

## The Grand Eraglio

For months large ice barriers had blocked any traffic coming in and out of the town of Florence, Wisconsin. It was a hopeless endeavor for anything more than a horse to bring in mail and medicine if the weather permitted, which lately had been a rare occurrence. Luckily, today had been exceptionally mild, and the mail had made it in.

Because of this, Sepp walked with a tinge of excitement. Throughout the day, the warming weather hugged everyone and gave the town a sense of new romance. Sepp couldn't help but think he was one of those fabled fur traders, walking down the Menomonee River as in the stories he had heard in his childhood.

There were tracks in the melting snow. It was funny to watch Ames sniff them and bark at all of the animals in the woods who had come out for spring. Ames, who was a little bigger than a ragdoll, barked at every single rabbit and robin they passed in the woods. Yet, with even a single breeze, Ames was swept from his feet and clung to Sepp to avoid being blown away. One could not help but laugh at the adorable straw-colored puppy, his confidence, and his naïveté.

It was stunning to witness the woods waking up from its winter slumber. It was the closest thing to the Garden of Eden Sepp had witnessed in his short sixteen years. It was music to hear the melting snow drip from the trees, and it was pleasant to feel the sweet wind ripple over his skin. The fresh aroma of the uncovered pine trees and rich soil hung in the crisp Wisconsin air.

When they got to town, Sepp carried Ames around in his arms like a baby, showing him to all of the children. When they finally got to the post office, the large Cornish

shopkeeper, Mr. Trewern, greeted Sepp with a hearty nod, "Hello Sepp, mail is in today! How were the findings?"

Sepp replied, " the mine's getting slow, and they've started to take out some of the carts in the old shafts. I've been sorting through junk all day, and it's all earth and no iron."

"Same as everyone, I suppose," replied Mr. Trewern. "Kurt, your father, is doing nothing but work and you know," he hesitated, "the money is not around like it used to be."

Sepp was handed the letter waiting for him and tucked it away in the inside pocket of his filthy, threadbare blue wool shirt. It was turning black and was worn thin at the elbows from sorting iron at the mines. He resented this shirt and Kunidert, his father whom everyone knew simply as 'Kurt.'

Kurt worked in the iron mines too. He worked under the frost and ice deep underground where the iron was. He was known to be one of the hardest and most diligent workers and was respected by all of the older residents of Florence. Rarely was he ever seen, as he spent days at a time down in the shafts where the danger was. There was little oxygen deep in the earth, and men often died, were injured, or were trapped from the dangerous mine conditions. These men were greedy and died trying to mine more iron for more profit. Kurt was not one of these men. He worked because he was able. Sepp hated his simpleness.

It was getting cooler and the day's blue sky took leave for the night. The tiny but tough Ames was worn out from the day's activities. Sepp started back home, clutching the brown, furry lump to his chest. He could feel his heartbeat and his warm breath on his arm.

As the two left town, all of the day's activities were winding down. Sepp and Ames walked past the church and the baseball fields, where the younger boys were in the last

innings of their game. The boys were using a wheelbarrow handle as a bat and old chair cushions for bases. Sepp and Ames continued past the brick building where the boys went to school. These were the children of the prospectors, the bankers, and the lawyers. They wore white shirts, slacks, and ties.

These boys were worthless in Sepp's eyes. Sepp knew he would achieve more than all the school boys, and felt ashamed of his dirty wool shirt, his dungarees faded white and ragged with wear, his small home in the country, and his father. Sepp silently shed a few angry tears and buried his face into Ames' plush puppy fur. Ames licked Sepp's face and whimpered, and Sepp could feel Ames' little heart quivering.

On the way home, Sepp took the envelope out of his shirt and opened it. It was a letter from Sam, his best friend who had gone off to school in Chicago. He had gotten these letters before. In each one Sam wrote about all of the amazing things he had seen in Chicago and how well he had been doing. Without reading it, Sepp tore up the letter and threw it on the ground. He hated northern Wisconsin, all the mines, and all the snow.

On the outside of the town was an old theatre that was shut down when the banks squeezed the town. The once-lit marquee read 'The Grand Eraglio' in dull crimson letters. The glass from the ticket office was removed as well as the teak dragons and trim that used to top the pagoda-style roof. They were either taken by the bank or stolen.

Coming from inside was a racket of sloppy, drunk jazz and the jocund uproar of voices. This was the barrelhouse. It was known that this was here the miners, the gangsters, and the drunks came at night. A rush of energy and excitement went through Sepp. He was not allowed to be here— it was Kurt's rule.

Familiar voices from the theatre rattled into the forest. With a slight hesitation, Sepp tied the sleeping Ames to a birch tree in the back of the theatre and defied Kurt, throwing himself into the smoky doorway of the barrelhouse.

Inside the former lobby of 'The Grand Eraglio' was the unmistakable stench of strong grain alcohol. A dozen or so impromptu card tables were constructed in the center of the room, with a large bar counter in the back. Two black men were playing a piano and a bass which looked as if they were salvaged from a burnt-down house, and a white man was behind an equally decrepit drum set. It was Friday night, the place was packed, and the bootleg liquor was flowing.

The room was filled with greasy-looking men in ill-fitting suits and desperate-looking women in short dresses who pounced like hungry cats on any man who seemed to have a few dollars. The room was in utter disarray and was matched by the tumultuous music.

"Hey old Sepp, is that you?" It was another boy who worked at the mine. He was known as Monk because his father was the priest of the Menomonee church. "What are you doing here? Old Kurt finally let you have some fun?"

Sepp saw Monk sitting at a table with some older guys he had seen before at the mine. "No, I ain't seen him in three days. He works so damn much, but he still don't have money for us. I'm getting real tired of him," Sepp responded. "I ain't going to work in the mine forever like him."

"Yeah, Sepp. Kurt's smart you know, but he doesn't treat you like a man. He loves you much, but he's stern as a tree trunk." Monk bought Sepp a mug of the grain alcohol mixed with water and syrup.

“What is this place? The sheriff don’t come around here?” inquired Sepp, who was amazed by the raucousness of the barrelhouse. “How’d they get liquor?”

“You really shouldn’t be nosy you know. But if you gotta know, it all comes from those guys.” Monk nodded to a group of rakishly dressed men in the back corner by the bar accompanied by some pretty blonde women, all of whom Sepp had never seen before.

“They run the booze in from Canada. They pay off the cops and do whatever they want.” A jolt of intrigue shot through Sepp. Look at their shiny, polished shoes! Look at those beautiful blondes! That was the way to live, not like a miner, and not like Kurt.

Sepp and the boys had a few more rounds of the booze. It was rough at first, but after a while it didn’t taste too bad anymore. It was approaching midnight--Kurt would be waiting for Sepp at home--but Sepp had no intention of leaving.

The bootleggers were going around to all the tables; they were looking for something. Surprisingly two of the men approached Sepp’s table and introduced themselves. “Hello boys, I’m Snake, and this is Billy,” announced a short and handsome man who looked a few years older than Sepp. He had enticing green eyes and was dressed in a fine pinstriped suit with gleaming black shoes. Billy was a large, brutish man of about the same age as Snake. He wore a cream-colored suit with black-and-white saddle shoes. He had a thin smile and didn’t seem to talk very much.

“You guys have tools we can borrow? We need a shovel and a pick if any of you boys would be so kind,” asked Snake. “You help us out; we’ll return the favor.” At this moment, Sepp peeped up like an excited child.

“I have some of my dad’s tools at home,” Sepp volunteered.

“Perfect,” replied Snake with a wide smile, “Let’s go.”

Sepp got up and followed the men outside where there was a green Ford Model A. Before they embarked, Sepp ran to where he left Ames, untied him, and then returned. Sepp, Snake, Billy, and Ames drove off to Sepp's house.

Pulling into the gravel patch in front of the house, Snake told Sepp, "OK kid, go get the stuff and hurry up." Sepp got out and ran to the wooden shack he called home. On the front door there was a scribbled note:

*Sepp,*

*Where are you? I'm in town looking for you.  
I just got done working an 18-hour shift, and am very tired.  
Please come home soon and go to bed. Please be safe son.*

*Love,  
Kurt*

Sepp scanned the note and then ran into the house. He looked under Kurt's bed where he knew Kurt left his tools. He grabbed the shovel and pick axe and then returned to the car. He put the tools in the trunk and then joined the sleeping Ames in the backseat. The car got going, and not long after, Sepp dozed off and joined Ames in sleep.

Sepp was awoken by Snake's cool voice, "kid, get out and dig. The car is stuck. Hurry up." Sepp jumped out of the car and surveyed the surroundings. They were on a frozen part of the Menomonee River about eight miles or so from his house and the car's back wheels were lodged about six inches in the snow. Snake handed Sepp the shovel and he got digging right away. Ames was also awake by this time. Sepp let him out of the car so he could run around on the frozen river, and then got back to digging.

The job was finished in about twenty minutes. Sepp could see Ames a hundred yards down the river; the puppy was sniffing some dead branches. "Come Ames!" commanded Sepp. Ames looked up and started back to the car. It was funny to see the tiny

Ames running through the snow. His pink, wet tongue was hanging out of his mouth, and his short legs kept falling through the snow. Snake and Billy joined Sepp in laughter and watched Ames slowly trying to make it to the car.

Ames was about 75 yards away from the car when all of a sudden, the puppy vanished. The three looked at each other confused. Where'd he go? Sepp's heart dropped through his stomach. Sepp exploded out of the car and sprinted over the snow.

"Ames! Here boy! Ames! Come here!" There was no answer.

Then he saw it. The end of Ames' rope leash was sticking out of a hole in the ice; it led into the frozen, black water under the ice. The hair stood up everywhere on Sepp's body and suddenly every heartbeat felt like a cannon ball striking his chest. Sepp reached the hole and pulled the rope. Out of the water came the tiny and tough Ames, silent and motionless. His eyes were closed and his fur was soaking wet with ice water. Sepp ripped off Ames leash and held him close to his own chest just as he had done a few hours ago. There was no heartbeat; there was no warm breath; there was nothing.

Sepp's eyes flooded with hot tears and he dropped to the ice. He pounded his raw fists into the ice; they started to bleed, but Sepp only hit harder. "Let's go, kid," came Snake's voice from behind. Sepp did not reply. "I said let's go, now!" Again, Sepp said nothing. Billy sharply struck Sepp with the shovel, and Sepp now laid motionless on the river alongside his companion Ames.

It was morning. This day was as warm and beautiful as the previous day. Sepp's eyes opened to a blurry but comfortable room that he soon realized to be his own home. He was lying in a warm bed and looked around to see a distressed Kurt sitting in a chair

next to him. There were tears slowly dripping from his sunken and tired eyes. He looked at Sepp lovingly. Sepp never had seen his father cry before.

After a few minutes, Kurt cracked a teary smile and addressed Sepp, “ My son, what have you done? Where were you?” Sepp stared at his father but could say nothing. “My tools are gone, and I can’t go to work. Besides, I am too tired; I’ve been up all night.” Sepp saw a basket at the other end of the room. He strained his eyes to see Ames. He looked as if he were only sleeping. Sepp looked back at Kurt. “Son, unknown to you until now, I was saving up to send you to school; you weren’t meant to be a miner like me, Sepp.”

Sepp choked on a breath and then stared back at his father. He loved his father. He missed Ames. He was ashamed to live. Kurt leaned down into the bed and held Sepp in his arms, as if he were a child. If only he could have watched over Ames as his father watched over him. Sepp realized from this moment that he was blessed. He was proud of his home, of his ratty blue wool shirt, and of his father.