

18+

Don't fear
I'm not the foe
I'm part of you
And you
You're part of me

The Limbo Zone

by Yuri Melnikov

Yuri Melnikov
The Limbo Zone

«Издательские решения»

Melnikov Y.

The Limbo Zone / Y. Melnikov — «Издательские решения»,

ISBN 978-5-00-702267-5

The Limbo Zone is not a novel in the conventional sense, nor is it merely a collection of short stories. It is a complex, polyphonic statement: a novella in fifteen parts, orbited by eight companion stories, and concluded by a Song with a brief postscript. Together, they form a structure resembling a wheel with spokes — or, to use the text's own metaphor, a seam, that very seam by which, in the words of the tailor Noah Goldstein, the past is sewn to the present, life to death, a name to a body.

ISBN 978-5-00-702267-5

© Melnikov Y.

© Издательские решения

Содержание

Prologue	6
Chapter 1. Vertigo	10
Chapter 2. Dust	14
Chapter 3. The Farm	18
Chapter 4. Smoke	23
Chapter 5. The Blue Dress	27
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	30

The Limbo Zone

Yuri Melnikov

Translator Yuri Vadimovich Melnikov

© Yuri Melnikov, 2026

© Yuri Vadimovich Melnikov, translation, 2026

ISBN 978-5-0070-2267-5

Created with Ridero smart publishing system

Prologue

November oozed through the brick rubble, through the slate-blue pumice of the fog, settling on the shoulders of an alien coat — taken from an alien shoulder, too vast and loose. Hans Weber — that was the name given to the void inside this broadcloth, a name written in a calligraphic, accounting hand on a certificate issued by an office that no longer existed. He strode down Bahnhofstrasse.

He walked, listening to how the city receded before him: not out of respect, no, but out of a cindered, frozen indifference. Hannover was waking up with eyes wide open, like smashed storefronts. The sun, a tarnished brass button on the tunic of a dead sky, barely glimmered through the dust. Hans Weber, non-combatant, commercial representative, Protestant, was looking for his wife. He was looking for two boys, Klaus and Dieter, whose voices still splashed in his left ear like seawater trapped in a mother-of-pearl shell — water that was slowly but inevitably becoming salty blood.

From the disemboweled bellies of half-ruined houses, from behind curtains stitched from burlap, the radio seeped out. The airwaves in the Gray Zone suffered from an incurable arrhythmia; they were sick with frequencies that didn't exist on any tuning scale. No one knew whose hand turned the switch, but from the speakers, through the crackle of static, glassy electricity, flowed a melody as thick as molasses — «Lili Marleen» — slowed down, as if a pale finger were dragging the phonograph needle along the grooves.

Vor der Kaserne, vor dem großen Tor...

The music bogged down in the air, then severed, and the time of the Voice began.

The Voice was reading names.

A dry, barking, fractured Berlin tenor with a faint Rhenish accent — the voice of the — dead? — Doctor from Alexanderplatz, who now, from the cellars of a Moscovite non-existence, read the lists. He read them with that peculiar, pitiless, hypnotic intonation used for reading inventory ledgers.

Esther Rosenblum, nineteen-twelve. Moritz Klein, nineteen-hundred and three. Ruth Klein...

The names fell like measured drops from a rusted tap. These were the lists of people currently trading ersatz bread on the next street, people who were alive, breathing, but in the voice of the radio-wraith they had already turned into numbers, into ash, into a thick, sweetish smoke trailing over their houses.

Noah Goldstein, born eighteen-ninety-two. Place of death: Treblinka. Date of death: August fourteenth, nineteen-hundred and forty-two.

Weber pressed his palms to his ears — palms that were clean, with neatly trimmed nails — but the voice didn't come from without; it came from within, from that place where bone joins memory, and there was no plugging it.

In this world, this incorrect, defective world, there was no Treblinka. In this world, the war had ended in October. Goldstein is alive. He sits in his workshop. He sews a suit. He threads the needle on the first try. He smiles. There is no date. There is no place. The very word does not exist.

No, Weber was not listening to the names. No, Weber was walking to the tailor, moving his legs like a blind, swaddled pupa — a pupa waiting for a transformation, but having forgotten which specific butterfly it was destined to become.

The cellar of the workshop smelled of chalk, heated wool, and dust — the scent of halted time. Goldstein, an old Jew with eyes the color of wet asphalt, sat by a kerosene lamp. He was sewing. The needle entered the fabric and exited the fabric, in-out, in-out, and every stitch was a tiny decision, a minuscule attempt to sew back together a time torn to shreds.

«Your suit, *Herr* Weber. It is almost ready,» the tailor said without raising his head, and his voice rustled like dry leaves over cobblestones. «Good fabric. Pre-war. Everything is easier in a good suit. Even not being yourself — that too is easier.»

Weber sat on a chair, and the chair immediately became what every object in this zone was: a void with legs. The cellar swayed. The space of the room shivered like heated air over a brazier, and through the soot-stained walls, an endless, squelching mud seeped through.

Noah was not sitting by the lamp. Noah was standing.

He stood in a cold wind, and he wore no vest, only a thin, soaked-through striped *Häftling* uniform, and behind his back stretched rows of wooden, geometrically perfect barracks, receding into a gray eternity the color of a Wehrmacht uniform.

«*You wanted to burn me, didn't you, Herr Lang?*» the tailor said, and his lips did not move, but the words resonated, echoing in Weber's temples with the hum of an electric furnace. «*But the matches were damp... yes? You didn't sleep well tonight, Herr Lang?*»

The humming ceased. The pendulum ticked again. The lamp smoked.

«You are quite pale, *Herr Weber*,» Goldstein looked over his slipped glasses, and in his gaze was unbearable, calm precision with which the dead look upon those who have forgotten to die. «Go to the station. A train arrived from Stettin today. Perhaps your family is there? If a man searches, it means he is still alive. When a man stops searching, it means he is already...»

«No,» Weber said quickly. Too quickly. Like a lie. «They stayed in Berlin. Helga would not have left Berlin.»

«Helga?» The tailor tilted his head. «A beautiful name. I had a client — Helga. A different Helga, of course. Before the war. In Berlin. She loved the color blue. She said: blue is the color of loyalty. I sewed her a dress — blue, with a white collar. A dress like that...» He traced his fingers through the air, drawing the contour of something that existed only in his memory. «The kind of dress in which one could survive the end of the world, and after the end of the world someone would look at you and say: what a beautiful dress.»

Weber was no longer listening. He burst out into the street, greedily gulping the frost-nipped air, pushing away the old man's words, but the street was no longer a street.

There was a crunch. On the corner, hissing with its wide tires, stood a British patrol Willys. Two men in olive drab were lazily smoking. They were searching. They were looking at faces.

And then Weber smelled it.

A thick, animal, sickeningly sour smell of panic, of split adrenaline, of metallic sweat. The smell of fear. He knew it thoroughly. Back in August, in the SS training camps, he had inhaled this steam rising from those who were brought to him, the smell of those who realized they had become meat. He had been the conductor of this smell. He had been its creator.

But now there was no one else near. The smell was coming from his own armpits. From his skin. From his pores. He had stepped into the line. He had become the prey.

Beside himself, Fritz Lang — alias Hans Weber — bolted into a narrow alleyway. He ran, gasping, stumbling over bricks, and the alleyway folded like an accordion, narrowing, the walls rising upward, covered in dirty spring snow. Somewhere far away, or perhaps very close, inside his own cranium, a shepherd dog burst into a bark. One. Then another. The barking meant the scent had been caught.

The sound of his own footsteps began to change. The ragged breath, the thud of boots on stone — all of it smoothly, terrifyingly transitioned into the rhythmic, sated purr of an engine.

Fritz blinked. He was no longer running.

He was sitting on the soft, creaking leather seat of an army *Kübelwagen*. His hands, encased in the perfect black leather of officer's gloves, rested calmly on his knees. The car rolled slowly through the March mud of the Warsaw Ghetto. And ahead of the car, gasping in animal terror, bleeding his feet to pulp, stumbling, ran a man in a coat that was too vast, taken from someone else's shoulder.

And this running man, this hunted beast looking back at the dogs, was himself.

And the one sitting in the car, lazily watching the pursuit through the clean glass of the windshield, the one who felt the absolute, geometric correctness of what was happening — that was also himself. Cause and effect had traded places. The executioner was hunting his own mercy.

The alleyway ended. Weber pressed his palms against the damp wall near the railway station. His heart was hammering. There were no dogs. There never had been. He — was Hans Weber. From Bremen. Commercial representative.

The train from Stettin stood on the second track. Long, filthy, with smashed windows. People flowed out of the carriages slowly, the way people emerge from dark water — heavily, reluctantly. Women with bundles. Old men. All with the same expression on their faces, the faces of those who have arrived, but have not come home.

He stood on the platform and watched as space began to betray him again.

Every woman in a gray coat for a second became Helga. Every boy clinging to a hem — Dieter. But the longer he looked at the train, the more the smashed windows of the carriages were boarded up with planks. The doors grew heavy external bolts.

It was a different train. And the platform was different.

People did not exit slowly. They were unloaded. Fast, fast, *schnell*, spotlights struck the eyes, barking tore the eardrums. He stood on this platform, and before him wound an endless, submissive line, and his own hand, in its black glove, rose and fell. To the right. To the left. To live. To the oven. To the right. To the left. Every movement — a stitch of the needle, a tiny decision, a tiny choice. Meticulous. Like a column of figures.

And then he saw them.

In the crowd of refugees descending onto the Hannover platform of thirty-nine, came Helga, Klaus, and little Dieter. Alive. Real. Dieter was crying, clutching a wooden toy to his chest. They had escaped. They had arrived. He only had to take a step, call out to them, embrace them. To start a new, nameless, quiet life in this zone of Limbo.

He took a half-step. Klaus looked back, and froze.

No. He would find them. He would embrace Helga. Klaus would say «Papa.» Dieter would cry — he always cried when he was afraid, and then, when he stopped being afraid, he cried too. They would live — here, in this zone, in this Limbo, and he would be Hans Weber, commercial representative from Bremen, and no one — no one — would ever know.

And everything would be — fine. But he had already said this — he had already told himself this before, and even earlier, and even earlier than earlier. And it all repeats, like a skipping record.

And he would lie beside her at night, and the ceiling would be white, and in the darkness — gray, and then black, and then the ceiling would vanish, and in place of the ceiling — smoke. And he would know where that smoke came from. And in that world, in that magnificent world where the Reich stands for a thousand years, Helga would have been washing his uniform. And Klaus would have been marching, straight and true, as they taught him in school. And Dieter would have stopped crying, because men do not cry, because crying is weakness, and weakness is a «no.» And in the mornings, smoke would rise from the chimney behind the hill, and they would not ask — whose? And he would know, and this knowledge would be familiar, as rain is familiar, as wind is familiar, as everything to which one becomes accustomed is familiar.

And Noah Goldstein would not be sewing suits. And Noah Goldstein — would not exist. And that other Helga, who loved blue — would not exist. And the blue dress with the white collar — would not exist. And the boy on the platform — would not exist. And the boy would not have looked back.

And if this perfect world had won, if it had arrived right this moment...

Space clanged. Again. The trap snapped shut. He looked at his wife's blonde hair — and saw her in a baggy, filthy *Häftling* robe. He saw Klaus, clutching a pale Dieter to himself. He saw how his own, perfect hand, encased in black leather... pointed them to the left. Into the oven. Because order demands purity. Because the machine knows no mercy.

Weber stood on the platform, not daring to approach them, not daring to touch them. He watched as someone's family passed by, dissolving into the crowd of strangers, saved people whom he had not killed.

The train left. And the station left with it. Evening found him on Bahnhofstrasse.

The sun had gone — swiftly, thievishly, like a man who does not wish to be a witness. Hannover lay in the twilight, and the twilight suited it, the way a coat fits when tailored to a precise measure — the twilight hid what could not be seen in the light and exposed what the light hid.

From the barbershop on the corner, the voice of the dead propagandist could be heard again, monotonously reading the names of the dead-who-never-were. He did not stop — neither by day nor by night, neither in this world nor in that — he read as a river reads, as rain reads, as fire reads: without beginning, without end, without a comma, without mercy.

Weber stopped. He listened.

He listened to the names of people who in this world were alive, but in that other one — the one he had drafted, designed, calculated, the one where everything was correct, and pure, and according to the law — in that world, they did not exist. Not a single one. They were — figures. They were — smoke. They were — the ash that fertilized the lawn by their house, on which the grass later grew, and that grass was green, because ash is a good fertilizer; there were calculations about that too, and the calculations added up, and the columns were straight, and the handwriting — meticulous.

Rachel Kowalski, nineteen-hundred and ten...

He listened, and the names entered him as a needle enters fabric — rhythmically, precisely, stitch by stitch — and every stitch sewed him to this place, to this pavement, to this world where they are all — alive, where the tailor sews, where the boy looks back on the platform, where the woman in the gray coat leads a child by the hand — to this world where he — is nobody.

A commercial representative from Bremen. Protestant. Did not serve. Looking for his family.

He stood there, and in the window of the barbershop — in that cracked window that doubled everyone — was his reflection. Vague. Faceless. Beside it — another, small, stooped, with glasses and a goatee.

Goldstein? Again? — No. A flare. A crack. A shadow from a lamp. No one.

And the voice read:

Fritz Lang...

He recoiled.

— *nineteen hundred...*

But the voice continued with a different date, a different name, a different fate.

Not his. For now — not his.

The man without a name stood on Bahnhofstrasse, in a city pretending to be a city, in a zone that was neither a zone, nor a world, nor a purgatory, but a seam. A line along which one world is sewn to another, stitch by stitch, and if you pull the thread — both will unravel.

He stood and listened to the voice reading the names of the people he had not killed. In this world, he had not killed them.

And this «not» — thinner than a thread, thinner than a spiderweb, thinner than a blade drawn between two worlds — was the only thing standing between him and who he was.

Between him — and who he wanted to be.

And on the second track stood the empty train from Stettin, and in the empty carriages, the wind played, and the wind smelled of nothing.

Of absolutely nothing.

But above the station, above this dreary city, above this entire gray, torn-apart zone, on the very edge of one's senses, where smell ceases to be physiology and becomes a state of the soul, there trailed a thick, sweetish, unbearably familiar scent of crematorium smoke that did not exist.

A blue dress with a white collar.

Chapter 1. Vertigo

The distance from Oranienburg to Lemberg is one thousand and eighty kilometers along the Reichsautobahn — if the Reichsautobahn still existed, if the bridges haven't been blown up, if the gasoline hasn't run dry somewhere between Breslau and Krakow, if the convoy hasn't been strafed from the air, if headquarters still stands where it stood yesterday, if yesterday was still yesterday, and not some geological era separated from this morning by an impenetrable layer of burnt paper, ash, and human numbness.

The distance from Lemberg to Berlin is seven hundred and ninety.

The distance from husband to wife is immeasurable.

Fritz Lang, *SS-Untersturmführer*, adjutant to the commandant of the special detention camp *KL Sachsenhausen* — so it was stated in his documents, and «special detention» meant a form of detention where the contents had a tendency to diminish, and Fritz had filled out these documents himself, with his own hand, in a neat accounting script, because meticulousness was not a trait to him, but a spine — stood in the corridor of the requisitioned voivodeship administration building, pressing a black Bakelite telephone receiver to his ear. It was heavy as a knuckleduster, cold as a stone — and he listened.

He was listening to his wife's voice.

The wire — gray, coiled — stretched to the apparatus on the wall. The apparatus was screwed into the plaster with Polish screws, the plaster applied by Polish hands, which now, most likely, were digging Polish earth or were already lying in it.

But the voice came through. The voice was coming from Berlin — along a copper wire strung on wooden poles from Lemberg through Krakow, through Breslau, across fields where bomb craters hadn't yet cooled — and this in itself was a miracle, a fragile, impossible miracle: the wall, the wire, the apparatus, the receiver, the ear, the voice. This entire chain hung by a thread, on its final tension, and every sound along the way lost a piece of itself, just as water flowing through pipes in winter loses its heat. And Helga's voice, by the time it reached his ear, was no longer entirely her voice, but its shadow, its cast, its imprint in the wax of static.

«...Dieter didn't sleep all night,» Helga was saying, and her voice trembled but didn't break, and there was something in it that made Fritz want to smash the receiver against the wall and simultaneously press it so deeply into his ear that the voice would penetrate bone and marrow, reaching that part of the mind where things are kept before they become memories. «He heard it, we all heard it — they bombed Spandau, we were in the Schmidts' basement because ours is flooded — and Klaus was silent all night, Fritz, silent, he didn't cry, didn't call for me — he just sat there with his eyes open. And I don't know what's worse: when a child screams — or when a child is silent.»

«Helga. Helga, calm down.»

«I've packed two suitcases. One for the children's things. The other for documents and winter clothes. Mother called from Stettin, it's quiet there, the British are only bombing the factories, and there are no factories in Stettin, there's a port, but a port isn't a factory, Fritz — the trains are still running...»

«Helga, listen to me.»

«No,» and in that «no» of hers lay that specific feminine firmness, harder than any order, because an order can be disobeyed, but a wife's «no» cannot. It is not subject to appeal, it has no higher authority, it is not logged in the incoming register. «No, Fritz, you listen...»

«I am listening,» Fritz said, and his voice became the one he used not with his wife, but with his subordinates: even, measured, the voice of a man in control of the situation. «And I am telling you: stay in Berlin. The roads are the worst place to be right now. You will stay home. Stettin is a

port, but a port is a target, Helga. A port means ships, supplies, it's what they bomb second, right after the factories. Berlin is a fortress. The Führer is in Berlin. As long as the Führer...»

«The Führer is not in Berlin,» Helga said. «The Führer is in Prussia. Everyone knows.»

Fritz gripped the receiver. His palm began to sweat. How did she know? The location of Headquarters — *Wolfsschanze*, Rastenburg, East Prussia — was a secret, but secrets in Berlin lasted no longer than butter on a hot skillet: they hissed and evaporated. Frau Schmidt knew what the General Staff knew, and she knew it earlier, because the General Staff received their briefings through communication channels, while Frau Schmidt received hers from Frau Müller, from Grossman the grocer, from the dentist who treated the Chief of Staff's adjutant's wife — through that human wiring that functions without poles, without current, without screws, and which no paratrooper drop could ever sever.

«Helga. Listen to me. Please... Turn on the radio. The Führer knows what he is doing. Yes, the Russians stabbed us in the back,» Fritz said. «Yes, Stalin broke the pact. But you have to understand, Helga,» and here his voice took on that didactic, almost paternal intonation that so irritated Helga and which he himself mistook for persuasiveness. «You have to understand politics, at least a little: Churchill hates the communists. The Entente won't make a deal with Stalin. The British, the French, they will stop the moment they see red flags at the Vistula. That is a law, Helga. It is a law of history... We have reserves...»

«Fritz!» Helga's scream struck his ear so sharply he flinched. There was no SS officer's wife in that scream anymore. There was only a mother beast saving her young. «The bombs don't care about Churchill! They don't care about Stalin! They don't have eyes, Fritz! They fall from above! They don't care what they fall on — a tank factory or Dieter's crib! I am leaving. I am hanging up and taking the children.»

«Helga, I forbid...»

The line severed — not gradually, not fading out, but instantly, the way scissors cut, the way an umbilical cord is cut — and on the other side of the incision remained everything: the apartment, the coat rack, the smell of coffee, Dieter's voice from the bathroom, Klaus with his open eyes, the two suitcases by the door. And on this side — silence. The hollow, final silence of a dead wire, the silence of a snapped thread, a silence without even a dial tone, because a dial tone is still a system, it is still order, still a connection, and here there was nothing. A severed edge. A crater. Emptiness.

«Helga?»

He pressed the cradle down. Released it. Pressed it again. Cranked the handle. Cranked it once more. The copper wire, seven hundred and ninety kilometers of stretched copper — was silent. Somewhere between Krakow and Breslau, or between Breslau and Liegnitz, or in an open field where a pole stood amidst an autumn furrow — somewhere out there, the thread had snapped: an artillery shell, sappers, a soldier's boot, the wind, or simply the weight of the world bearing down on a thin vein — and the conversation was over.

Two suitcases. One for the children's things. The other for documents and winter clothes.

The door at the end of the corridor flew open — it didn't just open, it flew wide, slamming against the wall — and Walter Bremme, *SS-Rottenführer* of the signals corps, rushed toward him. The usually polished, pedantic signalman now looked as if he had been dragged by a rope over gravel. His tunic was unbuttoned, his eyes widened into two saucers brimming with pure, unadulterated terror.

«Herr Untersturmführer!»

«Bremme.»

«The Russians, *Herr Untersturmführer*,» and the words tumbled out of him out of order, like belongings tumbling from a suitcase opened on the run, «paratroopers — airborne drop — near Lublin — and near Radom — and, they say, near Krakow — at night — massive — no connection...»

«No connection with whom?»

«With anyone.»

That «with anyone» dropped into the corridor and lay there — it didn't bounce, didn't roll, it simply settled, filling the space between the walls, between the stucco molding and the floor, between the painted-over eagle and the portrait of the Führer on the opposite wall. It settled and became the very air they now had to breathe.

«Not with Army Group Headquarters,» Bremme continued, his voice acquiring the flat drone of a man who has crossed over from panic into mere recitation. «Not with Berlin. Not with the Krakow commandature. The lines are cut. They're cutting the wires, *Herr Untersturmführer*. They are — everywhere... General Guderian's tanks are stalled without fuel — the supply trains are burning... The Poles have struck our rear — the remnants hiding in the forests have joined up with the Soviets... And in the west...»

Bremme swallowed hard.

«The French have crossed the Rhine, *Herr Untersturmführer*. They aren't even shooting. They are just driving trucks down our autobahns. The British are already in Belgium... We have no troops there. The Reich is squeezed from three sides.»

«What about the Führer?» Fritz asked. «Rastenburg?»

Bremme looked at him. And in that look — fleeting, sliding — was something Fritz had not seen on his subordinate's face even once in all their months of service: not fear; fear was the norm, fear was their working environment, fear was what they manufactured. This was something else. Bewilderment. That specific, infantile bewilderment that descends when a man discovers that the floor he was walking on has suddenly vanished.

«Rastenburg has been silent since four in the morning, *Herr Untersturmführer*. They say — airborne drop. They say — paratroopers approaching the perimeter. But these might be rumors.»

«Rumors,» Fritz repeated mechanically.

He hung up the receiver. Slowly, meticulously — precisely onto the cradle — because meticulousness cannot end, meticulousness is the last thing left when everything else has crumbled to dust. The receiver rested on the cradle, and Fritz's hands fell to his sides, and he stood in the corridor, straight-backed, buttoned to the collar, clean-shaven, flawless. He stood like a pole stands when the wire has already been cut, but the pole doesn't know it yet.

He adjusted his tunic. Ran a palm over his hair — an automatic, morning, peaceful gesture, a gesture from a world where there is a mirror, a razor, a shaving brush, hot water, the scent of *Kölnisch Wasser*, a schedule on the wall — a gesture belonging to order. He existed for the sake of order. For the sake of every object being in its place, every man in his formation, every number in its column. So that contents would arrive and diminish, but always — always be accounted for.

And now, the numbers didn't add up. Nothing added up. The world had turned out to be a meat grinder with stripped threads.

Fritz, without looking at the signalman, moved toward the exit. He stepped out onto the porch.

Lemberg lay before him — alien, made of stone, indifferent — a city that didn't care who its master was: Poles, Germans, Russians, Austrians, Turks — it had outlived them all and would outlive these. The chestnut trees on the boulevard stood in their rust-red, copper foliage, and the September morning was clear and warm, and there was something obscene about this beauty — because the world had no right to be beautiful when everything was collapsing.

A column was moving down the street — westward. A retreat was not yet called a retreat: it was called a «regrouping,» an «alignment,» a «strategic withdrawal to pre-prepared positions.» But words have a breaking point, just like wire, and when a soldier is running, no word can turn a rout into a march.

Fritz looked at the column and thought about two suitcases.

Helga was probably already at the station. Or already on a train. Or the trains weren't running — the lines cut, the wires, the paratroopers. No: to the west, towards Stettin, the lines were still intact. They had to be intact. Stettin was a port. It was the north. It was the Baltic. The Russians were in

the east. They were bombing Spandau, not Stettin. Stettin was out of the way. Stettin was on the outside. Stettin was...

The distance from Lemberg to Stettin is eight hundred and sixty kilometers.

The distance from husband to wife is infinity.

He walked back into the building.

«Bremme!»

«Herr Untersturmführer?»

«A car. Fuel. Rations for three days. A map. We are leaving in an hour. The business trip is over.»

«To where, Herr Untersturmführer?»

Fritz didn't answer. Not east — the Russians were there. Not west — the French were there. North?... To Helga. To the two suitcases by the apartment door on Schillerstrasse, if the suitcases weren't already buried under plaster, if the door was still there, if the apartment was still standing.

He was left alone. He stood by the window, wearing a uniform that just yesterday had signified absolute power, and today signified an absolute target. He picked up the heavy Bakelite receiver again, pressed it to his ear. He listened to the silence — long and intently, the way a doctor listens to a stopped heart.

And in that silence — for the first time, barely audible, on the very fringes of his consciousness — something stirred for which he had no name. Not fear — he knew fear, fear was a tool, a working material, fear he knew how to dose and tabulate.

This was different. Something that made the world, already derailed, begin to slowly, unstoppably turn. Like a massive centrifuge. Spinning, spinning, until up became down, until the soldier became a refugee, until the man who compiled the lists was himself transformed into a hunted animal on someone else's list.

But that would come later.

For now — there are the clouds. For now — the chestnut trees. For now — the sentry at the gates, finishing his cigarette with that greedy, doomed concentration of a man who suspects this cigarette is his last. For now — two suitcases, one for children's things, the second for documents and winter clothes. For now — seven hundred and ninety kilometers of silent copper.

For now — there is the distance.

Chapter 2. Dust

The road north from Lemberg begins with the fact that there is no road.

That is to say, it exists on the map: a thin red line, drawn by an imperial cartographer with the same meticulousness with which Fritz Lang traced the columns in his ledgers — a line connecting dot to dot, Lemberg to Lublin, Lublin to Warsaw, Warsaw to Danzig, Danzig to Stettin — on and on, along the red arteries of a Reich that only yesterday stretched from the Rhine to the Bug, but today was contracting like a fist from which water is leaking. The red lines on the map were becoming what they had always been: ink on paper.

On paper, a road. On the ground, a quagmire.

The *Kübelwagen* crawled along the highway like a beetle across a sodden page of newsprint. At the wheel sat Kurt Zimmer, a corporal from the Oranienburg motor pool, assigned to Fritz for the assignment along with the car — small, wiry, with a face carved from a root. He was one of those drivers who lead a car not with their hands, but with their spine, feeling every pothole as a personal insult. He was silent. He was silent because everything that could be said was being said by the road.

The road spoke of — retreat.

Passing them — heading toward Lemberg, from where they had just fled — was that which three weeks ago had been called the *Wehrmacht*: trucks with dropped tailboards where soldiers with faces the color of road mud jolted; motorcycles loaded so heavily their sidecars scraped the stones; horse-drawn wagons — horse-drawn wagons! — in an army that prided itself on tanks; and the infantry, gray-green, endless, marching out of step, without formation, without song — a mass that had lost the only thing distinguishing an army from a mob: direction.

«Where are you headed?» Fritz shouted, leaning out of the car as the *Kübelwagen* stalled once again in a bottleneck.

A lieutenant — young, with an ashen face and eyes where the spark textbooks call «fighting spirit» had already gone out — was walking beside his men, on foot. He had likely abandoned his vehicle, or lost it, or it simply no longer existed.

«To Lemberg,» the lieutenant said. «Orders are to hold Lemberg.»

«Whose orders?»

The lieutenant looked at Fritz — at the black uniform, the runes on the tabs, the *Totenkopf* on the cap — and in that gaze was the expression with which field officers looked at the SS: the way one looks at a rat that has found the cheese.

«Orders,» he repeated and walked on.

Whose orders — he didn't know. No one knew. Orders were born of the void — of rumors, of fragments of the last radiograms, of words spoken by someone to someone else an hour or a day ago. Every order contradicted the next, and together they contradicted reality, while reality contradicted itself.

And along the shoulders flowed something else.

On the right, pushing carts piled with featherbeds and pots, were those fleeing the Germans to the east. On the left, wrapped in shawls, trudged those now fleeing the Russians to the west. Counter-flows of panic, rubbing against one another.

Jews and Gypsies walked in the same dust as Poles, shoulder to shoulder, and this was wrong — not because they walked, but because they walked *together*. In that calligraphically perfect world Fritz had built, these streams could never intersect. But the ruled world was over. There remained only the unruled world, where everyone saved themselves along the same ditch.

«In October, everything was different, *Herr Untersturmführer*,» Zimmer said suddenly, his eyes never leaving the grimy windshield. «Almost a year ago...»

He jerked the wheel, swerving around a dead horse with a belly bloated like a drum.

«When we entered the Sudetenland, there was no dust. In Carlsbad, they stood along the roads. Girls threw asters onto our armor. The autumn was warm, and those flowers... they smelled of perfume, of wet asphalt, of a holiday. We drove through Europe like gods, *Herr Lang*. A girl threw one to me — a white one — right into the cab. I dried it. I wanted to bring it home to my wife.»

He fell silent.

«Did you?» Bremme asked from the back.

«Lost it. Somewhere between Prague and Breslau. It fell out of my pocket. Or I threw it away. I don't remember.»

Zimmer spat out the cracked window.

«And now we're driving through a cesspool. And no one knows which way to climb out.»

Fritz remained silent. The driver's words bounced off him without causing harm, because inside Fritz, a different mechanics was at work. On his knees lay a brown leather briefcase with the monogram *KL*. And within this forest-like, primal panic, the briefcase remained the last island of supreme, crystalline reason. Inside was a folder marked «*Geheime Reichssache*.»

His assignment to Lemberg, to this melting pot of nationalities, had not been an inspection. Oranienburg was facing a crisis that Fritz, as a good manager, was supposed to resolve. Arrests of «asocial elements» were on schedule, but the system was failing at the output: the elderly, the sick, the exhausted could not work. They took up space. They consumed rutabaga gruel. They were a loss without a profit, a line in the budget that didn't balance.

Shooting them was not cost-effective. A bullet is brass, it is gunpowder, it is logistics and the human factor. The economics of death demanded elegance.

That was precisely why Berlin had sent him to the East. Here, in Galicia, where the local population was gleefully ready to take on part of the dirty work, where antisemitism was absorbed with mother's milk, Fritz Lang sought a new solution. He held meetings. He drew diagrams. What to do with those who cannot work?

He had been one step away from a clean, almost mathematical revelation. He could already see the outlines of large, bright rooms with showerheads in the ceiling, where the problem would be solved hygienically and without the expenditure of non-ferrous metals.

But Russian paratroopers and French tanks had turned his blueprints of the future into scrap paper. His perfect Reich, where he would be the Architect of Purity, had collapsed, leaving him in the dust, fleeing north toward his wife.

«Zimmer,» Fritz ordered curtly. «Turn off. A backroad. Any of them.»

«But *Herr Untersturmführer*, it's not on the map...»

«Turn off. We need to clear the filters and try to catch a signal. We won't make twenty kilometers before nightfall in this mess.»

The *Kübelwagen* veered, bounced over a ditch, and, crushing dry thistles, left the imperial highway. The thick, roaring noise of the refugees began to fade, muffled by yellow foliage, until it turned into the dull, distant hum of an ocean.

They stopped two kilometers later, by an old stone wall. The engine coughed and died. Silence fell — that deafening silence of September nineteen-thirty-nine, in which one could still hear an acorn fall, even though high-explosive bombs were already falling twenty miles away. The silence of a pause. The silence between an exhale and an inhale.

Bremme, the signals man, immediately hopped out of the car, carried the radio onto the hood as tenderly as an infant, and tossed a thin antenna wire over an oak branch. Zimmer opened the trunk, taking out tin cans of stewed meat and bread. Fritz stepped out of the car, stretching his stiff legs. He took out a cigarette. He wiped his hands with a handkerchief — carefully, finger by finger. A gesture from that world where, after every document, one had to wash one's hands.

He lit up. The smoke mingled with the scent of damp leaves.

And then, a dog appeared from the undergrowth.

It didn't run out — it *appeared*, the way things appear in this loosened world: without warning, without reason. A minute ago, an empty field. And now — her. A large mongrel, dirty white with tan patches, so thin that every rib could be read under the skin like a string.

She stood at the boundary of light and shadow. She didn't bark. She didn't growl.

But it wasn't her emaciation that was terrifying. It was her teats — swollen, dark, weighed down toward the earth. She was a nursing mother. A mother who had plenty of milk, but those who were supposed to drink it had vanished in the craters of this mad day.

She stood and looked at them. And in her brown, transparent eyes, there was neither hunger nor supplication. There was only one question, older than human speech: *Where? Where are mine?*

Zimmer froze with the open tin.

«Come here, mutt,» he called softly, breaking off a piece of fatty meat and tossing it into the grass. «Here...»

The dog didn't even twitch an ear. She didn't need meat. She was looking for what these men in gray and black uniforms had taken from the world by the very fact of their existence.

Fritz looked into the animal's yellow eyes. And in this wordless contact, something made his throat seize. Because he knew that look. He had seen it on the *Appellplatz* in Sachsenhausen when women were being led out of the barracks, those being transferred — where? To another barracks? To another facility? To another column? — and they would turn, and their eyes would dart along the line — and the question was the same, the same, always the same: *Where? Where are mine?*

But back then, that look had been mere material to Fritz. An incoming flow. But now, on this empty field, reality buckled, slid, and in the yellow canine eyes Fritz suddenly saw Helga. He saw his wife standing in a flooded Berlin basement. Helga, clutching a numbed Klaus to her, while from above, from an indifferent sky, a bomb falls with a howl, absolutely indifferent to whose flesh it tears.

A strike of alien, unbearable pain pierced him beneath the shoulder blade. A simple human weakness, from which he had so carefully cured himself over the years — with drill practice, regulations, columns of figures — something for which he knew no name and wanted to know none — poured into him like water into a ship's hold.

«Get out!» Fritz shouted hoarsely.

He stepped forward, drawing the heavy Luger from his holster. The hand of the camp architect, always so steady, gave a small, unaccustomed tremor. He aimed the barrel at the animal, defending himself from her eyes, from her loss, from his own collapsed world.

«Get out, you beast!»

The dog wasn't frightened. She looked at the pistol, blinked slowly, and, turning just as noiselessly, dissolved into the autumn woods, taking her heavy, unrequited love with her.

Fritz stood there, breathing heavily, gripping the pistol.

And at that second, behind his back, the radio crackled loudly, strained.

«*Herr Untersturmführer...*» Bremme's voice from beneath the headphones sounded dry, like breaking kindling. The signals man wasn't looking at the apparatus, but somewhere through the hood of the car. «On frequency forty-two point three. Clear text. No cipher.»

Fritz slowly lowered the Luger, without taking his finger off the trigger.

«Report.»

«Königsberg is transmitting. Rastenburg has fallen. Soviet paratroopers have captured the headquarters train.»

Bremme swallowed.

«The Führer is dead, *Herr Lang*. He shot himself.»

The forest around them stood yellow, silent, and absolutely indifferent. Fritz looked at the piece of fatty meat in the grass, at the copper wire slung over the oak branch, at his brown briefcase with the monogram. It was over. The world ruled into columns was dead.

He holstered the pistol.

«Roll up the antenna, Bremme. Zimmer, start it up. We're moving.»

«Where to, *Herr Untersturmführer*?»

«North. To the sea.»

He had to keep moving. North. Toward Helga. Toward the two packed suitcases.

Chapter 3. The Farm

He was awakened by a touch — fingers on his shoulder, short, hard fingers smelling of gasoline and bread — and Fritz opened his eyes.

He opened his eyes — and saw himself.

He was hanging.

He hung in the aperture of the sky, within a frame composed of two blackened posts and a crossbeam — hanging, and his head was positioned incorrectly, tilted, like the head of a person listening to something very quiet, something rising from beneath the earth. But he wasn't listening; he couldn't listen, because his neck was broken, and from beneath the rope — coarse, hempen, the kind used to tie bales in the camp workshops — a tongue protruded. A blue, swollen, obscene tongue that would never again issue an order, a recommendation, or a single word.

And the face, his face, was his own: the same jawline, the same forehead, the same eyes. But the eyes were open and looking down at him, sitting in the car — looking not with reproach, or with pity, but with patience, with the infinite, mineral patience of a stone that knows that everything, sooner or later, must fall.

The hanged man swayed. The rope creaked. The creaking was measured, rhythmic, like a pendulum, like a metronome, like the clatter of train wheels going in one direction: *creak-creak, creak-creak, in-out, debit-credit*. And every creak was a word, and the word was one, and the word was his name — not the one written on the certificate, not «Weber,» no, but the other one, the real one, the one the rope knew.

Behind the hanged man's back was not the sky. A fence. A brick fence, long and institutional, and near the fence — something he couldn't quite make out, and from this «something» came a scent — no, not *that* one yet, that one hadn't arrived — but the scent already stood in the air, the way a storm stands half an hour before the first lightning strike.

«*Herr Untersturmführer.*»

Fingers on the shoulder. Gasoline and bread.

«*Herr Untersturmführer, wake up.*»

Fritz blinked. He blinked again. He rubbed his eyes — with his knuckles, hard, painfully, pressing reality back into his sockets.

The hanged man was gone.

Before the car rose a gate. A wooden arch, darkened, lopsided, with two posts on either side. A sign had once hung from the crossbeam — on rusted chains, two chains — but the right chain had snapped, and the sign dangled by the left one alone. It was tilted the way a broken neck tilts. On the sign — letters, half-erased: «...*sky khutir.*» Just a sign. Just the wind. Just a chain.

Creak-creak. In-out.

«*Herr Untersturmführer,*» Zimmer stood by the open door. «There's a farm here. The gates aren't locked. It's getting dark. Shall we stay the night?»

Fritz looked at the sky. It was the color of cooling lead. The sun had left without saying goodbye — the way one leaves a room where something irreparable has happened. September twilight crawled in from the east — the direction from which everything was now crawling: tanks, paratroopers, fear.

«Very well,» Fritz said, wiping clammy sweat from his forehead. «Drive in.»

They entered the yard.

The farm was of the sort that stands in Galicia from century to century, outlasting empires the way a boulder outlasts glaciers: not by resisting, but simply by — remaining. A long, whitewashed house with a thatched roof blackened by rain. Outbuildings — a stable, a shed, a hayloft — arranged around the yard like figures on a chessboard where the meaning of the game has long been lost, but the pieces remain standing. A well with a shadoof. An apple tree — knotted, old, with the last

apples hanging in the twilight air like small yellow planets in a cosmos from which the light has been pumped out.

The owner came out onto the porch. In his hand, he held a kerosene Dietz lantern.

Yarema — he gave only his name, without a surname, as people do when a surname is no longer needed or no longer safe — was tall, gaunt, with a face weathered by wind and *horilka* to the state of old leather. His eyes — pale, faded like fabric held too long in the sun — looked out from under bushy brows without surprise. Three Germans in a military vehicle had come to him, one in the black uniform of the SS — and he was not surprised. He had seen worse. He had seen Austrians, and Poles, and Petliurists, and Reds, and Whites — they all came, and they all left, but the farm — it stood. His wife was dead, his children had left for Lemberg, vanishing in the crucible there, and now he lived here alone with a mute farmhand whom the guests never saw — he had already gone to sleep in the hayloft.

«To stay the night,» Fritz said in German, reinforcing the words with gestures. «One night.»

Yarema nodded. He understood German — not fluently, not rapidly, but the way one understands a language in which people giving orders have spoken to you for centuries: selectively, by intonation, by the tonality of the threat.

«It is possible,» he replied, and his voice was like the creak of the well-sweep: low, rusty, unlubricated by conversation. «The car behind the shed. No need to show it.»

They sat in the main room, at a table that had probably once stood in the kitchen. Fritz would remember this room — or perhaps he wouldn't, or he would remember it incorrectly, the way things seen in a state where consciousness is already peeling away from reality like wallpaper from a damp wall are remembered. He would remember individual details, redundantly bright, as objects are bright in a fever:

The table — heavy, oak, scrubbed white, with deep gashes from a knife — a table at which people had eaten, and cut, and kneaded, and probably given birth — a table that had absorbed so many lives that it had become alive itself.

The plates — clay, coarse, with a thick brown glaze the color of last year's honey. Four plates, though besides the host, only two guests sat at the table (Bremme had stayed in the car to man the radio).

The *salo* — sliced into thick, almost obscenely thick slabs, white with pink, pink with white. *Salo* in which the pink was not the color of meat, but the color of a sunset frozen in fat. And in the warmth of the room, it began to sweat slightly in small beads; it seemed a cross-section of human flesh, an anatomical specimen cast upon an oak block.

The bread — black, dense as peat, with a crust that crunched under the knife so loudly that Zimmer winced.

And the *horilka*.

The *horilka* stood in a bottle without a label, cloudy, yellowish, the color of that uncertain hour when it is not yet clear whether it is dawn or the reflection of a fire. Yarema poured it into four cups — clay, of the same brown firing as the plates. Four cups.

Fritz looked at the fourth one.

«Who?» he asked.

Yarema did not answer. He raised his cup, nodded — not to them, but somewhere toward the corner where a dark, soot-stained icon hung, the face of the Mother of God almost indistinguishable — and drank. They drank after him. The *horilka* struck the palate the way truth strikes: crudely, hotly, without warning. It smelled of scorched roots, raw earth, and wormwood.

They ate in silence.

The silence was thick, dense — the silence of people who have nothing to talk about because the things that need to be discussed cannot be spoken. Fritz ate the *salo*, and it melted on his tongue, its taste being exactly what the taste of the world should be — simple, fatty, real. And he couldn't

remember the last time he had eaten something real. In Oranienburg? In the officers' mess, where schnitzel was served on schedule? But the schnitzel had been institutional, numbered, from a menu, while this *salo* belonged to no one, was no-man's, *salo* that existed for itself, without a schedule, without accounting, without columns.

«We were waiting for you,» Yarema finally spoke, and his voice came from somewhere deep, from the place where *horilka* meets resentment. He spoke German slowly, picking his words like heavy stones. «We thought: the Germans will come — they will remove the Poles. There will be order. We waited a hundred years. Two hundred. The Austrians were here — nothing. The Poles were here — bad. We thought: the Germans come — it will be better.»

He fell silent. Poured another. Drank it without a chaser.

«And you — you gave us to the Russians. Traded us for something. And now you are fleeing yourselves.»

It was said without anger. With exhaustion. With that peasant exhaustion that accumulates over centuries and becomes not a feeling, but a landscape: hills, fields, patience. Yarema raised watery eyes to Fritz, examining his black uniform.

«The black uniform — it is the color of death, *Pan* Officer. But when death begins to run — it is funny. And terrifying. You cannot drive in this. It is a shroud. The Russians — they are near Lemberg. Perhaps already in Lemberg. The Poles — they have gone feral. They have weapons now. And your people are running. I have a radio. The last I heard: the Russians are moving on Warsaw. Your leader... the one with the mustache. He is dead. Then — noise. Only noise.»

Fritz did not answer. What could he say? That the Reich didn't «give» them away? That the pact was a strategic move? That the Wehrmacht would restore order? Words — all words — were now the same as the red lines on the map: scrap paper. And Yarema knew it, and Fritz knew it, and this knowledge lay between them on the oak table.

«Turn on the radio,» Fritz requested quietly.

Yarema stood up and went into the other room. He returned with a receiver — old, wooden, pre-war, one of those that look like small churches: a semicircular top, a cloth speaker grille, a tuning knob, a yellow scale with the names of cities that now belonged to other countries or belonged to no one.

He placed the receiver on the table, between the plates. Turned it on. The tubes inside lit up — with a warm, living, amber light, like the eyes of a predator in the dark. The receiver hummed, warming up, the way a throat warms up before singing.

Then came the static.

That very noise: crackling, rustling, whistling — the voice of the atmosphere, the voice of a space in which all stations had gone silent. Yarema turned the knob slowly — Warsaw, Kraków, Berlin, Vienna — and every city answered identically: with noise, with void, with absence.

Suddenly, through this hum, a man's voice broke through. He spoke rapidly, rhythmically, distant, as if broadcasting from the bottom of a well. But the words did not form meaning. It was not German, nor Polish, nor Russian. It was a language turned inside out, consisting of sibilant and guttural sounds pronounced backward. A language come from somewhere beyond the scale.

Yarema turned the knob. The voice drifted away. In its place — noise again.

And then, a song began.

It didn't start from the receiver. It started from the silence — from that place where silence becomes so dense that sounds begin to emerge from it, the way faces emerge on an icon soot-stained by centuries of candles. A woman's voice — deep, low, chesty. A voice that didn't sing, but rather — remembered singing, remembered a melody it had heard once long ago, in another life.

The voice sang a cappella. No instruments, no accompaniment, no nothing — only the voice and the void, the voice and the darkness outside the window.

Llorando...

The language was unfamiliar — Spanish, or Ladino, or a language invented by this voice for this single song. The words were not important. The voice sang grief. Pure, distilled, absolute grief, from which everything had been evaporated: names, dates, circumstances. All that remained was that which makes something inside you clench, something that has no name, because anatomy does not know the organ that aches from another's singing.

The voice filled the room. It penetrated the clay bowls, the white, sweating *salo*, the wood of the table. It was an illusion — a sound recorded on a piece of tape, broadcast from nowhere to nowhere, *no hay banda* — but the sadness was absolutely real.

Three men sat at the table — two Germans and one Ukrainian — and listened to a woman singing on a radio that shouldn't have been working, on a frequency that shouldn't exist.

Fritz felt as though he were falling again. That the rope on his neck was tightening. This invisible woman was singing for him. Tears, treacherous, hot tears he had forgotten since childhood, welled up in his eyes.

The *horilka* stood on the table. No one poured, yet the cups were full, all four of them. And Fritz looked at the fourth cup, standing before the empty chair — and the cup was full, and the chair was empty, and the voice sang.

Yarema crossed himself. Slowly, broadly, in the Orthodox fashion — from right to left, the opposite way.

The song ended. The static returned. The receiver's tubes flickered and went out, though no one had turned it off.

Yarema silently poured the *horilka*. They drank in silence. The *horilka* was the same, but the taste had changed: now it was bitter, with the aftertaste of the water that sits at the bottom of a well where light has never fallen.

«Sleep,» the old man said. «You leave in the morning.»

Fritz lay on a bench in the main room, covered by his greatcoat. The ceiling above him was whitewashed, low, with a crack stretching from wall to wall like a front line on a map. He followed this crack, and it doubled, diverged, and in the rift between the two lines, in the gap between wakefulness and sleep, there stood a scent.

The scent of apples. The scent of *salo*. The scent of smoke from the stove. The scent of smoke. He fell asleep.

He was woken by Zimmer. The dawn — murky, milky, indifferent — seeped through the small window.

«*Herr Untersturmführer*. It's time. The host gave us some potatoes. And bread. And this,» Zimmer showed a bottle. «*Horilka*. For the road.»

Fritz sat up. His head was heavy, dull as a stone — the *horilka* or the dream, or what stood between the *horilka* and the dream. Some crack into which he had fallen during the night and from which he had not entirely emerged.

He went out into the yard. The morning was cold, dewy, with that crystalline sharpness that comes at the end of September when summer has already died but autumn has not yet decided what to be. The *Kübelwagen* stood behind the shed; Bremme was already sitting in the back seat.

Fritz was walking toward the car, and then — out of the corner of his eye, on the periphery, where vision is not yet vision but only a hint — he saw movement.

Behind the barn, on the patch by the hayloft, a man with a pitchfork was tossing hay.

The farmhand.

The man worked steadily, habitually, the tines entering the hay and lifting it, and the hay flew. And the hay was wrong. It was too bright. Unnaturally, offensively bright — golden, radiant, acid-yellow, as if a small lamp of its own burned inside every straw. As if the hay were not hay, but yellow light that had taken the form of hay. And this light flew through the air, and the man with the

pitchfork stood in this light, and Fritz could not look away. For a moment, it seemed to him that it was not straw on the pitchfork, but human hair.

The man was of medium height, sturdy, in a simple linen shirt. His face was not visible — he stood with his back turned — but something in his figure, in the set of his shoulders, in that pedantic, machine-like precision with which he drove the tines into the straw — was familiar. Not familiar — his own. As one's reflection in a mirror is one's own: you recognize it by that unique way your body occupies space.

The farmhand turned.

Fritz did not make out the face — the morning light was too murky — but it seemed to him, in that fraction of a second where only pure horror fits, that the farmhand had his face.

Fritz blinked. The delusion vanished. By the shed stood an ordinary old man in a dirty shirt, listlessly tossing ordinary, withered, gray autumn straw.

The light dimmed. The gold vanished. Just a man. Just a farmhand. Just hay.

«*Herr Untersturmführer?*» Zimmer called from behind the wheel. «Are we going?»

Fritz sat in the car. The door slammed shut. The engine coughed and started.

The *Kübelwagen* drove out of the yard, passed under the arch of the gate — the sign still dangled from its single chain, creaking softly in the morning air — and turned onto the backroad.

In the rearview mirror, the farm, the yard, the apple tree, and the figure of the man with the pitchfork standing in the gray fog — shrank, receded, until they finally vanished.

Until they became what everything left behind always becomes: a memory that does not yet know it is a verdict.

Chapter 4. Smoke

The field opened up suddenly — the way a wound opens when a bandage is removed: in one motion, without warning, without preparation.

The dirt road curved out from behind a grove, and the grove was gone, and in its place space emerged. Flat, brown, stretching to the horizon — and in this space, scattered with the generosity with which war scatters its gifts, lay things.

Fritz asked Zimmer to stop the car. They stood on the shoulder and looked.

Closest of all was a *Kübelwagen*, just like their own, only turned inside out by fire. The chassis — black, twisted, reared up as if the iron had tried to flee the heat at the last moment and frozen in that impulse, in that convulsion of escape. A little further — an Opel Blitz truck, overturned on its side, the steering wheel protruding from its cab, bare as the skeleton of a clock from which the mechanism has been removed. Even further — a tank. A light Pz. II, a machine for parades and intimidating peasants. It stood in the middle of the field, its turret blown off and lying three meters away, turned toward the sky with its muzzle like an overturned cup drained to the dregs.

But this was not the main thing. The main thing was the horses.

They lay everywhere — dozens, perhaps more — in the postures in which death had caught them: on their sides, on their backs, with legs outstretched, as if they continued to gallop in some subterranean space where they had been dragged down along with their riders. Some were perfectly intact — light bays, black-browns, dapple grays. Their coats still gleamed with morning dew, the wind ruffled their manes, and one might have thought they were merely sleeping, were it not for their bloated bellies. Huge, taut as drums — bellies in which death had already begun its work, its own bookkeeping, its accounting of debit and credit.

The locals — peasants, men and women in gray homespun clothes — were dragging the carcasses to two bonfires burning at the far edge of the field. Closer to them, by the forest, the long, fresh scar of a mass grave lay black — that was where they were pulling the Uhlans. Someone had thrust a birch cross, knocked together from two poles, into the foot of the grave, and on the crosspiece hung a cap — a four-cornered Polish *rogatywka* with a tarnished eagle. It hung there the way things hang on a coat rack in a hallway when the master has stepped out for a moment.

Fritz looked at the *rogatywka*. The eagle on it looked back at Fritz with the blind, stamped gaze of cheap metal.

Fritz thought: they charged tanks. On horseback. With sabers. They knew it was pointless. They knew a saber does not pierce armor, that a horse does not outrun a shell, that cavalry in nineteen thirty-nine is suicide — a beautiful, useless, absolutely aesthetic death.

But they charged.

There was something in this that Fritz did not understand and did not want to understand. Something that did not fit into any column, into any cell of his calibrated world. It was the opposite of accounting. The opposite of calculation. The opposite of everything he believed in. They charged the tanks because... what? Because they had to? Because of the motherland? Because of honor? Words that usually provoked a light, squeamish irony in Fritz — because in his world, «motherland» was a supply schedule, and «honor» was a paragraph in the regulations.

Here, in this field, next to the dead horses and the birch cross, these words suddenly acquired a terrifying density they had never possessed before. In this tableau of ruin lay its own flawless, mathematical completeness: hot flesh challenging cold, stamped metal — and the metal tearing that flesh apart, only to choke on it.

To kindle the fires, the peasants were using diesel fuel from the destroyed trucks and automobile tires. The fire roared, greedily devouring organics and rubber. A thick, oily smoke rose into the sky, and from it, large, greasy flakes of soot fell onto the road.

One such black feather drifted down onto the sleeve of Fritz Lang's black tunic.

He stared at this smudge of soot, and suddenly the sound of crackling tires began to recede. The color black in his eyes lost its density. The oily flake of soot suddenly slowed its dance and began to lighten. Before Fritz's eyes, the black soot transformed into blindingly white, weightless ash.

It fell quietly, solemnly, like the first December snow. This ash no longer smelled of diesel. It emanated a subtle, terrifyingly familiar, sweetish aroma — the smell of burnt sugar, almonds, and human hair. White flakes settled on his cap, on his shoulders, on the windshield of the *Kübelwagen*. Fritz held out his palm. A white snowflake touched his skin and melted, leaving no dirty trace, leaving only the sensation of absolute, surgical cleanliness.

Fritz blinked. The white snow vanished. The oily smudge was blackening his sleeve once more. He rubbed it with his finger — mechanically, the way one rubs a typo on a document that must be flawless — and the smudge smeared, but did not disappear.

«Bremme,» he said curtly, dusting off the fabric. «What's on the frequencies?»

The signals man, sitting in the car, raised his head. His face, drawn after a night spent listening to the void, brightened slightly.

«There is something, *Herr Untersturmführer*. On our headquarters wave. Fragments, but they're ours. German speech. Wehrmacht format. They are somewhere nearby. Twenty or thirty kilometers to the west. Maybe closer.»

«We need to get to the highway, *Herr Untersturmführer*,» Zimmer said from behind the wheel. «Two jerrycans of petrol. That's maybe a hundred kilometers. And Stettin is as far as the moon.»

Fritz looked at the field one last time. At the smoke, at the fires, at the cavalry cap.

«We drive. We'll find our people.»

They found them an hour later.

The column was parked on the shoulder of the highway. More precisely — not parked, but lying there, the way a wounded animal lies when it is not yet dead but has already ceased to resist. Peasant, requisitioned wagons with white crosses drawn in chalk on the sides. Harnessed to them were horses so exhausted they did not lift their heads. Soldiers sat on the carts, and these soldiers were — different.

Fritz had seen the retreating men yesterday: those were a mob, a herd, a mass that had lost its form. These men — had retained their form. Not in the sense of order and formation, but in the sense that a fragment broken from a statue retains its form: it is no longer a statue, but the line of the fracture reveals what it used to be a part of.

An *Oberleutnant* — Fritz didn't catch his surname, or caught it and then lost it — was sitting on the running board of a medical Opel. He was smoking and looking at the sky with the expression of a man staring at the ceiling in a dentist's waiting room: without hope, without fear, with a dull expectation of pain.

«Russians,» he said hollowly when Fritz introduced himself. «Near Zamość. A company of fast tanks and infantry. We lost all our equipment. All the armored cars.» He smirked, and the smirk was a crack in dry clay. «But we have petrol to drown in. Dead tanks don't need fuel.»

He nodded toward a canvas-topped truck. Fritz saw the jerrycans. Even, green, stacked. Jerrycans that were supposed to feed iron tracks, and now fed only the void.

«Take as much as you need,» the *Oberleutnant* said. «You can't fuel horses with petrol.»

Zimmer was already dragging jerrycans to the *Kübelwagen* — quickly, greedily, with that hungry agility with which drivers handle fuel when it turns into treasure.

«Where are you headed?» Fritz asked.

«West. Home,» the officer took a drag. «And you?»

«North. To Stettin.»

The *Oberleutnant* looked at him — long and hard, the way one looks at a man who has said something irreparably stupid.

«You can't go north, Lang. The Red Army is in East Prussia. Tank wedges. A paratroop near Danzig. Rastenburg — did you hear?»

«We heard.»

«Then you know. All of Prussia is a cauldron. You can't get through Warsaw. You're a dead man if you head north. There's nothing there now but the Russians and the Baltic Sea.»

He finished his cigarette. Flicked the butt. Crushed it underfoot — meticulously, as if it were the last cigarette butt on earth and had to be destroyed down to the final thread of tobacco.

«And another thing, *Untersturmführer*,» he lowered his voice, though there was no one around but the wounded sleeping on the straw. «Take off your uniform. The Poles are on the roads. Yesterday they shot up a field gendarmerie patrol near Tarnów. All of them. And hung them — upside down. On lampposts. If they see those runes,» he nodded at Fritz's collar tabs. «They won't ask for papers. They'll just string you up.»

Fritz nodded. He said nothing.

The jerrycans were loaded. Zimmer started the engine. The *Kübelwagen* pulled out and drove west along the highway, past the column, past the wagons, past the horses with lowered heads. Fritz looked at the wounded, at their browned bandages, at the hands dangling from the sides of the carts. And every hand swayed in time with the movement, and the swaying was measured, rhythmic, like a pendulum. *Creak-creak. In-out.*

They had driven about two kilometers from the column. The highway was empty. The sky was empty.

And then came the sound.

At first, distant, on the edge of hearing. A hum, like the hum of a swarm of bees, like the hum of high-voltage wires, like the thrum of blood in the ears when the heart beats too fast. The hum grew. Approached. It filled the entire sky, from horizon to horizon. Fritz turned around and saw them.

Planes.

They were flying low, in formations of three. Blunt-nosed, twin-engine, with red stars on their wings. Flying evenly, confidently, with that mechanical inevitability of a conveyor belt that knows no doubts. And they were not heading for the *Kübelwagen*, nor for the empty highway — they were making a run on that very column of wagons with crosses that Fritz had just left behind.

«Brake!» Zimmer barked. «Off the road!»

He wrenched the steering wheel with a crunch, and the *Kübelwagen* flew off the asphalt, plowed through the ditch, bounded over the embankment, and crashed into a strip of woods. Branches whipped against the windshield. The engine stalled.

Silence fell. And then — not silence.

Then came the roar. Heavy, visceral, felt not with the ears but with the diaphragm, the stomach, the place where fear lives. The roar of bombs tearing the earth, tearing the wagons, tearing the horses — those very horses that had just been standing on the shoulder with lowered heads. Fritz, pressed to the ground, face in the grass, face in the black soil, heard everything: the muffled thuds, the screams, and the neighing. The neighing of horses that was not a neighing but a shriek, and this shriek was human, though it did not come from humans.

Silence fell again. Ringing.

Fritz lifted his head. Bremme lay nearby, hugging the radio the way a child hugs a pillow during a thunderstorm. Zimmer sat in the car, clutching the steering wheel with whitened fingers.

There, behind them, where fifteen minutes ago the column had stood, smoke was rising. Black. With black flakes. The same smoke as on the field with the cavalry, but now another smell was mixed into it — a smell from which Fritz turned away. That very petrol the *Oberleutnant* had offered them to take had become his funeral pyre.

Fritz did not look. There was no pity in him. There was only a cold, detached understanding: the machine of which he was a part was being destroyed by a more perfect machine.

«Those are *Katiuskas*,» Bremme said. His voice was flat, dead, the voice of a man who speaks only to keep from screaming.

«What?» Zimmer never took his eyes off the smoke.

«*Katiuskas*. That's what our pilots in Spain called them. The SB frontline bomber. Tupolev. They're faster than our fighters. You can't outrun them. A Russian woman's name.»

«A woman's name,» Zimmer repeated, and in his voice was that emptiness where words cease to mean anything.

Fritz Lang was silent.

He looked at the black, greasy smoke rising over the highway. And in his mind, another smoke arose once more. White, even, methodical. The two smokes, black and white, mingled, and the line between them grew razor-thin. The ash needed a hearth. It needed a place where Fritz could become what he was destined to become.

He was silent for a long time. A minute. Two. Then he adjusted the collar of his tunic.

«Start the car, Zimmer.»

«Where are we going, *Herr Lang*?»

«To Upper Silesia. Past Kraków.»

His fingers had stopped trembling.

«To Oświęcim,» Fritz added. «There are old Austrian barracks there. A railway junction. They won't reach there. Our people are there.»

He pronounced the name the way one pronounces the name of the only saint still capable of hearing a prayer.

The *Kübelwagen* crawled out of the tree line, pulled onto the highway, and turned west.

Behind them — smoke. Ahead — the road. And the road led to Auschwitz.

Chapter 5. The Blue Dress

Oświęcim revealed itself to them after midday — quietly, without warning, like a page in a book you are not yet ready for.

A small town in Upper Silesia, on the Soła River, near its confluence with the Vistula. Tiled roofs, a church spire, wisps of smoke from chimneys, plane trees along the embankment. A town like dozens of others in Silesia: German and Polish simultaneously, belonging to everyone and no one. A town that could have been a postcard, a backdrop for a Christmas tale, could have been — anything.

The September sun — late, low, almost horizontal — lay on the roofs like a honeyed varnish. It was warm. Wrongly, impossibly warm for the end of September. It happens this way on the last day before the frost, when nature, knowing the glacier arrives tomorrow, surrenders all its withheld heat at once, generously, prodigally, the way a man gives away money he will no longer need.

The *Kübelwagen* rolled along the road leading to the outskirts. The barracks — old, Austrian, made of red brick, built back in the time of Franz Joseph for a cavalry regiment — stood isolated, across the river. But before the barracks, there was still a block, another turn, and then...

The house.

It stood on the right side of the road, behind a low, neat picket fence of pale wood. A white house — small, two-story, with green shutters and a tiled roof of a warm, terracotta hue. In front of the house was a garden. Tended with the meticulousness that reveals not a hired gardener, but the hand of the mistress herself: the flowerbeds weeded, the rose bushes pruned, the paths strewn with fine gravel, and this gravel was clean, bright, as if washed by hand. Laundry dried on a line between two apple trees — starched, billowing in the light wind like small flags of a surrender no one had agreed to.

Fritz looked at this house, and something inside him — not in his head, but lower down, in that place where nameless things reside — shifted, the way a compass needle shifts when a magnet is brought near.

There was a woman in the garden.

She sat on a bench by the flowerbed, and children fussed around her: two boys and a girl of about five. Their voices drifted through the open window of the car — thin, bright, like glass bells. The voices of children playing in a garden on the last warm day of September. The woman wore a simple, austere dress.

Blue — the color of fidelity, as one of tailor Goldstein's clients used to say. No, the tailor did not exist yet, Goldstein did not exist yet, Hanover had not yet arrived. The dress was blue, with a white collar, and it fit her the way dresses fit women who know their body is not an object, but a — home. It fit lightly, freely. The white collar lay against tanned collarbones, the wind gently lifted the hem. The woman laughed, and her laugh was — or so it seemed to Fritz — Helga's laugh.

The woman caught the little girl, lifted her into her arms, pressed her close, and in this movement, in this sun-drenched scene, in the soaring childish laughter, there was contained such an unbearable, piercing, fragile beauty that Fritz forgot to breathe.

The *Kübelwagen* drove past.

Fritz turned around. The house, the garden, the woman, the children — all of it remained behind, shrinking — and he looked, and thought: someday. Someday — a house like this. With green shutters. With apple trees. Helga in the garden. Klaus already grown, ten, twelve. Dieter running around. And maybe a third. Or a fourth. A house where everything is right. A house where one could, finally, stop counting, accounting, filing — and simply live.

Someday. After. After what?

The barracks turned out to be exactly what Fritz had imagined: brick, long, with a grass-grown parade ground. Barracks built for one empire, used by another, and now housing men who belonged

to neither. Two platoons of SS men — the remnants of a guard unit transferred here from Kattowitz after the chaos began.

Bremme and Zimmer, gray with dust and exhaustion, went to the mess hall to sleep. Fritz headed for Ludwig Klein.

Hauptsturmführer Ludwig Klein, thirty-four years old. They had served together five years ago in the *Totenkopfverbände*, in Dachau, back when Dachau was still a model, a showcase camp exhibited to foreign journalists. Klein was one of those who genuinely believed that the camp was a school, that the prisoners were students, and that discipline was love. This belief had not weakened over the years; it had merely hardened, like clay in a kiln.

They sat in Klein's room — small, institutional, with an iron cot and a portrait of the Führer on the wall. Someone had already managed to drape a black mourning ribbon over the portrait. Ludwig, aged, gutted, his tunic collar unbuttoned, was smoking, flicking ash into an empty tin can.

«Göring,» Klein said mundanely, pouring Fritz some barley coffee. «Göring has taken command. Locked himself in Berlin and is preparing the city for defense. Forming the *Volkssturm*. A militia — boys, old men. The Russians are breaking through. The French are across the Rhine. The British bomb every night.»

He said this the way one recites a train schedule: evenly, dispassionately.

«The British bomb every night. It's all over, Fritz.»

Ludwig took a deep drag and looked at the brown leather portfolio resting against the chair leg.

«And what of your project? Your great Hygiene of the Reich? Are you still dragging it around with you?»

Fritz looked at the portfolio. The brass clasp. The embossed KL.

«It's here. Documentation. Blueprints. If we halt the Soviets... if there is an armistice... the problem won't just disappear, after all.»

Klein shook his head — slowly, with that heavy, bovine movement that served as his sigh.

«Burn it,» he said, grinding his cigarette butt into the tin with sadistic pressure. «Everything in that folder, burn it tonight. The classifications, the serial numbers, the signatures. And be ready to take off that uniform, Fritz. Not tomorrow — now. Have civilian clothes on hand. Soon enough, we'll be strung up on lampposts for these runes not just by the Poles, but by our own *Bauern*.»

Fritz was silent. The barley coffee was growing cold in the tin mug.

«Helga,» he said finally. «I called her. She wanted to leave for Stettin. Or stay in Berlin. I have to find her. I am going north.»

Klein looked at him. There was no pity in that gaze — only that cold, professional calculus they both possessed to perfection: probabilities, variants, outcomes.

«There has been no telephone connection with Berlin for a week. The British by day and the Russians by night are turning every railway junction into a lunar landscape. Trains no longer go north. Anything that moves on rails is a target. Your wife is unlikely to have gotten out.»

He didn't finish the thought. There was no need.

«If you go north — you walk straight into the meat grinder,» Klein continued. «Keep south. Stay away from the Autobahns and military columns. Travel as a refugee. It's your only chance. Alone. Without the uniform. And without the portfolio.»

They finished the surrogate coffee. Klein stood up, went to the window, and looked out at the parade ground.

«You know,» he said without turning around, «sometimes I think: what if we were building all of this — for ourselves? The barracks, the wire, the watchtowers. What if it wasn't for them. What if it was for us. And we just didn't know.»

Fritz did not answer. There are things it is better not to understand. There are phrases it is better not to hear.

Fritz did not sleep that night. He lay on the cot, under an institutional blanket, and listened to the wind rushing through the poplars outside the window — a sound like the rushing of a sea he had never seen. The ceiling above him was gray, concrete, without cracks.

He thought of the white house. Of the green shutters. Of the woman in the blue dress and the three children. Of the life that — someday.

The portfolio stood by the cot. He had not burned it. He could not. Not because the folder held value — the folder was dead, as a map of a nonexistent country is dead. But to burn it meant acknowledging that the Architect was left without a building. That it had all been for nothing.

In the morning, early, murky, smelling of river fog, there was a knock at the door. Klein stood on the threshold. In his hand — an envelope.

«Here,» he said, tossing the envelope onto the nightstand. «Papers. A *Kennkarte* and a ration pass. In the name of Hans Weber, a sales representative from Bremen. Protestant. Did not serve. Forty-one years old. Height, eye color — yours.»

Fritz picked up the cheap, embossed paper.

«Who is he?»

«A merchant. A Communist or a sympathizer. Detained in early September on the road from Kattowitz during a sweep.»

«And where is he now?»

Klein paused. His gaze grew heavy, empty.

«This is no time for procedure, Fritz. He is somewhere he no longer needs documents. But you do. You can find clothes yourself, I imagine. Everything is on the roads right now. Abandoned suitcases, abandoned lives. Pick any one. We leave in an hour, blow the blocks, and retreat toward Czechia.»

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «Литрес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на Литрес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.