



AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *THE CITY BEAUTIFUL*

ADEN POLYDOROS

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WRATH BECOMES HER

"Haunting, exhilarating, and a howl of vengeance."

—ANDREW JOSEPH WHITE,

New York Times bestselling author of *Hell Followed with Us*

Praise for *The City Beautiful*

Winner of the 2022 Sydney Taylor Book Award for Young Adult Fiction

2022 World Fantasy Award for Best Novelist

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A Lambda Literary Award Finalist

2021 Bram Stoker Award Preliminary Ballot for Young Adult Novels

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—*BookPage*, starred review

★ “A wild ride of a queer gothic fantasy that’s a must-have for YA fantasy collections.”
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★ “*The City Beautiful* is a triumph, showcasing queer love, illuminating historical events, and guiding readers to an enthralling ending that will leave them satiated yet desirous to return to the world in which they have become immersed.”
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—*Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books*

“*Bone Weaver* is a bloody and unflinching fantasy that balances its darkness with an unwavering cascade of love.”
—*BookPage*

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Young Adult

Wrath Becomes Her

Bone Weaver

The City Beautiful

Middle Grade

Ring of Solomon

ADEN POLYDOROS

WRATH
BECOMES HER



ISBN-13: 978-1-335-45803-2

Wrath Becomes Her

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Inkyard Press
22 Adelaide St. West, 41st Floor
Toronto, Ontario M5H 4E3, Canada
www.InkyardPress.com

Printed in U.S.A.



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CONTENTS

MAP	6-7
WRATH BECOMES HER	9
GLOSSARY	333
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	335

This book contains content and themes that may be difficult for some readers. For a list of content warnings, please visit adenpolydoros.com.



Giruliai Forest

Neris River

Lake Galve

Lake
Skaistis

LENTVARIS

Trakai
Castle

LITHUANIA

MIKASIUNAI ●

Rudniki Forest





Dedicated to those of us who've emerged from darkness
to find ourselves changed.

PROLOGUE

July 1942

Rudniki Forest, Lithuania

FIREFLIES BOBBED THROUGH THE NIGHT SKY, their greenish glow adding to the low, banked radiance of the fire. Resting against the log, I felt in my pocket for the smooth metal wire left over from the mine I had nestled between the train tracks. We had been nearly a kilometer away by the time we'd heard the crash, but even now, hours later, I felt like I could still feel that explosion slamming through my body in the excited drum of my heart and the nervous jolt of the blood in my ears.

My heart only pounded faster when Akiva sank down next to me, close enough that his hip brushed against mine. Discs of firelight danced across his ice-blue eyes, stoking them with a violet flash when he leaned forward to shrug his rifle's sling

from over his shoulder. He propped the gun against the log and stretched out his legs by the fire.

“We did good tonight,” I said, lightly tapping my foot against his. Our secret signal.

“You did good, Chaya.” A smile curved his lips. “Which reminds me...”

He reached into his pocket and unveiled a small rectangular slab wrapped in blue wax paper. My mouth fell open. It couldn’t be.

“A way to celebrate more dead Nazis,” Akiva said with a chuckle.

On the log next to us, Kuni leaned forward, the younger boy’s eyes gleaming in awe. “Is that what I think it is?”

“Chocolate, yeah.” Akiva broke the bar into four, a square for each of us.

“Where’d you get this?” I asked, hardly able to believe it. Food was constantly on my mind, as much a part of our nightly discussions as which train routes and military bunkers we should target.

“When we ran across Volkov’s men a few days ago, I traded it.”

“So you’re telling me you’ve been warming it with your ass all week,” I said, and Akiva rolled his eyes.

“Since when did you ever have a problem with my ass?”

I shoved him lightly in the side, chuckling helplessly.

He gave a piece to Kuni, and when Yael came over, handed her one as well. But when it came my turn, he hesitated and smiled at me, holding it to my lips. A challenge.

Rolling my eyes, I leaned forward, took the morsel of choc-

olate in my teeth. His fingertips brushed against my lips, calloused but gentle, teasing.

Yael shook her head, rising to her feet and brushing the dust from her pant legs. “While you two lovebirds enjoy yourselves, I’m going to get some sleep. Try not to offend the child now.”

“I’m no child,” Kuni protested. “I’m almost twelve!”

“She’s right,” Akiva said, pulling away. “You should probably go to sleep, too, kid. We have a busy day tomorrow.”

Sighing, Kuni rose to his feet.

“Kuni?” I said.

He looked back.

“You’ve got a bit of schmutz on your face.” I pointed to the chocolate smeared by one corner of his mouth.

Kuni wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, a blush already creeping across his cheeks. He made it no more than five steps before the night’s peaceful quiet was shattered by a gunshot in the direction of our dugouts.

For the briefest, perfect moment, we froze simultaneously. It couldn’t have been more than a split second, a single moment when the clock stopped ticking, and the night went still, and the silence that poured into place in the echoing reports of the gunshots was as heavy as a deep-sea void. And then I found myself on my feet, the taste of chocolate lingering on my tongue. Even as I reached for the revolver nestled in my coat pocket, Akiva was already jacking a round into his rifle’s chamber.

“Yael!” Kuni screamed out as more gunfire shattered the night, and Akiva and I lunged for the cover of nearby trees.

Kuni just turned and ran from the glade, the pistol Akiva had given him forgotten beside the fire.

“Kuni, wait—” Akiva began.

The boy didn’t even reach the tree line. A gunshot took him off his feet, drove him facedown. Akiva ducked behind the cover of a tree. As another gunshot echoed through the forest, I followed his example and pressed my back against a thick pine.

“Kuni, get up!” Crawling on my hands and knees, I tried to reach him. I hardly made it more than a meter before a volley of shots sent me scrambling back against the tree.

The firelight illuminated Kuni’s face in garish detail—hazel eyes wide and sightless, an ooze of blood spilled down his cheek, the top of his head—

Bile flooded my mouth.

His *head*.

As Akiva crouched behind the tree next to me, his gaze met mine. Panting breaths pushed through his gritted teeth, his eyes burning like pale fire. A slick, muddy shadow had bloomed across the front of his coat, and slowly, it dawned on me.

This was the end.

CHAPTER 1

February 1943
Mikašiūnai, Lithuania

I WAS BORN ON SCRAPS OF PAPER. LOOSE PAGES, torn parchment, holy scrolls severed from their dowels. Before Ezra gave me a tongue, he taught me how to read.

Aleph. Mem. Taw.

“There is a mark on your forehead, and it means truth.”

Aleph. Mem. Taw. *Emet*. Truth.

I felt the word thrum in the empty space where Ezra would sculpt my mouth. With my fingertip, I traced the three letters he’d jotted across the floorboards, copying them into the dust.

The corners of Ezra’s lips twitched upward in a smile. It meant he was pleased or amused. The expression seemed ill at ease on his face, in conflict with his severe cheekbones and hard gray eyes.

“Yes, Vera. Very good.” Ezra wiped away the first letter,

making אמת into מת, *met*, dead, before blotting out the rest into a ghostly smear nearly as pale as the breath that left his lips.

Even with the walls insulated by old horse blankets, the winter chill still managed to intrude into the hayloft. From how he shivered, I could almost believe the cold had found its way into his bones as well, like the way I felt ice crystals form and crackle within me on the most frigid winter mornings, veining my insides as sharp and fine as splinters.

Clay and chalk sullied Ezra's hands. On his right hand, he was missing his pinkie finger and the last two knuckles of his ring finger, his leather gloves snipped and sewn to fit. Not unfinished like me, he had explained, but torn from him by the same shrapnel that had turned his right leg to wood and leather from the knee down. He fumbled with the stick of chalk as it dwindled into a nub. Even so, my handwriting was a spidery scrawl compared to his.

Truth. True. Trust me. Trust that this is for the best.

When the sun set, our lessons came to an end. Ezra curled up on the pallet in the corner, just a shadow in the darkness. Candles were precious things, reserved for Friday evenings or when he woke deep in the night, biting his own arm to stanch his wrenching sobs.

To soothe himself from those haunting dreams, he would explain to me what he had seen. A tide of smoke rolling across a pockmarked field, or soldier boys without limbs or innards, or his daughter before he had buried her. It helped him to give his fears a name and face, as though only by talking about them was he able to convince himself they weren't crawling through the stalls below.

Ezra slept with his back to me, buried beneath layers of

blankets to keep out the cold. He had taken off the leather leg and rested it on the floor beside him. From my nook across the room, I couldn't stop staring at it—*Prosthesis, Vera, it is called a prosthesis*—thinking of how my own legs must have looked before he had attached them to my body. Had he shaped them in pieces, first the feet and then the calves? And if it had taken him several months to do that, how long would it take for him to sculpt my mouth?

The thought made me restless. Ezra had given me my second leg less than a week ago, and I had spent plenty of time pacing the room since then. He had even allowed me to venture into the hayloft once, although I had been too frightened to clamber down the ladder to the stalls below. As I rose to my feet, I was pleased by how smoothly I stood. Walking was getting easier every day.

There was scarcely enough room to move. All along the walls were moldering scrolls and prayer books, stacked so that whenever Ezra climbed through the hidden doorway into the greater hayloft, he was forced to step over them.

A desecration, he would say, both to leave them on the floor and to step over them, *but necessary*.

He used the same phrase when talking about his creation of me.

Bats chittered in the rafters above, stirring like black handkerchiefs. They were my only companions aside from Ezra, and I longed to have their freedom. Some nights, I imagined climbing up to their perches and following them through the cracks between the roof slates on wings made of parchment and scroll dowels. I would soar past the fields and forests, and

follow the twists and turns of the Neris River until it flowed into the Baltic Sea.

With the hidden panel wedged firmly in the hayloft's northern wall, I was confined to this room. For now, I could only hear the outside world. It was quieter at night, but not silent. The lowing of the cows below; their wet snuffles and shifting bodies. Squawking chickens and barking dogs.

The noises both seduced and taunted me. They sounded so close. If I could just speak, maybe I could shout loudly enough for someone else to hear me, for someone to *answer*. Anyone would do. The man who Ezra chatted with while tending to the livestock, or the girl who called the chickens by name. Even the cows and horses would make welcome companions.

Unlike Ezra, I had no need to rest, and the only time he put me to sleep was when he sculpted my form. To pass the time and distract myself from the temptations of the outside world, I plucked a book from the stack nearest to me and flipped idly through it. A commentary on the midrash. My thoughts strayed and the words buzzed through my mind like gnats. The verses were meaningless to me, as was the rest of the scripture. Even the passages which marked my own limbs.

I had seen Ezra peruse most of the books in our hideaway, and every week the strangers below brought him newspapers or Polish language novels with colorful paper covers. But he refused to touch the loose parchments in the corner, the ones heaped in a crudely hammered lead box so old the metal had turned white and chalky with age. Hebrew and Aramaic, and another Semitic dialect that I couldn't quite place, even though I could read its letters. He wouldn't let me touch the lead coffer or its contents, but once or twice,

I'd snuck a glimpse, and the sight of the water-stained pages had made me feel vaguely dizzy and unstable, as if my core had begun to liquefy. I couldn't quite put it into words, except that it had felt like looking at the dirty picks and scalpels or the clots of clay smushed into the floorboards. A part of myself, torn free and dripping.

I set aside the book with a sigh, contemplated the volume of poetry beneath it, then continued my lazy search for something else to pass the hours. Briefly, I amused myself by playing with Ezra's prosthetic leg, figuring out how it attached to his hip and practicing buckling and undoing the straps. It interested me to touch it, something crafted so much like myself—just the shape of a leg—and yet unmoving and silent.

I traced the word *emet* into the false limb's calf, half hoping it would jerk awake, that the straps might writhe like the centipedes that had crept from the woodwork before winter had banished them into hibernation, or the blockish foot might cleave into separate toes. But it remained still, just a lifeless husk of leather and wood. I had expected as much, only I couldn't help but feel a twinge of disappointment—and above all, loneliness so deep and gnawing, it seemed to burrow into the center of me.

As I set the limb down, my gaze caught in the small mirror hanging on the wall. Several times a week, Ezra would use the mirror to shave, balancing a bowl of water in one hand and his razor in the other.

The mirror's silvery sheen transfixed me. Every opportunity I had, I loved to touch it, tracing its icy smoothness and the pockmarks of tarnish. As I came closer, I could see parts of myself reflected in its surface—arms covered in black let-

ters lifted from the parchment when my skin had yet to dry; the word for truth, אמת, inked beneath a widow's peak of dark curls; deeply-set eyes the dusky gray of dawn; a nose as sharp as Ezra's; and below all that, the smooth expanse where I felt my mouth straining to be.

Soon, Vera, soon.

Gaze fixed on my reflection, I tried to form my lips myself. My fingers mashed uselessly against my face's cool, unyielding surface. The fingernails Ezra had so carefully laid into my skin were useless. I couldn't even dimple it.

Ezra always put me to sleep before working on my body, but I had once glimpsed the instruments he used to create me. Picks, shears, blades, and awls encrusted in chalky clay. Sponges used to buff my skin until it was as smooth as the mirror itself. Bundles of human hair, braided to keep from tangling.

Maybe I just needed to find something sharp. A snapped dowel, perhaps, or one of the nails studding the floorboards.

No. My fingers curled into fists. Then he'd know.

Ezra had never hurt me, but I was afraid of what he would do if he found out. He might take away my fingers until he knew I wouldn't disfigure myself, and my legs until he was sure I wouldn't run away. If he wanted to, he could turn me back into clay and start anew. He wouldn't return me to the river; I would be thrown out, left to muddle with the horse manure and filth all winter long, then baked to a crisp in the summer sun.

So, no nails or broken dowels. I must bear without a mouth for a little while longer.

I just needed to wait.

I despised the wait.

An icy crackle stirred me from my daze. I looked down to find the mirror spider-webbed to pieces around my fingers. Shards studded my skin, leaving behind pinpricks that sealed up in an instant.

Until now, I had used my hands only for the most mundane tasks, to pick up things or rearrange them, and to laboriously copy Ezra's handwriting. A strange flash of excitement rippled through me as I realized that I could break things, too.

CHAPTER 2

WHEN EZRA WOKE THE NEXT MORNING, HIS face hardened at the sight of the shattered mirror. He picked up the shards one by one, cradling them in his cupped palm.

He turned to me, his gray eyes cold and analytical. “You did this?”

Sitting in my nook in the corner, I nodded reluctantly. In the hours since dawn, I had stared at the mirror in terror. I had even tried fixing it. The painless gashes torn into my palms healed instantly, sucking the splinters of glass deeper inside me, but no matter how hard I pressed the shards together, they refused to merge.

“Why did you break it?” He studied me with disconcerting intensity. “Was it because of your reflection?”

The way he said it made something tighten inside my chest.

He made it sound as though that was the expected reason, the inevitable one. I had seen the way he looked at me when he thought I wasn't looking, mostly with thinly veiled repulsion, sometimes with outright *resentment*, as if by just being alive—or the closest thing to it—I was to blame for what he had done to create me. But for the first time, I wondered if a part of him, however small, wished to return me to the dust.

Shaking my head, I picked up a chunk of chalk left over from yesterday's lesson. On the floorboards, I wrote: *It was an accident.*

"Ah, I see. Of course." Ezra chuckled, shocking me. He discarded the broken glass in the chamber pot in the corner. "You don't yet understand your own strength, but you will in time. And you will only grow more powerful."

From the box where he stored his belongings, he retrieved a small bundle and unwrapped its mud-stained folds. Steel glistened in the sunlight streaming through the knotholes. His tools.

I brushed away my writing and began anew, intending to ask him if he would give me my mouth today. I stopped mid-sentence when he held a slim pick out to me.

He pressed it into my hands. "Try to bend this."

I did as he commanded. The rod held up a bit better than the mirror, but after a brief resistance, the metal bent in my hands. I tried to form it into a circle and succeeded halfway before it snapped in two. The sharp edges cut a gash into my palms, a numb line that began to mend immediately. Within seconds, all that remained was a ghostly imprint, until even that faded away.

“You are truly an incredible creation,” Ezra murmured, taking the pick’s broken pieces from my grip.

I wrote on the floorboards: *Is it good to break things?*

“Some things, yes. However, it is not the act of breaking that pleases me, Vera. It is your ability. Your strength. My first two attempts resulted in weak beings of slush and water, not even stable enough to rise to their feet, let alone pass as human. But you are perfect. I... I think it is time to finish what I started.”

Laying down the broken pick, he returned to the crate and took two glass jars from its depths. One was filled halfway with human teeth. In the other, a tongue floated in cloudy liquid. As he shook the teeth into his hand, sadness darkened his gaze.

“These were hers,” he said, his voice low and grave.

When I was still just a crude form, he had told me about her. Chaya. His daughter. She’d been sixteen when the war had begun, and seventeen by the time she’d died. For several months, she had lived with him in this hayloft, until the day a pair of young partisan fighters had taken refuge in the barn below—and she had been lured down by the sound of Yiddish voices. Familiar voices.

“The girl was a friend from school.” Ezra spat out *friend* with shocking bitterness. “And the boy was quick to become one. I wasn’t able to stop Chaya after that. They came back a second time, because knowing her—knowing that Tomas and his family had given us refuge—meant this was a safe place. That they could expect shelter here. And the second time, she left to fight with them.”

She didn’t last long. Just months after she vanished with

the pair, Chaya was shot to death a stone's throw from the same town she had been born in. The partisan boy had carried her here in a desperate stagger through a muggy mid-summer night, heavily wounded, already dying. But it was much too late to save her.

"She's buried at the edge of the field. It was a sin and a crime what I did, but not as terrible as the one that had put her there. A desecration, but necessary. There could be no other way." Ezra's eyes lifted to me. Their gray color mirrored my own. "The dead must be buried whole. But if God is here, he is not listening. There is only you now, Vera."

As he stepped toward me, I recoiled, my face straining with all the words I couldn't say.

Make me my own teeth, I wanted to plead as he set the jars on the floor. Make them from river rocks or even clay. I'm not her. I don't want to see this. Please, don't make me see this again.

He sank to one knee and reached out for me.

"Sleep, Vera," he murmured as his fingers brushed against the three letters written on my brow. The floorboards beneath my knees gave way to—

—wet soil. Slimy pine needles beneath my fingers, rustling branches overhead. Past the forest canopy, the moon was as round and white as a fish-picked skull, surrounded by a silt of stars.

Only one thought filled my mind: Akiva. I needed to draw them away from Akiva.

I lurched onto my feet. I had burning lungs, and a heart that pounded against a bone rib cage. Dark liquid welled from my scraped palms.

I bled here.

Bushes shuddered behind me. I broke into a frantic run, grasping

around me blindly as I bolted through the forest. Tree branches struck out at my shoulders and tangled in my hair. The darkness was not my friend, nor was the river. I emerged from the trees to confront its swollen rapids. The water was as black as a grave. I faltered.

If I fell in, I would sink to the bottom. The fish and snails would strip me clean; the current would tumble my bones.

Gravel crunched behind me. Slowly, I turned.

Two men emerged between the trees, stepping toward me. One wore a navy-blue uniform with red piping, the glossy leather brim of his uniform cap shadowing flinty blue eyes and a cruel twist of a mouth. The other was dressed in gray, and as he stepped forward, terror thrummed through my body. Something about the color or cut of his uniform, or maybe the metal skull pinned to his hat, honed my fear into a needle point. Even more than the first man, I sensed this one was dangerous.

“You must understand, it’s really quite pertinent that we find him,” the man in gray said in crisp and formal German. “We need him. He is the last step. The key to awakening them.”

The words would have meant nothing to Chaya—she didn’t have the language sunk beneath her skin, the way the scribes’ ink had done to me when I had been left to dry upon the parchments. All I felt was her confusion.

“Tell us where he is!” the other man barked in Polish.

“I don’t know!” I heard myself say. “We were separated after the invasion. He’s probably dead.”

“I see,” the German soldier answered, once the other man translated the response to him. A regretful smile edged across his lips as he drew the pistol from the holster on his belt. “That’s a shame. I hate killing women.”

I woke with the taste of blood and chemicals ripe on my tongue. My tongue in my mouth. My mouth.

I lay there for a moment, my hands splayed across the worn floorboards. Shifting golden constellations of dust motes span-gled the air above my head. I focused on them to center myself. The fear didn't remain for long; I didn't have a pounding heart or a body that bled, so Chaya's memories felt rather distant in the waking world. Within moments, her terror buried itself inside me, out of sight and out of mind.

Sitting up, I tentatively ran my fingertips over the smooth edges of my teeth. In the jar, they had been as white and small as the chips flaking from the salt blocks stored in the hayloft, and seemed just as fragile. But against my fingers, the teeth felt solid and even more substantial than the clay they were rooted in.

Next, I tested my lips by pulling on them and then biting them. My lips and palate were not flesh like my tongue, except they felt no different to the touch. As if the differences between what was mine and what had been Chaya's were already beginning to lose their form.

"Careful now," Ezra murmured, sitting atop the pallet with his chin resting on his folded hands. I jerked my head up in surprise. I had almost forgotten he was there. A wry smile edged his lips. "Don't bite too hard. You don't want to ruin all my hard work."

Clay encrusted his fingers, and his wrinkled flannel shirt was smeared with more of the same. He seemed as insubstantial as the bats roosting in the rafters, his harsh face cast in shadows.

"I have a mouth!" The moment the words left me, I gasped

and pressed my hand over my lips. So, this thrum in my throat—this was to speak. And this frigid *whoosh* passing through my chest, this was air. This was what it meant to breathe.

Ezra's eyes narrowed, and for a long moment he merely regarded me.

"Ah, so no baby babbling. Your Yiddish is impeccable." A faint tremor weaved its way through his voice. "I suppose it should come as no surprise that you would be born fully formed, as Eve was. But tell me, were you born with self-awareness? Do you know what you are?"

"Yes."

He waited patiently.

I struggled to answer him. I was clay and steel and ink and words. I was hair and teeth. But I was also more than just my individual parts.

"I am alive," I said at last.

"No, that is not what I am asking. I asked, what *are* you?"

"A golem." The word tasted bitter on my tongue, as harsh and unnatural as the cloudy elixir it had come packed in.

He nodded and took a deep, unsteady breath, as though my voice had bruised him. "And what is a golem?"

I didn't answer. Merely hearing him say it struck me with a terrible image, the relic of a scribe's daydream—a crude form shaped from clay, all lumpish limbs and misshapen features, its eyes just gouged holes. The word גולם hacked into its brow, each letter as deep and gaping as an open wound.

The memory filled me with horror. I was nothing like that. Ezra had said as much. And yet...

"I suppose it's unfair to expect you to know your true nature," he said.

My mouth brimmed with questions I wanted to ask him. More than anything, I wanted to know about the difference between us. I felt that if I learned a little more about Ezra, I would uncover secrets about my true nature. It would be like revealing memories from my own past, or rather, the past that I had inherited through Chaya's eyes and teeth.

"Who are *you*?" I asked, turning his own question back on him.

His brow furrowed in puzzlement. "I am your creator. Ezra. I've told you this before, have I not?"

"I know, but that's not what I mean." I strained to find the right words. "You...you made me. But I want to know, who *are* you?"

His face chilled over. At first, I thought he meant to silence me. A twinge of acute terror rippled through me. He could do that, I was sure. Either through commands, or simply by disfiguring the mouth he had so carefully built. He had left the bundle of tools within hand's reach.

Just when I began to think he wouldn't answer, he sighed, relenting. Brushing his fingers through his hair, he regarded the clay beneath his nails, the scarred absences of his pinky and ring fingers. Flexed his fingers. Curled them.

"I don't know what you expect to hear," he said at last.

"Tell me anything."

His gaze lifted to mine. I could tell from the firm set of his jaw that he didn't want to, but after another hesitation so long it was almost excruciating, he began to talk.

"I was born in 1896, in a suburb of Vilna," he said, tracing

a thumb over the worn floorboards. “My father was a rabbi, who hailed from a long line of rabbis, only I didn’t share his acclimation for scripture. When I was your age—Chaya’s age, I mean—I was angry. So incredibly angry. I was eager to fight. I didn’t know what that meant at the time.”

When the Great War broke out in 1914, Ezra had been recruited into the Imperial Army. Once this place had been the kingdom of Lithuania, but at that time, it was part of Russia. Only later would it be claimed by Poland, and after that the Soviet Union.

Near the end of the war, a mortar, a kind of explosive, had landed in his trench. He lost the use of two fingers and a leg, the hearing in his left ear, and his dream of traveling the world. But in the end, upon returning to his hometown, he had found something as well.

“What?” I asked, leaning forward, mesmerized.

A wry smile touched his lips. “Love.”

Toiba had been a year older than him, a nurse working in a war hospital. Before he had shown her his heart, she had seen the uglier parts of him—his shrapnel-gouged limbs and the bandaged stump of his knee—and inhaled the biting stench of piss and gangrene.

He described these things so vividly, a visceral shiver swept through me, and I found my left hand straying toward my own leg. A part of me expected to encounter a ragged stump and the leaking reeds of torn arteries, that glint of white he’d realized was his own femur. Instead, my fingers encountered smooth clay. It came as a small comfort to know there was nothing beneath.

The sun had risen and fallen in my long sleep, and with

each minute, the night encroached on us. As Ezra continued his story, his gray eyes tarnished to the color of ashes in the failing glow. Unless he spared a candle, we would be in darkness soon enough.

“Toiba died during childbirth.” He took a deep breath, pinching the bridge of his nose. “She never had a chance to watch our daughter grow old, but I suppose in some ways that was a mercy. If she were still alive today, she would have been horrified...”

He trailed off, but all his unspoken words hung in the air between us, as cold as a winter chill. She would have been horrified by me, he meant. By what he had done to create me.

He had killed men before. I sensed it in myself. His potential for violence was a part of me, sunk under my skin like ink. But to take from your own daughter her eyes, her nails, her tongue, her teeth...

That was something else entirely.

“The mystics of legend were said to be so wise and powerful, they were able to create the perfect likeness of a man from clay alone.” He said it almost apologetically, as though that explained it all. “But I am no holy tzaddik. I am not even a rebbe. So, I had to resort to other means. Kishuf.”

“Kishuf?” The word felt strange and peppery on my tongue, like the shape of something I had nearly forgotten.

“Ancient and profane magic,” he said quietly. “What my father would have derided as witchcraft or worse. You do not learn these things in a shul or yeshiva. You do not even speak of them. They are abominations against God.”

His statements were defanged by the weary resignation in his voice, as if it was a simple fact of my creation to which

he'd had no choice, but I couldn't help but feel vaguely uneasy, as if he had exposed a fissure deep within me. Something prone to cracking.

"Then how did you know to create me?" I asked.

A wry smile touched his lips. "Have I ever told you about the legend of Pardes, the heavenly orchard?"

I shook my head, testing the word *Pardes* silently on my tongue. Its shape felt strange and smooth, like water-worn pebbles.

"It is said that, over a thousand years ago, four rabbis attempted to access the orchard of heavenly learning. Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Rabbi Akiva, and Achor. One man died, one went mad, Achor became a heretic, and only Rabbi Akiva survived the encounter, leaving in peace and whole. Why do you suppose that is? What do you suppose they saw there?"

I didn't answer. I was filled with knowledge—it was imprinted in ink on my surface, and had sunk even deeper in the weeks since my creation—but the idea of heavenly knowledge felt as inaccessible as the daily prayers Ezra whispered like repentance.

"According to family legend, my ancestor, Shachna Bar Zemah was obsessed with that question. More specifically, with what Achor saw—what must have been so unfathomable that it had turned him away from his faith."

"Why did he want to know that?" I asked.

"I imagine, for more or less the same reasons that led me to create you," Ezra said, smiling humorlessly. "Shachna survived the Khmelnytsky Uprising and the Russo-Polish War after that. He came of age surrounded by death and suffering. In any case, in his search for answers, Shachna too became

a heretic—first driven from his home in Vilna by scorn and hatred, then the Vilna rabbis put him into herem in the late 1600s, cutting him off from the religious community entirely. Over time, his interest turned to other, even stranger subjects of immortality and the creation of artificial life. Mix in a little Kabbalah with medieval superstition, Baltic paganism, and Paracelsus's alchemical writings on the creation of a so-called 'homunculus,' and you will come close to understanding Shachna's particular breed of madness."

Ezra gestured to the stacks of books piled along the walls. Some were bound in flaking leather or cloth, while others were so old, the spines had broken away to reveal stitching like dried sinews. "These texts came from the same temple as the village he died in—the one I grew up in—from the genizah where old texts are stored before burial. When the Soviets occupied our town, they turned the shul into a warehouse."

Soviets. Disjointed memories flitted through my head like a flurry of crows: a star and sickle, red flags, clamoring laborers crowding around a man standing on a platform, a young soldier confronting an encroaching tide of smoke.

Overwhelmed by the visions, I pressed my hands over my eyes until they receded into darkness. For something that didn't belong to me, the scribes' memories felt more substantial than my own short lifetime. Chaya's, even more so.

At times, I wasn't even sure who I was beyond the disjointed memories and emotions that filtered down to me. Was the admiration I felt for Ezra something he had carved into me, was it a residue of Chaya, or was it truly my own?

Where did I begin?

As I lowered my hands, Ezra continued talking. These

books and Torahs constituted only a small amount of the writings from the genizah and shul, he explained. Before the Nazis had invaded, he had smuggled out what he could at his father, the rabbi's, behest.

"Yet I suspect even my father didn't know what the genizah contained," he said.

Buried in a lead box beneath the storage room's floor had been Shachna's magnum opus, texts too unholy to keep outside consecrated ground, and too dangerous to bury in the cemetery lest they spoil the earth. They did not concern the mystical art of Kabbalah. They were something different. Darker.

"An ordinary golem is created from pure elements, the same dust from which HaShem shaped the first man. But to create you, it involved power gained from going against all our commandments—the collection of blood in a vessel, the desecration of a corpse, the desecration of the Torah. Self-mutilation."

Ezra turned his palms upward. Puckering pink scars climbed down his forearms, overlaying the older hatching left from shrapnel. The sight filled me with unspeakable shame. I looked down at my own wrists, circled in ink. The black letters resembled scars of their own.

If a tzaddik was able to create a golem, that meant golems themselves weren't abominations. Only ones made through kishuf. Only me.

Ezra must have sensed my mounting discomfort, because he cleared his throat, offering me a thin smile. "But enough about that. Say more. Say anything. That word on your forehead. Do you remember what it means?"

“Truth.” I savored the sound of the word, *emet*. To show off, I repeated it in Polish.

“Polish. So, you can speak Polish, too.”

Without further prompting, I echoed the word in German and Russian.

The different languages came to me the same way that recollections of the world beyond the hayloft filtered through the darkness behind my eyes, like opening the floodgates to another part of myself, a stranger sunken deep inside me.

“Incredible,” Ezra murmured. “How do you know this?”

I struggled to find the words to answer. When my voice failed me, I pointed at the scrolls and stacks of papers along the walls then pressed my fingers against the calligraphy trailing down my forearms.

The scribes had left me with more than just the Hebrew printed in ink upon my skin—they had poured so much of their souls into their writing, that I’d inherited their memories and languages, too.

Yiddish. Polish. Lithuanian. German. Hebrew. Russian.

I was the daughter of two dozen different scribes and a murdered girl. I was the daughter of the Vokè River.

“I know it because they knew it,” I murmured.

His eyes narrowed. “You have their memories?”

I swallowed, recalling the taste of blood. I shouldn’t have known what blood tasted like, considering I had none of my own. It troubled me to experience sensations that didn’t belong to me, even though they were all I’d ever known since Ezra had dredged me from the riverside.

“And Chaya’s,” I said.

When I said Chaya's name, Ezra flinched as if I had struck him. He leaned forward in his seat, his eyes afire.

"Then you must know how she died," he said breathlessly. "You must have seen it."

I nodded. "Not all, but..."

"Tell me everything."

"I... I..." I didn't know how to put it into words. Chaya's fear encroached on me like an inky wave, and before I knew it, I bent over myself and pressed my hands to my face. Recalling the desperate flight through the forest, and the impact of the gunshot, so powerful that it had nearly taken me off my feet. The breathlessness, like I was still just clay in the Voké River, crushed beneath the weight of surging water.

"It's all right," Ezra said, and though he said it as if he meant to soothe me, he remained at a chilly distance, his chin resting in his hands. "You don't have to say it. Just remember the men who killed her. Remember what they look like. Burn their faces into your memory and hate them with every fiber of your being. That is why I gave you emotions, so that you would hate them as much as I hate them. Because one day, you will do what I cannot do. You will destroy them all."