. Anna didn't believe that her mother could possibly think that anyone other than their own family could either hear or see the young soldier—not with the clamor all around them from this distraught and pathetic parade of refugees; rather, she guessed, Mutti simply didn't want to be reminded of the reality that they had the (his term for himself, not theirs) *lad* with them. When the war had been far to the east and the west in the autumn, Callum had been a harmless, albeit brawny and tall, exotic animal: He knew how to play the accordion that her father's brother, Uncle Felix, had left behind when he'd been transferred—to everyone's relief—to the western front. And he hadn't even fired a shot before he'd been captured. He and Helmut were never going to be friends, but Anna was confident that her mother appreciated the time the Scot spent entertaining her and her little brother (though, of course, Mutti hadn't an inkling of either the details or the depth of the way he had entertained her one and only daughter). Quickly Callum retreated back beneath the grain and Anna withdrew her hand, moving forward to help her father steer the horses into the copse of pine to their right. As she was

grasping the reins, she heard once more the shriek of a Russian shell. She looked deep into the creature's eyes, hoping to keep the animal calm when it exploded.

THIS TIME THE shell landed beside them. One moment she was gazing into the face of a velvety bay stallion she had named after a castle—Balga, a fortress that was nearly seven hundred years old—and the next she was on the ground, awash in snow and pine boughs and small frozen clods of dirt. She looked up and saw Helmut was talking to her, saying something—perhaps even yelling—but she couldn't hear a thing. It was as if he were mouthing the words. He was standing over her, then squatting beside her, staring at her with those hazel eyes and girlishly long eyelashes that sometimes she couldn't believe he had gotten instead of her. Her father and Callum were kneeling, too. They were sitting her up, each holding an arm and appraising her, dusting the debris off her cape. Slowly her hearing returned, and the first sound she was aware of was the wailing of women not more than fifteen or twenty meters behind them, their cries for help. Someone swearing at the Soviets. Apparently, a shell had exploded just behind them, too.

She opened her mouth to tell Helmut and Callum and her father that she was fine, she wasn't hurt—at least she didn't believe that she was—but suddenly the simple act of speaking seemed like too much work. Something was pinching her stomach, and she realized it was the earrings and the necklace she had bandaged against her flesh when she had been unable to fit another piece of jewelry into the secret pouch she had sewn into her skirt. She saw there was a trail of blood now on one of the sleeves and shoulders of her father's usually immaculate uniform coat—the stain was shaped, she thought, like monkshood—and she reached out her arm to him. He seemed to notice the wet blotch for the first time and remarked casually, "It's not mine." His head jerked reflexively toward the line

behind them and so she turned. Men were pushing an overturned cart into the snowbank beside the road, trying either to move it out of the way or to reach whoever was underneath it, or both.

Finally she uttered a word, a two-syllable question: "Mutti?"

"Mother is fine. Theo is fine. We're all fine," Helmut told her.

"Callum? Are you—"

"I said we're all fine," Helmut hissed. Then to the Scotsman he ordered, "You. Back beneath the feed."

She glanced at the wagon that had been upended by the explosion and understood now why someone was howling: There in the snow were a man's unattached legs, the limbs still in their wool trousers, and a steaming, Medusa-like nest of tendon and muscle emerging from the pants where there should have been an abdomen or a waist.

Her father chastened her brother for being short with her and for snarling at Callum. She looked around now for Mutti and Theo and saw that her mother had pulled Theo ever deeper against her chest, shielding his face from the debacle just behind them. Then, with the awkward jerks of a marionette—Mutti was shaking, this woman who in 1939 had single-handedly buried the Luftwaffe pilot whose plane had been shot down by the Poles and would crash in their hunting park, was actually trembling—she turned her eyes to the sky. There was another plane. A Russian plane now, because that was about all that filled the skies these days. It was approaching from the south, perhaps paralleling the path the Vistula had carved through this section of the country. Some of the trekkers stood frozen in their spots in the queue, but others scurried, despite the knee-deep snow, like frightened mice into the comparative safety of the forest. But the plane, for whatever the reason, didn't bother to strafe them. Neither did it drop a single bomb on the ice. It simply continued on its course toward the north.

An elegant old woman beside a sled with four large suitcases balanced upon it pulled her hands from a fur muff and shook her fist

at the sky. She said something dismissive about Göring. Wanted to know where the German planes were.

Slowly Anna climbed to her feet and smiled for her mother and young Theo.

"I'm okay, Mutti," she said. "Really. Just a little shaken."

And then, no longer hushed by the burlap bags of oats beneath which he had been hiding for hours, came the voice that spoke a German that was lighthearted, enthusiastic, and still, on occasion, inept. "It takes more than a little bomb to slow Anna Emmerich," Callum said. Despite the characteristic irreverence in his tone, however, his smile was forced and his eyes were wide ovals of dread.

WHERE TWO YEARS before there had been a yellow Star of David, there was now a small Nuremberg eagle made of bronze. The star, by law, had been sewn onto his overcoat with the stitches so tight that a pencil point couldn't be pressed between them. The police or some Brownshirt bully would check. This eagle, dangling from his uniform beside an Iron Cross, was merely attached with a pin. He stood now on the east bank of the Vistula with his hand on the grip of his pistol, though the gun was still holstered and the safety was on, wondering if it all wouldn't be easier if he were just decapitated by a fragment from one of the Soviet shells that clearly were inching closer. Just get it over with. Unfortunately, by even the most liberal definition this wasn't a bombardment: He had endured Red Army bombardments, and this was nothing like them. But these civilian Prussians in the lines before him now? These once proud Aryans and anti-Semites who had literally leapt for joy when Hitler's tanks had rolled into Poland in 1939 and made them Germans once more? They seemed to think it was the end of the world. Oh, please. It was as if they had never seen a limb—a leg, an arm, a fist—fly through the air like a falcon.

The irony of the exodus approaching the river wasn't lost on

him. On his own, he had read, he had studied. The difference between this flight and the others? These souls were fleeing a retribution they had asked for. They had brought these shells down upon themselves.

Now, of course, he was on this nightmarish sinking ship with them, though if he had to wager he would bet he would figure a way off. Find yet one more lifeboat. He was, apparently, unkillable. But how much would it really help him to become a Jew again now? It wasn't as if the Russians had such great love for his people either. The Lithuanians were stringing the Jews up back in '41 while the Nazis were still en route; the Ukrainians and the Latvians had been all too happy to handle the heavy lifting when it came to machine-gunning the Jews in the early days. They had practically volunteered for the opportunity!

No, he should have started to work his way west months ago, as soon as it was clear that the western Allies had no intention of being pushed back into the English Channel.

"Manfred?"

In the midst of the turmoil and the noise, for a moment Uri had forgotten that he had renamed himself Manfred. It was the most Teutonic alias he had been able to come up with when he'd realized what was expected of him as reservist Henrik Schreiner with Police Battalion 101, and so in the chaos of the retreat from Łuków he had commandeered this uniform from a Wehrmacht soldier who had been shot cleanly in the back of the head. Before that, since jumping off the train almost two years ago now, he had been Hartmut, Adler, Jurgen, and Franz. Sometimes he had found the dead soldier's name in the papers in the uniform pocket. Other times, there hadn't been any papers at all and he'd come up with a moniker such as Manfred (which, he'd realized in hindsight, was both Teutonic *and* the name of the doctrinaire Nazi pedant who'd lived in the town house beside his family back in Schweinfurt, before they had been forced to move).

He turned now to the one-armed captain beside him, a fellow

roughly three or four years older than he was. Twenty-nine or thirty, Uri guessed. The officer had served in Poland and France and North Africa and Italy and Russia, a virtual travelogue of Nazi victories and defeats, with little more than the scratches and bruises that are inevitable with a life in the field. But no serious wounds. Then in October, while home on leave in Dortmund, his left arm was crushed when he was helping his grandmother down the stairs of her home during an air raid, and the house had sustained a direct hit. His grandmother had died pretty near instantly, he'd told Uri, but he'd thought his arm might have a chance. It hadn't. The good news to losing the wing? It meant that he had been relegated, for the moment anyway, to this sort of police action many kilometers behind the front.

Though, the captain had rued, those kilometers had collapsed exponentially since the Russians had begun this most recent offensive.

Uri wondered if years from now, if somehow they both survived, he and this captain might actually be friends. The fellow was unflappable, a trait Uri respected, and he seemed to see the misery that was marking the end of their world as more Chaplinesque than Wagnerian—which, most days, Uri did, too. But then he decided a postwar friendship was unlikely. Not because this Captain Hanke was anti-Semitic, though Uri supposed on some level he was. Rather, he had the sense that the two of them had been too lucky for too long, and it was absolutely inconceivable that they would both be alive when this steamroller was done lumbering over them. And if he, Uri, was indestructible, then the odds could not be especially good for this poor fellow beside him.

"The engineers are coming to destroy the ice now," the captain was saying. Then he motioned toward the teenage boys in their Jungvolk uniforms who were helping to keep order. "Send the children across the Vistula."