

Prologue

Sarajevo

Wednesday, 8 April 1914

Compared to Vienna, Sarajevo was a hole in the ground. Its Kafe Zemljak was modelled after Café Landtmann, next to the Burgtheater in the Habsburg capital. It was a tad less grand but not for want of trying. Kafe Zemljak had high ceilings and dark wood panelling. The place was famous for its thick, strong Bosnian coffee served in a copper can, accompanied by rosewater-flavoured *lokum*.

It was a slow evening. Haughty waiters in black tie observed the scarce clientele's every move. The real action was taking place in the back room. Despite its sedate outlook, the café provided a meeting space for seditious Bosnian Serbs. The insurrectionists agitated against the *Kaiserliche und Königliche Doppelmonarchie* — the Austro-Hungarian Empire and its Habsburg rulers — which had occupied their country since the Congress of Berlin in 1878. The room's two exits into the warren of streets behind the café were an asset in a city where police raids were both frequent and brutal.

The man on the podium was a greying seventy-year-old. He wore a black *šajkača* cap — a nationalist symbol named after the Serb troops that had fought off the Ottomans on the banks of the Danube and the Sava rivers to safeguard the Austrian Empire two centuries ago. The cap was a reminder to the Austrian authorities of how poorly the Empire had rewarded the Bosnian Serbs for their loyal services.

The speaker was an hour into his speech and getting tired. Not that it mattered much. There was no need to convince his audience. They all felt the Empire treated Bosnian Serbs as second-rate citizens.

The Hungarians had obtained self-rule half a century ago. If the emperor wanted their support on any matter, he needed explicit approval by the Hungarian parliament and government. No such courtesy had ever been extended to the Bosnian Serbs, regardless of their merits in defending the realm. They expected nothing from Emperor Franz Joseph. The old goat had been in power for sixty-six years and was stone deaf to their legitimate demands for more autonomy. His fat nephew, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, who also happened to be the heir presumptive, appeared to show more understanding for their grievances. But could they expect *any* scion of the House of Habsburg to yield to their demands? The question was ridiculous. Ever since the

Napoleonic wars, the Habsburgs' reign had been in steady decline. That only made them hold on to power even more stubbornly. No, the Bosnian Serbs' future didn't lie within the confines of the Habsburg Empire. They needed outside help to shake off their abusive relationship with the Habsburgs. The Kingdoms of Serbia and Bulgaria were natural Slavic allies. The Russian tsar also appeared eager for an opportunity to take a bite out of the *Doppelmonarchie's* flank and — as an additional bonus — to push the Ottomans back to Constantinople.

The silent audience, which filled the room to half capacity, listened politely. About eighty men were present. Some were dressed in traditional gear like the speaker. The majority wore cheap, dark suits. Most of their clothes were the worse for wear. Times were hard.

There was *one* woman in the room. She was sitting front centre. No one seemed to notice her, although she was conspicuously out of place. She was a tall, fair-skinned blonde with a strong chin and chiselled jawline. There wasn't a drop of Slavic blood in her veins. Moreover, she dressed expensively in the latest Viennese fashion. Her chequered, black and white silk dress was designed by Emilie Flöge. The matching hat was an equally exquisite creation — a broad-rimmed *canotier* of black crinoline braid from the trendy Mühlbauer Hutmanufaktur. Her outfit cost more than the combined monthly wages of all the men present in the room.

She was looking at the speaker with a vacant expression. Her eyes were deep blue, sometimes changing inexplicably towards violet tinged with red. The orator was sweating. The limited eloquence he'd mustered at the beginning of his speech had declined into a breathless mumble. Though the woman focused all her attention on him, she had no use for the man. He'd be dead in less than five months. A fledgling cancerous tumour nested in the lower half of his left lung, she knew. Pea-sized now, it would develop in the coming weeks at an alarming rate into sprawling carcinoma. Then it would start spreading to other parts of the body — the right lung, the liver, the kidneys, the brain. In its final stage, it would transform into bone cancer. Its victim's last weeks would be a living hell of ceaseless pain.

The young man sitting to her left was the real reason for her presence. He'd never met her. Even though the room was almost empty upon his arrival, he'd chosen the chair next to hers without hesitation. He hadn't nodded or looked at her. They'd been sitting next to each other for twenty minutes in complete silence before the speaker started his introduction.

The man wasn't much to look at. He was short and narrow shouldered. His eyes were deep set and had dark circles; his nose was too big for the thin face with jutting cheekbones. He tried to dress like a dandy but lacked the means to pull it off. His most distinctive feature was a pencil-thin moustache, which contrasted sharply with the bushy extravaganzas sported by the other men.

The tiring speaker had just paused to pour himself a glass of water when a young man came barging into the room. 'Get out!' he yelled. 'The coppers are coming!'

The youngster had been loitering across the street, acting as a lookout. He'd seen a group of twelve uniformed policemen turning the corner, marching in the direction of Kafe Zemljak, truncheons at the ready.

The men in the room bolted in a panic towards the two back exits, left and right of the podium. In the melee, the younger men shoved aside the elderly. The doorways were too narrow to facilitate a speedy escape. Most of the attendees were struggling to get to the doors as the police rushed in.

The short man took advantage of his front-row seat to reach the left exit as one of the first, only to be elbowed aside by somebody much larger than he. A blow to the throat left him momentarily breathless before he tried to push through the door again. He put his hand in his trouser pocket to retrieve his knuckle-duster and punched the man in front of him in the kidneys.

Constables were clubbing down the laggards in the room and moved towards the crowd near the exits. Fifteen men had escaped; the rest were engaged in a chaotic hand-to-hand scuffle with the law. Several men lay cowering on the floor, bleeding from head injuries. The woman was nowhere to be seen.

When a police officer grabbed the person in front of him by the scruff and yanked him backwards, the short man saw his chance. He ducked and weaved his way through the doorway and into the chilly evening air. Disoriented, he hesitated briefly before running away, turning left and right to throw the police off his trail. The cop whistles came from everywhere; the sound of hobnailed boots pounding the pavement closed in on him quickly. The fugitive risked a look over his shoulder and saw the contours of a huge brute barely thirty feet behind him in the dusk. He was no match for this colossus — there was no way he could outrun or outfight him. Panic dug its sharp claws into his brain, but fear didn't give him wings. Fatigue was getting hold of him. His legs felt like flannel, and his laboured breathing scorched his windpipe. Five steps after he'd turned the next corner, he was pulled off the street inside a house.

The front door remained partially open. When the policeman reached the spot, he stopped and peered into the semidarkness of the hallway, looking straight at the short man. Then he turned on his heels and ran on.

The chased man couldn't believe his eyes. What had just happened? Panting, he turned to see who'd pulled him inside. It was the woman he'd been sitting next to during the meeting. He looked at her, confused, not recognising her. She was almost a head taller than he and dressed like nobody he'd ever met. She looked composed. There was no indication she'd run a four-hundred-yard dash in high heels. And how could she have been strong enough to pull a running man — even a lightweight like him — into the house?

She stared down at him with a mocking smile. 'Don't you think you should stop wasting your time listening to old men's speeches?' she asked him in accentless Serbian.

The woman was a total stranger. Her opinion shouldn't have mattered to him, but her remark cut him to the bone. She made him feel like he somehow needed to justify himself. He wanted to tell her he'd tried damned hard to be a soldier. He'd attempted several times to get accepted by the Black Hand in Belgrade — the secret military organisation that aimed to unite all South Slavic territories. Each time, they had rejected him because of his diminutive stature. He'd been able to join the Srpska Revolucionarna Organizacija and had trained with them in hand-to-hand combat, learnt to use firearms, and how to make bombs, and then: nothing. Nothing had ever happened. Not once had they called him into action. He'd been to more secret meetings than he cared to count, and it was all talk, talk, nothing but talk. It was frustrating. Though he yearned to make his mark on history, he'd found himself forever relegated to the sidelines — always an observer, never a player. He was nineteen, and his time was already running out. Each morning, he coughed up phlegm laced with blood. He knew he suffered from consumption; he didn't have long to live.

He looked into her eyes and knew she understood. She felt his anger, his hatred, his impotence. He wanted her to like him; he wanted to make her proud. In the

doorway's feeble light, he fell under her spell. He was her slave. Her mesmerising eyes of ever-changing colours looked right into his tormented soul.

He closed his eyes and let himself be carried by her musky perfume. She smelt of the Nordic snowy pine forests. He sensed the hungry wolves marauding among the trees and their prey's feverish heartbeat, the smell of blood coursing right beneath the skin. He felt another presence, older than the trees or even the snow on the mountaintops, powerful and oppressive. The scent deepened. It turned resinous, flavoured with southern aromas — myrrh, cinnamon, and undertones of cardamom. The landscape changed: a blistering sun, vast expanses of sand, utter emptiness devoid of life, except for the occasional slithering beast. Through the radiating heat, he saw a dark presence shimmering in and out of existence — like a *fata morgana*, a wordless enchantment made of hot air. It was unbearable, and it felt like home.

Opening his eyes again, he was flustered and soaked in sweat.

'Gavrilo, be the change you want to see in the world,' she whispered.

She touched his cheek with her gloved right hand and pressed a light kiss on his lips, a sweet promise of more to come.

Sarajevo

Sunday, 28 June 1914

Ever since his meeting with the mysterious lady, Gavrilo Princip had the weirdest nightmares that woke him up screaming in the middle of the night. Sitting up in bed — gasping for air, eyes wide open in the dark — eerie images still haunted his memories. Even walking the streets of Sarajevo, he felt there was always something watching him — a dark shadow hovering at the edges of his perception.

He tried to convince himself he was being paranoid. After his flight from Kafe Zemljak, he took matters into his own hands. He contacted a couple of fellow Bosnian Serbs he knew from earlier secret meetings, and who were more or less his age.

Trifko Grabež was a hothead who'd been expelled from school after striking a teacher. He quickly radicalised, and the Black Hand accepted him as a member. Still, he too was champing at the bit, as impatient and frustrated as Princip.

Nedeljko Čabrinović had run away from home and dropped out of school because of his abusive father. He couldn't hold a job for long, and his work in the printing industry paid poorly. Čabrinović was more of a thinker than the other two and avidly read Marxist literature. As he always felt exploited, he proved fertile soil for incendiary, left-wing ideas. He loathed the Austrians and had been a natural recruit for the Black Hand.

The three of them were teenage rebels with a cause, aching for action. When the newspapers announced Archduke Franz Ferdinand's visit to Sarajevo, it took them little discussion to decide they'd kill him. They needed explosives and guns. Princip spoke of their plans to a local man who was well-connected with the Black Hand's higher echelons. To their surprise, Major Vojislav Tankosić himself came through. He was the right-hand man of the head of the Black Hand — Colonel Dragutin Dimitrijević of the Serbian army, who hid behind the codename Apis.

Tankosić had been involved in several violent operations. Famously, he was one of the army officers who'd participated in the May Coup in 1903, which ended the reign of the unpopular Serbian King Alexander. The king and queen were murdered in their

palace and then tossed out of a window onto a manure pile. Tankosić himself executed the queen's two brothers. Moreover, he'd become a spymaster. He'd established a network of thousands of Bosnian Serbs after the Austrian-Hungarian Empire annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908.

Princip and his two friends were awestruck in his presence. Tankosić was a sharp dresser and sported a fierce handlebar moustache. Even in civilian clothes, his ramrod demeanour, brusque manners, and authoritative speech gave him away as an army officer. He had the cold look of a fanatic. Tankosić had also been plotting an assassination attempt on the archduke with four other Bosnian Serbs, and he embraced the opportunity to enlarge his team.

The three would-be assassins were called to Belgrade for firearms training. The first morning, Tankosić put apples on their heads. He ordered them to stand still, and then — cocksure, at a twenty-pace distance — shot the apples clean off, barely taking the time to aim. Grabež pissed his pants, and Čabrinović threw up. Princip thought he'd faint, but he stayed on his feet, looking more composed than he felt.

'Never think while pulling the trigger,' Tankosić told them. 'A man who thinks is a worthless killer. Your mind needs to be a complete blank. You mustn't even be aware there's a gun in your hand. The gun is part of your body; it'll fire at whatever you focus your eyes on. There's only you and the target. The rest of the world doesn't exist.'

Tankosić was a harsh taskmaster. The training was relentless. After three days, Princip proved to be a reasonably accurate shot. He was able to hit a moving target while running. The major grabbed him by the shoulders and looked him straight in the eye.

'You'll do fine,' he said. 'Just fine.'

Tankosić provided the assassination team with six hand grenades and four Browning FN Model 1910 pistols with .380 ACP rounds. In case they were captured, he handed them suicide pills. A map of Sarajevo showed the archduke's planned route and the spots where policemen would stand guard. Franz Ferdinand would use an open motorcar. That made him a sitting duck for anybody with the nerve to throw a bomb or pull a trigger. The assassins planned a gauntlet of successive attacks — if the first one didn't succeed, the next one would. It was a foregone conclusion that the operation would be a success.

Princip was over the moon. This was what he was born to do.

The morning of the long-awaited day turned into a terrible disillusionment.

It was a bright and cloudless Sunday. Throngs of excited spectators lined the road from an early hour. After the archduke and his party arrived in Sarajevo by train, officials immediately led them to their respective automobiles. Franz Ferdinand and his wife, Duchess Sophie von Chotkow und Wognin, shared the third car in the motorcade — a large, dark-green convertible Gräf & Stift 28/32 PS Double Phaeton — with Governor Oskar Potiorek and Lieutenant Colonel Count Franz von Harrach. Security was a shambles. The local military commander had pleaded to line the route with soldiers, but the city councillors refused to go along with this scheme. They feared the citizens would consider such draconian measures an affront to their loyalty to the Crown. At long last, the council decided not to deploy the army at all and put local police in charge of security. The thirty-six policemen were inadequate for the task. They had neither the training nor the manpower to guarantee the archduke's safety.

The motorcade slowly drove down the Appel Quay bordering the Miljacka River. When it passed the first two assassins — one armed with a bomb and the other with a

gun — both men lost their nerve and failed to act. Čabrinović — armed with a bomb — was the third assassin in the gauntlet. Nervously, he pulled the pin on the grenade and then fumbled his throw. The bomb bounced off the Gräf & Stift's retracted soft top and rolled under the next car, where it detonated. The explosion tore the car apart, wounding two officers. A hail of shrapnel cut into the onlookers alongside the road.

A large woman standing next to Čabrinović received a glancing blow to the forehead from a random piece of metal. She sagged in her husband's arms, bleeding from a deep cut right below the hairline. By now, two men were tugging at Čabrinović's coat, calling to others for help. He struck one of the men on the jaw with a wild swing and tore himself free. He pushed two others out of the way, swallowed his suicide pill, and jumped into the river. Čabrinović landed hard. The water was only four inches deep. He crawled back to his feet, retching, nauseous, and dizzy. Pain shot up from his left ankle. He went back down on one knee, bile dripping from his mouth. Two policemen and some other bystanders jumped in the river and pinned him down in the shallow water. He was dry-heaving; his vision became blurred. He didn't die. The poison pill was so far past its sell-by-date that the cyanide failed to work.

In the meantime, the archduke's chauffeur had floored the gas pedal. He sped down the quay in the direction of the city hall. The governor had jumped up from his seat and acted as a human shield for his guests. Shoved back and forth in the swirling crowd, none of the other assassins were able to make another attempt on the archduke's life. Franz Ferdinand looked over his shoulder at the exploded car's smouldering wreck. He held his wife's hand tight; the duchess blankly stared ahead, in shocked silence.

The chaos was deafening. The grenade had injured over twenty people. Constables milled about in total panic, shouting out orders heeded by no one. Bystanders tried to get away from the place of the explosion while others wanted to get closer to have a better view of the carnage. They spilt from the pavement onto the street, trampling one another and preventing any medical services from reaching the victims.

Princip, the second-to-last assassin, had taken up a position near the Lateiner Bridge. He'd lost sight of his companions in the melee and was cursing his bad luck. He'd seen Čabrinović apprehended in the river. The police didn't make any efforts to determine whether there were still other would-be assassins in the crowd. A few clueless coppers were trying to clear the street to little avail. Princip's head was buzzing. He knew that, after the ceremony in the city hall, the archduke was scheduled to head back down Appel Quay and then make a right turn into Franz Joseph Street, right where Princip was standing now. No doubt the botched attack had messed up the official planning. It was impossible to know whether the archduke would come back and, if so, when and via which route.

A coughing spasm shook his frail frame. Princip wiped his mouth and noticed traces of blood on his hand. He spat on the pavement. The world slowed down. His vision clouded, and the street noises receded until they were but a dim buzz. All he heard was the dull, deafening thud of his irregular heartbeat. His mind went blank, and then he found himself standing on a vast, empty square. A blinding, white sun bore down on him. The temperature was blistering. He felt his skin tightening, and the scorching air seared his lungs with every gasping breath. It felt as if each gulp of oxygen cauterised the micro-lacerations deep in his pulmonary tissue. In front of him hovered an indefinable presence — an obsidian hole of sheer nothingness, deep as space. Carmine eyes peered out at him.

'Cross the street and wait there,' a woman's soothing voice whispered.

When he opened his eyes again, a concerned elderly man stood over him.

'Are you all right, my boy?' the pensioner asked.

'Yes... Yes, I'm fine,' Princip assured him, blinking. 'My blood pressure's probably a bit low. I think I've been standing too long in the sun. Thanks for your concern; I'm quite all right now.'

'You need to drink some water, son. You look parched. And eat! Put some meat on those bones,' the man advised and stretched out his hand to help the youngster stand up.

Princip thanked him once more and crossed the road. He felt whether he still had his gun in his pocket. It was there, a silent reminder of what he'd set out to do on this Sunday morning. On the corner of Appel Quay and Franz Joseph Street stood Moritz Schiller's Delicatessen. Princip hesitated. He could use a drink and a bite. Then he thought better of it and posted himself right in front of the café.

Schiller's was bustling with people. A line of customers was waiting to get in. Princip hoped nobody would show up and distract him from his purpose. Unfortunately, it took only a few moments before Mihajlo Pušara turned up and clapped him too hard on the back. Pušara brought back jarring memories. He was an old school friend who shared Princip's aversion to the Austrian regime. They'd been in a few demonstrations together and in a couple of scraps. After Princip had decided he wanted to join the Black Hand, he found himself in a waiting room in Belgrade along with his old comrade. They had the same idea at the same time. The interview went badly for Princip. The recruiter took one look at his skinny figure and told Princip he had no use for him. He needed men, he said, not scarecrows. Princip tried in vain to plead his case. The interviewer turned to his papers and waved him out without another look. When he next met Pušara, the man's smug look told Princip all he didn't want to know. He'd avoided his friend ever since. *Look at him now!* Princip thought. *Who carries a gun in his pocket? Who did the Black Hand select for this vital mission? Well, it wasn't Mihajlo bloody Pušara!*

After what seemed an endless exchange of banalities, Pušara was called away by his lover, who had secured seats in the delicatessen. She was a pretty wisp of a girl with striking, full lips — far better-looking than the jerk deserved. Princip wiped his brow. He was sweating like a pig. His shirt clung uncomfortably to his back, and the stains under his armpits kept growing. Missing breakfast hadn't been a smart idea; hunger pangs gnawed at his intestines. But he'd been too worked up to eat. Nerves had knotted his stomach after a sleepless night. He'd tried a little cold *burek* — a leftover from the day before — with some yoghurt but had given up after a few bites.

Before he could make up his mind to quickly enter Schiller's and buy some food to eat on the go, he was amazed to see the green Gräf & Stift rounding the corner, turning into Franz Joseph Street. One of the passengers yelled angrily and hit the driver on the shoulder. Princip could make out that the car should have continued its way along the Appel Quay and that turning into Franz Joseph Street had been a mistake. The chauffeur turned purple. He slammed the brakes and stalled the engine by clumsily putting the gears in reverse. They were less than fifteen feet away from where Princip was standing. Princip didn't have an ounce of religion, but this — there was no other word for it — this was a gift from the gods.

He stepped off the pavement onto the street, taking quick, long strides. He pulled his gun. The rest of the world ceased to exist. Duchess Sophie saw him first and looked straight at him. Although a light veil covered her face, Princip couldn't help but notice she had sad eyes.

Princip was five feet away from the car when he pulled the trigger once. He aimed for the body. During his training in Belgrade, Major Tankosić had repeatedly told him

never to aim for the head. 'Always the body,' the major kept saying. 'Aim for the head, and you'll miss. You'll never get a second chance. Aim for the body and put in three or four slugs.'

The duchess had moved in front of her husband as Princip was firing. A crimson flower bloomed on her white dress. He'd shot her in the abdomen. Whatever happened, she wouldn't live; she'd bleed out slowly.

The archduke anxiously bent over his wife, who slumped against him. The movement put Princip off his aim. He shot again. Instead of hitting the large man in the chest, the bullet went wide and nicked Franz Ferdinand's jugular vein. Blood splattered from his neck and stained his sky-blue cavalry officer tunic. The dying heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne held on to his spouse and whispered something Princip couldn't make out. Before he could take a third shot, policemen and civilians jumped him and wrested the gun away.

It was done. His life was forfeit, and it had been worth it. History books would forever remember the name Gavrilo Princip. The filthy disease eating his lungs away had failed to prevent him from achieving greatness. The tyrant was dead, and thus he'd brought the Bosnian Serbs one step closer to freedom. Somebody hit him behind the right ear with the pommel of a sabre. Everything went dark.

From an open window of the second-floor flat in the building across the street from Schiller's, a splendidly attired couple had witnessed the double assassination and subsequent capture of the assassin. The man wore a dark suit with a colourful double-breasted silk waistcoat and matching tie on a white shirt with a round club collar. He was in his late forties. His hair and ducktail beard were greying elegantly, and his hairline receded at the temples. His build had once been athletic. Now, a slight paunch was showing. A duelling scar marked his left cheekbone, a reminder of his days as a member of a fencing fraternity. He was looking admiringly at his partner. The woman who had approached Princip months earlier was — once again — a fashion plate. She was wearing a high-necked dress with bold patterns, similar to those Gustav Klimt had used in his first portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer.

'Someday, *Frau Gräfin*, you'll have to tell me how you knew, three months ago, this exact window would offer us such an entertaining spectacle today,' the man complimented her.

She smiled and raised her glass of sparkling *Burgunder Sekt* in a toast. 'To the end of the world as we know it, *Freiherr*, zum Wohl!'

They clinked glasses and laughed.

The *Freiherr* winked mischievously. 'You don't expect *der Alte* to declare war on Bosnia for *this*, do you, my dear? Not because of the murder of an heir to the throne he thoroughly despised, nor for the death of a cow whose children he never wanted to see on the throne. He's probably dancing a merry polka with Miss Schrott in Schönbrunn by now, don't you think?'

'Honour is a fickle thing,' the countess replied. 'It makes one do things common sense dictates to avoid at all costs. The emperor will be forced to make a move, and *any* move is fine by me. Do you play billiards, *Freiherr*?'

'Yes, of course, but I don't see—'

'Europe is a billiards table full of shiny balls,' she said, cutting him off. 'Take a cue and hit a random ball on the table hard enough in whatever direction, and *not one* of the balls will remain in its original place. Today, the balls started rolling.'

In a flat across the street, carefully hidden behind heavy curtains, another individual was observing the countess and the baron through binoculars. He paid no heed to the chaos below, intent as he was on trying to lip-read the conversation. After a short while, he put his binoculars away and reached behind him to take a small Simplex camera. Unlike most contemporary photo equipment, it wasn't a folding camera. It looked like an oblong box with rounded corners, covered in black leather. It was tiny by comparison to other cameras on the market, barely the size of a small cigar case. The man raised the viewer to his right eye and snapped a film roll's worth of pictures.

1

Zoetevoorde, Flanders

Thursday, 12 October 1916

When France called its citizens to arms in August 1914 in response to the mobilisation of German conscripts, farmers' sons expected to be back from the war in time for the September harvest; nothing had prepared them for a war of attrition that would last for years.

On 3 August, King Albert I of Belgium refused the German army free passage through his country. The *Kaiser* had planned to avoid the French fortifications lining the German-French border by making a quick, circumventing troop movement through Belgium. He wanted to take the French by surprise from the north, capturing Paris before France could organise its defences. The Belgian king's refusal was a first disappointment for the Germans. What made matters worse: the weak Belgian army held off the German onslaught for about a month — against all expectations. Belgium's resistance sent the Germans into a frenzy. They murdered civilians and burnt entire towns to the ground. The Germans captured the fortresses of Liège and Namur by shelling them with two of Krupp's monstrous Big Bertha howitzers. They then chased the fleeing Belgian troops from Antwerp and raced to the North Sea coast, only to be frustrated once again. The Germans were stalemated when, after about half a month of heavy fighting near the Belgian coast, the Belgians decided to open the sluices at Nieuport and inundate the Yser Plain from Nieuport to Dixmude on the evening of 28 October. It stopped German progress in its tracks and signified the end of open warfare in that region. The Germans held the coast from Zeebrugge to Nieuport and captured inland Dixmude. Then the war shifted to Ypres. On both sides of the flooded Yser Plain, Belgian, French, British, and German troops dug themselves in. Trench warfare had begun.

Two years later, nothing much had changed. Continuous shelling and heavy rains had transformed Flanders' green fields into long stretches of nightmarish mud pools. It was a no man's land marked with splintered tree stumps, sinister curls of barbed wire, unexploded shells, and rotting corpses nobody cared to collect. Living conditions were infernal. The trenches regularly filled up with water. Exhausted soldiers were forced to stand knee-deep in a slimy, brownish soup for days on end — their boots stuck in the heavy, waterlogged Flemish clay. Rats had a field day. They swamped the trenches, stealing food and taking the occasional bite out of a sleeping *Poilu* or Tommy.

Zoetevoorde was an insignificant village a few miles north of Dixmude on the bank of the Yser Plain. When the Germans captured it, a couple of days before entering Dixmude, a civilian sniper killed four of their soldiers with a hunting rifle from the St.

Andreas church tower. In retaliation, *Oberstleutnant* von Stuck gathered the village's entire population on the church square and had everybody shot. Then he proceeded to burn down all of the houses. Finally, for good measure, he ordered a nearby artillery unit to use the church for target practice. Zoetevoorde was now nothing but a ghost town. Its remaining houses were burnt-out, empty shells. The church nave was destroyed. Its west wall and the tower were left partially standing, and the north transept and the apse somehow also survived. The ruins offered a chilling sight on clear, cloudless nights.

On the night of 12 October 1916, under a waning gibbous moon, an icy wind howled through the derelict streets of what had once been Zoetevoorde. It had been raining incessantly during the day; large puddles had formed everywhere. Two crows had found a refuge in the remaining transept, and that was all the life for miles around. Until a black Mercedes 80/90 HP stopped in front of the church. Its headlights were taped off, allowing the light beams to pass through narrow slits. Only the bass-heavy rumble of the powerful six-cylinder engine could have given it away if anybody had been around to care. Four people clad in long fur coats and caps with goggles descended from the car and walked in silence towards the church ruins. Each one carried a wooden, battery-operated trench torch with a large bull's eye lens.

They avoided the fissured west wall and entered the building via the nave. The floor was covered with debris, making their progress slow. The leader was a woman; she picked the path to follow. The four torch lights projected whimsical shadows on the pocked church interior — it looked as if giant, hairy creatures from another world were roaming through the ruins. One man slipped in a puddle and hurt his elbow. He loudly cursed in German. A stone pulpit jutted above the hundreds of limestone roof fragments scattered all over the floor. Its ancient carvings of wild beasts and devils acquired a life of their own in the torches' erratic light beams. Without another mishap, the little group reached the transept. They were startled by the flapping noises and cawing of the two crows flying away from their perches. Carefully, they continued in the direction of the apse. The back of the church was relatively free of rubble. They quickly cleared away the few chunks of masonry that littered the floor.

The four huddled together, and the woman said, 'This is it. Look for the signs on the floor.'

The apse floor consisted of a mix of small- and medium-sized limestone flagstones. The three men scattered and shone their light beams at the floor, shuffling the dust away with their boots.

'I found one!' shouted one of the men after a couple of minutes.

He pointed at a smaller flagstone. Eight centuries of wear had almost erased the image carved into the stone. Superficially, it looked like a curly, vegetal design. On closer inspection, one could distinguish something resembling tentacles. The other three found similar images on other flagstones. The four spots formed a trapezoid, with its larger base to the back of the apse's wall.

'On my mark,' commanded the woman.

All four were standing next to the flagstones they'd discovered.

'Now.'

They each stepped on their marked stones. For a while, all was silent; only the wind could be heard lashing against the ruined walls. It began to drizzle again. Their weight pushed down the stones, ever so slowly. After about five minutes, the stones had sunk two inches. The intruders heard faint clicking and grating noises. A rectangular surface within the trapezoid sank as well. Its descent stopped after ten inches, and then — no doubt managed by a sophisticated system of pulleys and weights — the rectangle

split lengthwise. Both halves slid left and right under the flagstones. A dark hole opened, exuding a stale, fungal smell.

The four stepped to the rim and shone their torches in the opening. A stone staircase led straight down. As the torch lights played over the staircase's sidewalls, they noticed that, about thirty feet beneath the church's foundations, black stone slabs covered the walls.

They climbed down the thirty-inch-high steps with difficulty until they reached the black slabs, which appeared to be neither granite nor marble. In the glaring artificial light, the material appeared slightly diaphanous. It had a crystalline structure. Mineralogists could have identified it as alabandite — a sulphide mineral found in meteorites. There are no alabandite quarries on Earth. The mineral only occurs in the form of small crystals and tumble stones the size of pebbles. Here, the alabandite slabs extended over *thousands* of square feet.

They were covered in bas-reliefs reminiscent of Mayan art found about seventy years earlier in Quiriguá in Guatemala. The shimmering reliefs awakened long-forgotten, atavistic fears in the men. They represented bizarre creatures far beyond even the most spine-chilling imaginings of the old Mayans. At least the Mayan gods and monsters had remained anthropomorphic or shared traits with animals that roamed the jungles surrounding the Mayan cities. The creatures depicted here were so alien the human mind could barely hold their images. No doubt the reliefs told a story that, given time, could be deciphered. That wasn't the team's purpose. They continued their descent in awed silence as the ghastly shapes reluctantly faded back into darkness after their passage.

The four reached the bottom of the stairs an hour later. During the descent, the temperature had steadily declined, and the cold condensed their breath into wispy plumes of fog. Their lights failed to probe the furthest recesses of the monumental corridor that led them from the stairwell into an immense, oval chamber. The three men gasped in disbelief as they were met by a green, spectral glow generated by phosphorescent lichen. They warily brushed their fingers against the walls, which consisted of rough stone, and admired the eighty-foot-high massive pillars supporting the fan vault. The same type of terrible carvings they'd seen in the staircase covered the walls and pillars. The centre of the chamber held a pedestal or altar with a large ovoid on top. In the torches' beams, the shape revealed itself as organic. Skin folds curled from one end to another; veins ran close beneath the seaweed-green dermis. Its surface was irregular and made the whole look asymmetrical.

'The chamber is intact. I have no further need of you,' the leader declared. Noticing the others were about to protest, she snapped, 'Go back to the surface at once! You have one hour. Drive to the agreed spot and wait there. I'll give you a sign when to return to the church.' She patted the holster at her side, under her fur coat. It contained a flare gun. 'Now, hurry.'

Without a word, the others turned on their heels and marched back to the staircase. The woman watched them go. When they were well on their way, she looked back at the thing on the altar and switched off her torch. The phosphorescent lichen provided just about enough light to make out the cruel shapes of seamlessly intertwined horrors on the room's pillars. Disregarding the cold, she slipped out of her fur overcoat. Underneath, she wore a woollen pullover, a pair of mountaineering trousers, and sturdy, knee-length boots. She folded the thick coat, sat down on it, crossed her legs, and lit a cigarette. As soon as she'd finished smoking it, she flicked the butt at the ovoid and lit another one.

After an hour had passed, and a small mound of cigarette butts lay at the foot of the altar, the woman got up and languorously stretched her back. She stopped to study a carving on one of the pillars. It represented a snake-like creature consisting entirely of sharp corners and hooks, with eyes along the sides of its body and a vertical, toothy maw that opened in its belly. She grinned and ran her fingers along its shape. Then she turned her attention back to the thing on the altar. Standing fifteen feet away from it, she began chanting in a deep baritone. The song's words were guttural — no human speech could emulate these sounds. The incantation was slow at first. Then the rhythm, punctuated by throaty grunts, picked up speed until, after about ten minutes, the singing turned wild and frenzied. Her voice covered six octaves and reverberated throughout the chamber. The woman remained motionless with her arms spread as if crucified.

The shape on the altar unfolded. The skin folds belonged to bat-like wings that enclosed and hid the awakening creature's body. Opening, they revealed the being they'd enfolded for countless years. The grooves on the ovoid's bottom also came alive in a squirming movement as a mass of tentacles uncoiled. They slithered over the floor and waved in the air as if tasting their surroundings. While the monster further uncurled, it produced a long, booming howl from its circular, razor-fanged maw amid a restless mass of boneless limbs. The air crackled with sudden energy. The newborn began to glow and eventually filled the room with blinding light.

On the other side of the flooded plain, the Belgian, French, and British soldiers became aware of a deep sound travelling over the water. Risking a peek over the rim of their trenches, they saw, in a flash, a yellow-green light beam shooting up from the ruined Zoetevoorde church. Then darkness returned. The howling noise stopped. For half an hour, all was normal again.

Some soldiers doubted their eyes; others believed it was a sign from God and prayed. There was talk in the trenches about the Germans testing a new weapon. Fear took hold of those soldiers who had escaped the test attacks with chlorine gas in Langemarck-Poelcapelle a year and a half ago. They remembered with horror the grey-green clouds drifting in their direction for the first time, their comrades dying in excruciating pain from asphyxiation as the chlorine burnt their throats and lungs. Maybe this was a new type of gas attack. They put on their gas masks and ran to wake their sleeping mates so that they could take precautions as well.

Nothing could have prepared them for what followed.