
BERLIN DIDN'T WANT US

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DEDICATION

For those of us who no longer knew how to live in peace.

For those who found in the din of war the only familiar melody.

And for those who, even after the last shot, continue to walk among us, hopeless
specters.

CHAPTER 1

No one survives a war. Some just learn to walk among the dead, and I, in that winter of 1945, had been practicing that macabre dance for years. Night engulfed us at the border, a dense darkness that smelled of frozen earth and the rotten promise of another endless conflict. We were a handful of shadows clinging to the belly of a freight train, hoping that the beeps and squeaks would swallow any trace of our miserable presence. We had no uniforms, only rags and the ugliness etched on the faces of those who have seen too much.

The cold metal of the car was a second skin, and the rattling was an irregular heartbeat announcing the journey to an uncertain destination. We had crawled there like rats, huddled among empty boxes and the sweet, rancid stench of something that had been dead for a long time. It was the smell of Europe, I thought, a mixture of old sweat, fear, and the soot from thousands of chimneys that no longer smoked. An essence of decaying civilization.

"Do you think this old thing will last until dawn?" Paco muttered, his voice as rough as sandpaper. He rubbed his hands together, more out of nervous habit than because of the cold that penetrated his bones. The man always found something to complain about, and that night the train was his new victim, a rusty piece of iron that threatened to fall apart.

León, sitting cross-legged, did not respond. His eyes, two red embers in the gloom, scanned the darkness as if he could see through the steel of the car. His rifle, a Mauser with a worn stock, rested on his knees, a natural extension of his strong arm. He was our north, the rusty compass that kept us from scattering in the madness of helplessness. With León nearby, at least one knew why one had to keep holding on, why one still clung to a smoldering ember of instinct.

"I don't know about the old banger, Paco, but you can't even handle a ride on a donkey," replied Rojas, his usual acidity dripping from every word. He was leaning against the wall, his arms crossed and his gaze lost in the ceiling of the car. His glasses, which must once have been elegant, were fogged up and scratched, but he still wore them to hide the lack of faith in his eyes. A wall for his despair.

Paco hurled an insult at him that was lost in the growing roar of the train. They were like old dogs that bite each other out of habit, a ritual of survival in starvation. Not even the cold or the imminent threat of being discovered broke their routines, their little personal wars. On the other side, El Padre muttered prayers in Latin, his glassy eyes fixed on an invisible point. His rosary, made of what looked like human teeth, jingled slightly with each movement of the train, a jingle that was more of a warning than a prayer.

Among the scrap metal, the Old Man remained motionless, a lump indistinguishable from the rest of the accumulated rubbish. He could have been a corpse, were it not for the damp gleam in his eyes when the dim light filtered through a crack. No one knew how he got there with us, or how he always found the darkest corner to disappear and reappear at will. For him, war was a natural state, as inevitable as breathing.

The train suddenly accelerated, throwing us violently against the wooden walls. A brutal jolt that reminded us where we were, in what skin, in what fragile shell. The border had vanished behind us like a bad dream, and we were entering the bowels of Germany, a bleeding country groaning under the bombs. I felt the narrator's pulse, the urgency to recount the descent. Another step toward the pit.

I closed my eyes, trying to ignore the acrid smell of old gunpowder that still clung to the fabric of my coat and the despair that seeped through every pore of the car, like thick steam. We were the refuse of a war that no longer made sense, men without a flag, without rank, without a homeland. All we had left were our worn-out weapons, the hunger gnawing at our insides, and the strange certainty that outside of hell, we did not know how to live.

The rattling was the only pulse in that rolling sarcophagus. My companions clung to it, each in their own way, like children to the skirt of a sick mother. The rusty metal exhaled an organic, sweetish stench, a rancid patina that had adhered to the boards of the car. I realized then. This was not just any freight car; it was a cattle transport, an old slaughterhouse on wheels taking us to ours. The rotten wood had absorbed the fear of thousands of creatures, and now it was giving it back to us, drop by drop, seeping into every breath.

"This stench... fuck, it smells like rotten cow intestines," Paco muttered, shifting uncomfortably, trying to find a position that didn't exist. The complaint was not new, but the tone was. There was a twinge of something else, a revulsion that transcended his usual grumbling, a nausea he couldn't suppress. He scratched his armpit vehemently, as if the dense, heavy air itself were irritating his skin.

Rojas let out a sharp snort. "Maybe it's you, Paco. Lately, you smell like a worm graveyard. Hell must be exhaling from some orifice of your body, and I don't mean your mouth."

"Shut up, smartass," Paco replied, but without force in his attack. His eyes, in the darkness, looked tired, not only from the night, but from all the nights that had been the same, a perpetual gloom with no end.

León did not take his eyes off the crack. The moonlight, or what was left of it, barely illuminated his hard profile, as if carved in stone by the winds of war.

His immobility was a heavy presence, an unspoken promise that, if we had to die, we would do so in line and with a knife between our teeth. He was the only one who seemed unaffected by the stench of decay, as if his sense of smell had become accustomed to the stench of death long before boarding the train.

The Father, oblivious to the discussion, remained focused on his refuge in faith. His lips moved in a constant murmur, broken phrases in Latin that sounded like a dark incantation, a litany for the terminally ill. "Dies irae, dies illa, solvet saeculum in favilla..." he whispered, and a chill ran down my spine. The day of wrath, the day when the world will be dissolved into ashes. For him, I suppose, the train was already that place.

I looked toward the darkest corner. The Old Man, an indistinguishable lump, barely perceptible. Only the fleeting glint of his eyes, a pair of splinters in the night, confirmed that he was still there. He seemed to melt into the shadows, just another specter in this car that moved like a coffin on rails. I had never heard him speak. I had never seen him eat. He was a fragment of the war itself, a blade of a scythe without a handle that kept cutting without anyone telling him why or how.

Outside, the landscape flashed by in bursts: skeletal black trees, fields covered in dirty snow, the ghost of a deserted village passing by like a rusty, cracked memory. Every time the train slowed down, the silence grew deeper, as if the night were watching us, waiting for our end. Then the roar returned, and the reality of iron and speed dragged us back again. There was no dawn, only perpetual gray. There were no stars, only soot. Only the train car, the darkness, and the echo of a Europe bleeding to death as we headed toward the final death rattle.

I knew they were taking us to the slaughterhouse, that we were just another shipment in the chain of killing. But strangely, that certainty did not frighten me. It gave me a kind of perverse calm. Outside that filth, what were we? Nothing. The train continued on its way, swallowing up miles, and each jolt brought us closer to the abyss, but also to the only place where, in some twisted way, we felt we belonged.

The train continued on its way, devouring miles, and each jolt brought us closer to the abyss, the only place where, in some twisted way, we felt we belonged. Suddenly, a sharp screech tore through the air, and the car stopped so abruptly that we were thrown forward, a violent jolt. The silence that followed was more oppressive than the previous din, a heavy blanket that suffocated even our breath. Muffled voices could be heard, boots crunching in the snow, a military rhythm that froze our blood. The tension became palpable, dense.

León slowly stood up, his Mauser ready, his presence a warning. His eyes, now accustomed to the darkness, flashed with alertness, tracking every sound. Paco stopped scratching and Rojas straightened up, his posture defiant like a wounded fighting cock. The Father interrupted his litany and even the Old Man, in his corner, seemed to sharpen his silence, becoming even more inscrutable. We all knew what an unexpected stop in that no man's land meant. The wooden door at the end of the car opened with a groan that echoed like a complaint. A cold white light from a flashlight blinded us for a moment, and a gust of icy air carried the smell of snow and clean uniforms, an alien scent in our fetid living space.

In the doorway, silhouetted against the darkness of the night, stood an SS officer. Young, too young for the cruelty he already exuded, his immaculate uniform contrasted with our misery like an open wound. His face, framed by his helmet, was sharp, and his eyes, blue and icy, scanned us as if we were sacks of potatoes, inanimate objects. He wore black leather gloves that looked absurdly neat, oblivious to the dirt of the world.

"Are you the shipment of foreigners?" His voice was harsh, without inflection, with an accent that sounded to us like orders given to dogs, the language of master and beast. It was not a question, but a statement that demanded an immediate and submissive response.

León stepped forward.

"We are Spanish volunteers. At your service."

The officer did not respond immediately. His gaze lingered on our dirty faces, our rags, the motley assortment of weapons we carried. The flashlight rested on El Padre's rosary of teeth, then on the motionless bulk of El Viejo, lingering a little longer on his enigma. His expression did not change, but a hint of contempt appeared at the corner of his lips, thin as a knife cut.

"Volunteers, yes," he said, the word dripping with irony like slow poison. "Or so they say."

He took a few steps into the car, and the stench of cattle and old sweat must have hit him like a wall, because he frowned with an almost imperceptible gesture, a tic of contained disgust.

"My name is Otto Klein. Captain Klein. You're going to Stablatt. A training camp. If you're as useful as they say, you'll have a chance. If not..." He shrugged, and the flashlight swept over us again, pausing for a moment on my eyes, empty of hope. There was no threat in his voice, just a statement of fact. It was the tone of someone talking about livestock, cattle marked for slaughter.

Paco muttered something unintelligible, an exhalation that sounded like a stifled insult, a spark that failed to ignite. Rojas stared at the officer, and I could feel the silent rage consuming him, boiling inside him like acid. Klein seemed to ignore them, or perhaps he didn't see them as worthy of his attention. His gaze returned to León, perhaps recognizing an innate authority, a ferocity that even the SS uniform could not completely obscure, a primal beast that discipline had not managed to fully tame.

"We need manpower. It doesn't matter where they come from, or what shit they bring with them. Just kill. Understood?" Klein added, and the last word was a sharp blow, a hammer blow on the anvil of silence.

"Understood, Captain," León replied, his voice flat, the same sharp obedience of a well-sharpened steel blade waiting its turn.

Klein nodded with an almost imperceptible movement of his head.

"Good. Tomorrow you will arrive. There you will be assigned your role. But let this be clear. You are not soldiers. You are useful animals. Cannon fodder."

He turned on his heel without waiting for a reply. His boots crunched on the floor covered with dirty straw, and the door closed with a metallic click. Darkness returned, denser than before, now permeated with the echo of his words. Useful animals. An old and familiar heat of rage rose in my stomach, mixing with bile. It was nothing new. We had always been that, ever since we first picked up a rifle.

The train started moving again, with a slow, heavy groan, like a wounded animal refusing to die. The usual rattling was now a constant reminder of Captain Klein's words, of our destination. Stablatt. Another name for the slaughterhouse. I looked at León, Paco, Rojas. None of them spoke, only the silence that had seen too much. The fog in the car, thick and sticky, enveloped us all, a sticky shroud. We were rats in a cattle car, on our way to the slaughterhouse, and the only difference was that the executioner had already come to name us.

CHAPTER 2

The train stopped with a screech of rusty metal that tore through the frozen air. There was no platform, only a ditch filled with dirty snow and broken railroad ties. We jumped out of the car like sacks of potatoes, stumbling over the frost. The darkness was still thick, but the pale gray of dawn was beginning to tinge the horizon, revealing a desolate landscape: crooked barracks, frayed barbed wire, and the skeleton of a watchtower pointing to the sky like an accusing finger. Stablatt, as an SS non-commissioned officer had growled at us at the previous station, was the hole in the world where cannon fodder rotted before being thrown into the grinder. He was not wrong.

The air smelled of burnt coal, sweat, and misery so thick you could almost chew it. From inside the barracks came screams, coughs, and a constant murmur of despair that seeped through the cracks. Other trains, just as ghostly, spewed more men onto the field. They were hunched silhouettes, wearing ill-fitting uniforms or none at all. Some were old men with wire-like beards; others were barely children, with the look of those who had already seen too much. There were French prisoners of war in civilian clothes, German deserters with their insignia torn off, and what appeared to be Eastern volunteers, with high cheekbones and stern expressions. They were all meat.

"Welcome to the Reich's daycare center," Paco said, spitting out a strand of frozen saliva that dissolved on the ground. "I'm sure the wine here is excellent."

León didn't respond. His eyes, sharp as carving knives, scanned the camp in search of weakness, a crack through which to impose himself. Captain Otto Klein, our SS contact, appeared out of the shadows, wrapped in a fur coat that seemed too big for his emaciated figure. His hair was slicked back, and a nervous tic in his jaw gave him away. His gaze lingered on El Viejo, who, as usual, had materialized beside us without anyone seeing him get off the train. His knife, or at least the handle, protruded from his belt. Klein frowned but said nothing. The Old Man was an anomaly he didn't bother to understand, just another shadow among the many that populated that place.

"Fall in!" Klein shouted, his voice drowned out by the icy wind. No one moved. The other units, a handful of disorderly shadows, didn't even seem to notice. Klein turned pale. He opened his mouth to repeat the order, but Leon beat him to it.

"Form up, damn it!" His deep voice, weathered by the stench of gunpowder and the trenches, cut through the murmur like a gunshot. Our group, barely six of us, lined up in a rudimentary formation. Paco, Rojas, El Padre, El Viejo. I brought up the rear, watching. The heads of the other units began to turn, drawn by the undeniable authority that emanated from León, a beast who knew hell firsthand.

Klein, though irritated at being overshadowed, seemed to understand the value of that savage discipline. With a gesture of his gloved hand, he indicated the direction of one of the barracks.

"There. There's space. And food. Tomorrow, we start."

The word "start" sounded like a threat, a dry echo in the dawn light. We dragged ourselves toward the barracks. The interior was a rat's nest, with rotten wooden bunks that sagged under our weight and freezing air that scraped at our lungs. A thick miasma of mold, sweat, and unwashed bodies was nauseating. We tried to find a spot in a corner, far from the door. Other recruits watched us with the curiosity of the damned. Some were little more than teenagers, with sunken

cheeks and wide eyes, too big for their gaunt faces. Death was etched on their features.

"Corporal Rojas, what do you think of this paradise?" asked Paco, with a hungry wolf's smile.

Rojas took off his beret and scratched his head, his usual gesture when weighing up misery. "I think Marx chose the wrong cemetery. This isn't the end of history, it's the beginning of decay. And those of us who still have some brains left will be the first to smell it, as the flesh falls from our bones."

The Father, who had been muttering something in Latin, turned to us. His eyes, normally veiled by dementia, sparkled with an unsettling lucidity, like embers in the darkness. "There will be no tomorrow. Only an eternal twilight. God has gone to another war, one in which there may still be souls to save."

The Old Man found a piece of dry bread lying on the ground and nibbled at it with the same indifference as a squirrel or a rat might have done, without a trace of urgency. No one doubted his ability to survive, nor his lack of humanity. I, on the other hand, felt the frost clinging to my soul, my only constant companion. I wondered what war God had gone to fight. Perhaps the only one he could win. Ours, of course, was already lost. All that remained was to prolong the final act, waving our arms in the darkness so as not to see the cobwebs, and dragging ourselves through another day. And drinking. Always drinking, until oblivion stuck to our tongues.

I sat on the floor, leaning against the splintered wall. My body ached, every muscle a lament, but my mind was strangely clear. Too clear. I could see every detail: the rotten wood of the bunk, the dull gleam of the weapons on the floor, the mist escaping from our mouths with every breath, a fleeting sign of life. War was not epic, it was not glorious. It was just endless shit, a slow freeze, and we were the flies buzzing around, or the rats, as Klein had called us. And in this hole in the world, in Stablatt, we were the most useful. For now.

The "for now" in my mind was a web in which the hours and days became entangled. The night in the barracks dragged on, a jumble of snoring, coughing,

and muffled moans. The stench solidified, becoming a tangible layer that clung to our clothes and throats, a sweat of death. Other bodies huddled together on the bunks or on the floor, silent ghosts with their eyes open in the darkness, each with their own abyss of misery. They were the stragglers, the leftovers from all the wars, the spoils that the German military machine intended to recycle. Instinctively, we had huddled in a corner, forming a kind of invisible fortress, a stronghold of hardened souls.

León wasn't sleeping. I knew it. Even sitting down, his figure projected a tension that was almost palpable, a promise of controlled violence. I could feel his eyes scanning the darkness, calculating invisible threats. Next to him, Paco snored like a pig at slaughter, an obscene murmur, and Rojas muttered incomprehensible phrases in his sleep, perhaps fragments of poetry or forgotten manifestos, echoes of a world that no longer existed. The Father, for his part, had wrapped himself in his threadbare cassock and was reciting the rosary in corrupt Latin, peppered with blood-curdling apocalyptic exclamations. The Old Man, as usual, had vanished. It wasn't so much that he was asleep, but rather that he simply dissolved into the atmosphere, becoming another shadow until he decided to reappear, one more specter in the darkness.

At first light, which barely managed to penetrate the broken windows like pale ghosts, a German sergeant with a face covered in pustules and a hoarse voice entered the barracks. He carried a cane that he tapped rhythmically against the floor, creating an annoying echo.

"Aufstehen! Get up, parasites!" His voice, more than an order, was an icy slap in the face.

Most of the men moved slowly, like broken puppets whose strings had been cut. We got up faster, a conditioned reflex that the war had burned into our bones.

"Spaniards!" shouted the sergeant, pointing at us with his baton. "You, the lowest apes in the food chain! Out! Run! To the fucking square!"

León didn't wait for a second order. He gave each of us a push, a silent signal that we understood instantly. We went outside, where the air cut like razor blades.

The camp was waking up in organized chaos, a hive of desperation. Hundreds of men, of all ages and nationalities, were forming sloppy lines. The sun was a mere memory behind the gray clouds that stretched like a shroud over the world, heralding death.

The sergeant led us to a line already formed, made up of men even more ragged than us, some with dirty bandages on their heads, others with uniforms in tatters. A few looked at us with suspicious eyes, fearing our arrival. They were French, judging by their faded insignia and their accents as they babbled among themselves, unintelligible murmurs of bitterness.

"Stand still, monkeys!" Sergeant Schmidt shouted, banging his baton on the ground. Then he turned to another officer, a young lieutenant with a face too clean for the hell around him, the face of a child lost in the slaughter. Klein was nowhere to be seen.

The next few hours dissolved into a macabre parody of 'training'. Circular marches in the mud, heavy logs with no destination, ditches dug and refilled. Under the bone-chilling rain, there was no tactic or discipline, only constant humiliation and exhaustion, designed to break our spirit and reduce us to mere animals.

Paco, knee-deep in mud, growled: "This is worse than military service in Almería. At least there we had a cape that didn't smell like vomit, and the sun tanned your skin, it didn't rot your soul."

"It's the dialectic of degradation, Paco," replied Rojas, sweating under the weight of a log he could barely hold. "They're stripping us of our last shell. The ideology of mud prepares us to be fertile ground for worms."

"Shut up, guys," León growled, without looking at them. His gaze was fixed on the horizon, on the very spot where El Viejo had reappeared, sitting on a mound of rubble, watching the scene with the impassivity of a vulture waiting for its prey.

The Father, his lips purple from the cold, looked up at the gray sky. "The Lord gives us mud so we can see where we are. It is preparation for the final grave, the great pit where flesh is one with the mire."

My mind, detached from the need to understand, found a strange liberation in the mechanical act of moving one foot after another, of digging the shovel into the frozen mud. Irony had become a luxury. All that mattered was the next breath, the sip of watered-down coffee, the night when you didn't freeze. It was the peace of automatism, of being just another tool in the great machinery of destruction. The day promised to be long, endless.

The sun finally broke through the wall of clouds, but it only brought a harsh light that made the desolation more visible. The hunched figures followed the pace set by the sergeants, shadows moving in the mud, dragging empty sandbags or trying to lift wooden posts that sank again and again into the mud. An absurd dance, a pantomime of preparation that fooled no one. Here, no one would be a better soldier, only more broken, more empty, closer to being fodder.

Sergeant Schmidt, the one with the pustules, took particular delight in tormenting the Eastern recruits, who did not understand his orders and responded only with blank stares. His screams tore through the air, followed by the sharp crack of his baton against flesh or the ground. We, the "apes," had learned to stay on the periphery, a rat's strategy: move fast or become invisible, blend in with the trash.

León kept us grouped together, a solid mass against the wind of humiliation. His gaze was a constant warning to the others and silent protection for our own. Rojas had fallen silent, his irony drowned out by the monotony of mud and sweat. Only Paco continued to crack jokes, little dark jokes that barely managed to elicit a grimace from our parched lips.

"If we keep this up, we'll put the worms out of work," he muttered as he pushed a wheelbarrow full of mud. "And on top of that, we're not getting paid, and we have less dignity than a mold spore."

The Father, oblivious to fatigue, with an otherworldly smile, had begun to "bless" the wooden posts with a stream of urine, murmuring apocryphal psalms. Sergeant Schmidt saw him. His eyes opened wide with rage, glowing red.

"Hey! You crazy old man! What the hell are you doing?" he shouted, running towards him, baton raised.

León stepped in with a quick movement, without saying a word, a wall of flesh and bone. His presence alone, the way his forty years of fighting, knife fights, and fistfights accumulated in his posture, was enough to stop the sergeant in his tracks. Schmidt hesitated. The Father, serene, finished his ritual, a blessing on misery.

"It is a blessing, my son," said the Father with a toothless smile, his eyes fixed on the sergeant. "So that the rot does not suffocate us before our time, so that the earth will accept us when the hour comes."

Schmidt swallowed hard. Leon's face was a stone carved by despair. The sergeant looked away, annoyed and humiliated, but did not dare to raise his baton. He walked away giving orders to others, taking out his anger on the weakest. We had won a small truce, a respite in the relentless war of degradation.

That afternoon, lunch was a watery broth of rotten potatoes and a piece of stale bread, hard as a brick. We huddled in a corner of the barracks, trying to maintain what little dignity we had left, each of us clinging to our misery as if it were a treasure. Another unit was watching us: a group of Frenchmen, emaciated, in even dirtier uniforms, their eyes filled with an ancient, ancestral hunger that made them look like wolves. One of them, a blond giant with a broken nose, approached our ration.

"Share, comrade?" he asked in broken Spanish, extending a trembling hand, a plea.

León stared at him, his gaze as cold as ice. "This soup is Spanish. And it's not for sharing."

The blond man insisted, a desperate whisper, his voice broken. "We have children, comrade. In the other barracks, they're freezing to death."

Paco let out a dry laugh, rough as sandpaper. "We're all children here, comrade. And we're all starving to death. Go pray to your Marshal Pétain, or your fucking mother, if you still have her."

The tension thickened, tangible like fog. Other Frenchmen moved, forming a circle, their emaciated silhouettes a silent threat. They outnumbered us, and they were desperate, with the glassy stare of those who have nothing left to lose. The Old Man, whom no one knew where he had come from, was now sitting next to me, sharpening his knife with a slow movement, a metallic scrape that filled the air. The glint of steel was the only visible response to the threat, the promise of spilled blood. The blond saw the knife. His gaze hardened, his eyes now like blunt knives.

Before he could take a single step forward, Leon stood up. His height, his bulk, the scar on his cheek, everything spoke of contained violence, of a beast just waiting for the signal. He didn't say a word, just looked at him, and in that look was condensed all the brutality of war. The Frenchman, despite his size, took a step back. His men followed him, murmuring, their voices muffled, but they left, dragging their shadows behind them.

We sat down again in silence. The bread tasted like old cardboard, the broth like ash and the rot of the earth. But we had defended it, inch by inch.

"Civilization is a piece of stale bread," said Rojas in a low voice, without looking at anyone, with the resignation of someone who has seen too much. "And we tear ourselves apart for it. I suppose that's our role. Old wolves, with our claws already blunted.

"No," León corrected him, his voice deep, a hoarse sound coming from the depths of his chest. "Rats. But rats that know how to bite. And they don't let go of their prey, no matter how hard they pull.

I thought of the rats I had seen in the ports of Madrid, in the dark alleys, fighting over scraps, over crumbs. They were efficient, brutally logical, without remorse or ideals. In this hole in the world, we were learning to be like them. The training was not to fight the enemy we were sent to kill, but to survive alongside them, our own people, and ourselves. So that when true hell arrived, at least we would have sharp claws and the pure instinct of the beast.

The day faded into a violet and gray twilight, a last breath from the sky. Fatigue crushed our bones, our muscles were in constant pain, but something had changed. We had marked our territory, won a small symbolic victory on the scale of survival. Not for ideals of homeland or camaraderie, but for the simple and brutal need to continue existing, to secure the next breath. And in the silence of that barracks infested with broken bodies, our little pack of rats had grown a little closer, their bond hardened by violence. At least we were no longer alone, not entirely, not yet.

CHAPTER 3

The rattling of the cattle car marked the monotonous pulse of desolation. We had left behind the training camp, that parody of discipline where fear was trained with beatings and the future was little more than a grimace. Now we were a handful of shadows thrown into the heart of Germany, a nation crumbling under the weight of its rubble and broken promises. Through the cracks in the dirty wood, the landscape revealed itself in ruins, as if the apocalypse had taken root in the earth and was growing with cancerous slowness.

Smoke. Always smoke. Gray columns rising into the sky, sometimes like lazy exhalations, sometimes dense like the ghosts of burning cities. The railroad tracks, twisted like iron intestines, led us through ravaged fields where only the skeletons of trees and the earth remained, churned and bleeding from shrapnel. And amid that lunar landscape, the silent processions. Hundreds, thousands of refugees. Mothers with children wrapped in rags, old people with backs broken under the weight of a lifetime reduced to a miserable bundle. They walked in our direction, or in the opposite direction, without a clear destination, dragging their feet through the frozen mud. Their gazes mirrored our own: empty of questions, stripped of hope. Only the inertia of taking one more step kept them on their feet.

"Look, Narrator," Paco murmured, pointing his chin at an old woman pushing a creaking cart. "Another one who lost the recipe for happiness, if she ever had it. War is a bitch, yes, but it has the gift of making us all equal in ugliness."

Rojas, who until then had been brooding in a corner, slowly raised his head. His eyes, once ablaze with the fury of an ideologue, now held a glassy light, like that of a match about to be extinguished.

"It's not ugliness, Paco," Rojas replied in a hoarse voice. "It's the naked truth. War tears off the masks and shows you that all ideologies are just lies wrapped in shells of heroism. Look at those people. What are they fighting for? For the Thousand-Year Reich? For Mother Russia? No. They'll fight for the next piece of bread, for a night without the cold gnawing at them. They are the flock, and we are the rabid dogs herding them to the slaughterhouse."

León, sitting with his knees drawn up and his rifle resting in his hands, only growled. His pragmatism was a shield, his leadership the echo of an older code forged in action and silence, and he needed no words to express his agreement or his contempt. The Father, oblivious to the conversation, recited his litany of Latin and prophecies. His voice, now a hissing murmur, like the brush of a bat's wing in the dense darkness of the car, spoke of the wrath of God and the pale horsemen who would ride on Europe's last breath, of the bowels of the earth that would open to swallow the wicked like blind worms.

"We didn't get on the horses, Father," I said, more to myself than to him, my voice barely a scratch in the frozen air. "They put us in a rolling wooden coffin."

And so it was. The wagon, a cold and claustrophobic wooden box, vibrated with every jolt, pushing us relentlessly eastward, toward a destination no one dared name. The air was thick, impregnated with the rancid dampness of wood, old sweat, and the pungent stench of fear. We were canned meat, waiting for the moment when they would open us up to expose us to the voracious cold and blind shrapnel.

In the darkest corner, almost melting into the gloom, appeared The Old Man. No one had seen him board the train after the previous station, nor had we

noticed his presence before, but there he was, motionless, the blade of his knife glinting slightly at his waist like a cold promise. His face, furrowed by a thousand lines, was a geography of forgotten battles, a map of scars. He didn't even seem to feel the penetrating cold that chilled us to the bone, as if his own soul were already ice.

"When did you get on, Old Man?" asked Paco, always the first to break the silence, even though deep down he feared the answers he might get.

The Old Man blinked slowly, and his gaze was lost somewhere beyond the wooden walls, perhaps in the frozen fields blurring behind us, or in the icy promise of those that awaited us.

"I don't remember," he said, his voice as scratchy as the rubbing of two dry stones.

That was all he said. Then he sank back into silence, staring into the void, as the train dragged us through the broken arteries of a bleeding empire. The rattling became more and more rhythmic, more insistent, like the beating of a tired heart that refused to give up, even though it knew the blood in its veins was already frozen. Berlin awaited us at the end of that tunnel of decay and extinguished hope. And the train car, in its inexorable slowness, was the promise of a descent into the jaws of the unknown.

CHAPTER 4

The rattling of the cattle car stopped abruptly. It was not just any braking, but a sudden and brutal deceleration that threw us mercilessly against each other. The darkness, already almost absolute, became even denser, pierced by the agonizing groan of twisting metal and the clanging of something heavy, incomprehensible, rushing outside. A deep silence. Then, in the distance, a roar. Another, and another. As if the sky were tearing apart, throwing incandescent splinters of fire at us.

"Shit," Paco muttered, rubbing his head. His flask, miraculously, was still intact, a small bastion of normality in the chaos.

León was already on his feet, a block of muscle and nerve, struggling with the heavy sliding door. The jolt had jammed it, or perhaps the impact from outside had warped it. He kicked it with his boot again and again as the car continued to sway with a final metallic groan. The explosions did not stop; they were getting closer. We felt the shock wave in our chests, a hollow, constant drumbeat. The Father, oblivious to everything but his demons, muttered something in Latin, his voice rough as pebbles swept along by a stream.

"Open that damn door, Leon," Rojas spat, his rifle already at the ready, his gaze fixed on the dark hole of the opening. He, who had seen the worst on the Eastern Front, was always ready for the most terrible ghost, the one we did not yet know.

With one last brutal push, the door gave way. It didn't open conventionally, but collapsed outward with a final creak, revealing a landscape that seemed to have been vomited straight out of a nightmare. It was not a village, but its shroud: charred skeletons of houses, roofs like broken dentures, a thick blanket of dust and smoke devouring the dying light of winter. Our train lay stranded on a side track, parallel to a crushed platform, its own body just another piece of rubble in the desolation.

There were figures. Many. Too many. Bodies.

"Everyone down!" León ordered, a sharp roar that drowned out the still-distant echo of the explosions. He was already outside, moving with the agility of a wounded beast, crouched next to the car, his rifle pointing nowhere in particular and everywhere at once, scanning the debris, his eyes like radar.

We crawled over the frozen ground, the crunch of pebbles under our knees the only sound of our caution. The air. That air. It smelled of quicklime and burnt flesh, a sweet, corrosive, nauseating mixture that stuck to the back of our throats, a taste of recent death. But the sight was even worse, a stab in the heart. The platform, or what was left of its concrete, was littered with lifeless lumps, too many to count, too many to comprehend. They were not fallen soldiers in uniform with weapons. They were men, women, children, their clothes in tatters, many still covered by woolen blankets that had offered them not the slightest protection against steel or the shock wave.

"Fuck," whispered Paco, and the word came out without his usual sarcasm, hollow, like the ringing of a broken bell. He crouched down, seeking protection he knew was illusory behind a pile of smoking railroad ties, his face hardened by a bitterness unknown to him.

Rojas pressed his lips together into a hard line, his face pale under the visor of his helmet, expressionless. I saw him try, with almost palpable desperation, to process the image, to fit it into one of his twisted theories about the meaninglessness of war. But this was not a philosophical abstraction about human madness;

this was flesh, bones, life cut short. This was an open-air morgue, without any possible rhetoric.

The Old Man, impassive as ancient stone, said nothing. He simply slipped out of the car, a ghost made of flesh and silence, a shadow that effortlessly merged with the rubble of the station. His existence was a constant question mark for me, a walking omen, the inescapable silhouette of what we would all end up being if the war decided to drain us of every last particle of our souls.

We moved forward with animal caution, following León's silent trail. Each step raised a fine cloud of dust and ash that covered us with its deathly veil. The platform was a frozen massacre, a gallery of silent horrors. The blood, dark and coagulated, formed macabre patterns on the concrete, and the harsh winter cold had frozen the expressions of panic and pain on many of the disfigured faces. There were no doctors, no nurses, only the grim reaper sitting on his throne of rubble. Suddenly, the distant hum of engines became audible, a murmur growing in the distance. Airplanes. Or tanks.

"There's a bunker. Or what's left of it," said León, pointing with a sharp gesture to a half-buried structure at the end of the platform. More than a shelter, it looked like the mouth of an ancient cave, its entrance boarded up with sandbags gnawed by moisture and timbers rotten with age, about to give way.

The Father raised his wooden crucifix, almost like a weapon, his eyes wide with horror, staring with an intensity that pierced reality. "*Sanguis fundetur super terram in die illa*," he shouted, his deep voice trembling, not with fear, but with feverish conviction. It was prophetic madness that found its truth in that landscape of death. Blood will be spilled on the earth that day. It already has been. And it will be until the last man burns in the hell he has created.

We approached the bunker. The air. A wall of stench hit us: fermented sweat, urine, the metallic sweetness of dried blood, and the sour acidity of entrails. This was not a makeshift medical station; it was the very breath of disease, of exposed entrails, of something worse than death: prolonged, collective agony that never ended. It was a slaughterhouse where the beasts still breathed, and their suffering

was audible. The moans, low at first, almost inaudible in the icy wind, became with each step a chorus that grew clearer, more human, more unbearable. They were the sound of souls that had already left their bodies but remained chained to the earth by the invisible shackles of pain.

León looked at us, his eyes, always hard, two polished pieces of obsidian that reflected nothing but will. "Let's see what's left here. And who we can use." He didn't say "save." The word didn't exist in his vocabulary of survival. He said "use," and in that pragmatic brutality, I understood that, for him, everything was a tool, a scarce resource in the great inventory of death. Even dying lives. It was war stripped of any veneer, of any illusion, raw and stark. And that nakedness, that irremediable truth, froze my soul beyond the German winter.

The moans had turned into a chorus, a constant howl of pain and primal fear that clung to the walls like mold. Rojas stopped short, his rifle dropping a few inches, as if it had suddenly become too heavy for him. His gaze, a spark of contained rage, fixed on León's unyielding back. "Use who, León?" asked Rojas, his voice raspy, rough as sand in a gear. "The dying? How do you use a dying man?" Helplessness burned inside him.

León didn't even bother to turn his head. He just kept going, into the darkness of the bunker, as if the blackness were his natural habitat, his kingdom. There was no time for compassion, we knew that. Nor for questions. But the answer to Rojas' question hung in the icy air, tangible, cold and cruel as an iceberg: to use the dying to remind us how lucky we were to still be walking, or perhaps, and this was the most terrible thing, to make us realize that we were already as dead as they were, only we hadn't yet had the decency to fall.

I felt goosebumps, a cold that penetrated beyond my bones, beyond the German winter. It was not only the cold of the weather, but also that of the soul that was slipping away. I felt that I was no longer part of those who truly breathed, of the living. Just an observer, another ghost, silent, walking among other ghosts with empty eyes. The day did not begin as before, not because of the sunrise, but because of the stench of sulfur and burnt flesh that permeated the breath of the

world. The Father was not wrong: the world had twisted its hinges, morality had decayed to the bone. And we, our essence, were sunk up to our necks in that rot, being uninhabited, a body with nothing inside.

CHAPTER 5

The train, a metal beast exhaling rust and desolation, spat us out into a hole. What was once a town now lay spread out like an open jaw, a collection of broken teeth spat out onto the frozen, cracked earth. Smoke, a perpetual gray shroud, clung to the few skeletons of houses that defied gravity. Each step echoed with the crunch of pulverized tiles and charred beams, a mournful echo of immense and silent death. The cold was not just a layer on the skin; it was an emanation from the earth itself, from the rubble that voraciously absorbed any trace of heat, any glimmer of hope.

León led the way, his rifle swinging with studied slowness over his shoulder. His eyes, eager as a vulture's, scanned the blurred horizon, hunting for any sign of life or threat. Behind him, Paco, always complaining, snorted through clenched teeth about a sharp pain in his groin, a constant lament that was now part of his burden. Rojas, absorbed in his own darkness, kicked a piece of brick mechanically, his gaze lost, oblivious to the crunching, oblivious to the world. The Father, also oblivious, his gaze fixed on the leaden sky, let out a continuous murmur of incomprehensible phrases, a torrent of words that sounded less like a prayer and more like an ancestral curse. I dragged myself behind them, each stride adding to my fatigue, my own shadow dissolving into the vast canvas of desolation.

We found no civilians. Not even the starving silhouette of a dog. The air lacked the distant echo of artillery, that perennial soundtrack of our existence. Only the wind, an invisible specter, whistled among the ruins, carrying the acrid smell of burnt metal and a more insidious essence: that cloying, nauseating sweetness of rotting flesh that we already knew all too well. The Old Man, as usual, had vanished. He was a ghost among the ruins, a silent observer who appeared and disappeared without a trace, an autonomous shadow inhabiting his own time.

We turned down an alleyway. The roof of what must have been a bakery had collapsed, spilling broken sacks of flour onto the ground. The flour, now hardened, formed whitish mounds under the frost, ghosts of snow in the middle of April. It was precisely there, among the absurd remains of a makeshift barricade of shopping carts, broken cabinets, and the skeleton of a piano, that our eyes met theirs.

They were children. Or rather, the childish specters of what they once were. A dozen, maybe fifteen. Their uniforms, designed for grown men, swallowed them up mercilessly, coats that turned them into shapeless lumps. German helmets covered almost half their faces, leaving only bulging eyes and red, runny noses exposed. Their childish hands clutched rifles, some as disproportionate as their own height, others rusty and almost useless pistols that looked like crude, heavy toys. They stood motionless, like statues of salt in a lunar landscape, their weapons pointing toward nothingness, or perhaps toward the abyss itself. They were too small for the terror that wrinkled their features, but not for the desolation that was already withering their souls.

Next to them stood an SS officer. His uniform, immaculate in contrast to the surrounding decay, seemed untouchable. However, his eyes were hidden, covered by a thick white bandage that covered the upper half of his face, sealing the outside world from his gaze. The bayonet on his rifle, fixed in place, glinted with a dull light. As rigid and immobile as the children, he stood in the center of that absurd constellation of armed kids. His posture, almost ceremonial, evoked that

of a wax figure: his baton resting on the churned earth, his gloved hand clinging stubbornly to the hilt of his sword.

León stopped dead in his tracks, a block of stone sculpted by war. His muscles tensed like bowstrings, a predator sniffing the precarious stillness of the air.

"Damn... What the hell is this?" Paco's voice, always insolent, was drowned out by an inaudible squawk, a mixture of revulsion and his darkest humor. "They're kids."

Rojas pressed his lips together until they turned white, his face a tortured map of contained rage. His eyes, inflamed by old wounds that never healed, stared at the bandaged SS officer with visceral hatred, as if that blind man were the embodiment of all his miseries. The Father, oblivious to us, leaned forward, a hoarse whisper emerging from his lips: "...Herod has returned for the innocent. The blood of those who have not sinned will flood the earth, and the lament will be eternal."

They were not soldiers. They were children dressed as scarecrows, cannon fodder for a blind and deaf god. The officer was no warrior either; he was the conductor of a silent orchestra, directing a macabre symphony of ruin with a battalion of specters. The scene was so preposterous, so brutally absurd, that it made you doubt reality itself, wonder if you had not already dissolved into the utter delirium of war. The children, oblivious to our presence, or perhaps too petrified to react, stood firm, their small bodies shivering slightly from the bitter cold, or perhaps from something much more primal than war, in all its brutality, had not yet managed to erase from their souls: an instinctive and uncorrupted fear.

CHAPTER 6

The mouth of the tunnel was a vortex of tar, mud, and broken promises. The miasma of rotten sludge clung to our nostrils, so thick you could almost chew it. After days of crawling through the remains of charred trains and villages devoured by a merciless winter, the entrance to Berlin's sewers promised no refuge, but rather the antechamber of an open grave. SS Captain Otto Klein, a man with a face as expressionless as a cobblestone, had pointed out the crack in the concrete, illuminated only by a dying sun that tinged the horizon with bloody orange.

"This way, useful animals," Klein said, his voice muffled by distance, as if the proximity of our misery disgusted him. "The streets are clean. Down below, what's left of this hole is boiling.

León snorted, a low sound that barely broke the damp silence, but he obeyed. He always obeyed the brutal logic of survival. He tied a dirty handkerchief around his mouth, a useless formality against the stench that promised to rot us from the inside out. The rest followed him in single file. I walked behind Rojas, listening to the irregular rhythm of his breathing, and behind me, Paco, the sergeant, cursing under his breath, his voice a corrosive murmur in the darkness.

"By my balls, this smells like rat shit with bubonic plague," Paco grumbled, spitting in the mud, "there's no other way around it. What the hell kind of war is this? No wine, no women, just fat rats like rabbits fattened on human shit.

"It's the final judgment, Paco," sang El Padre, who was already several meters ahead, a deranged smile lighting up the incipient darkness of his gaunt face. "The purgatory of cities. Soon we'll see the angels, or the demons, which is the same thing when the Father sends them to settle scores."

León didn't even look at him. His eyes, already adapted to the perpetual gloom, scanned every bend in the tunnel like two frozen embers. He was a beast made for this underground hell, his instincts sharper than any hunting knife. There was something in the way he moved, a predatory cadence, that promised a quick and silent death to anyone who got in his way. He had turned us all into his shadows, silent extensions of his own contained rage.

Rojas walked silently, each step a heavy drag. The incident with the child soldiers in the ravaged village of Mil Hojas de la Metralla had tattooed a bitter grimace on his mouth. His idealism, already battered by years of barbarism, had been pulverized against the tiny bodies, turning to ash that now covered his soul. It was no longer the fury of the newcomer, nor the resigned contempt of the veteran. He carried his rifle as an extension of his own emptiness, without looking up from the mud, as if searching for answers in the stagnant waters.

The Old Man was gone. He simply ceased to be, without fuss. No one saw him disappear. One got used to his spectral nature, the way he blended into the shadows and reappeared without warning. He might have been in some damp corner for hours, hunting giant cockroaches for food or praying to nothingness with his machete in his hands. You never knew with him. He was a ghost among the ghosts that populated that dead city.

The feeble light of our flashlights barely pierced the veil of darkness. The concrete walls sweated sticky moisture, glistening under the flickering beam. The constant sound of dripping water, the distorted echo of our own footsteps, and the distant muffled murmur of the bombed-out city above created a macabre and suffocating symphony. Occasionally, the sharp squeak of a rat or the splash of its paws in the stagnant water broke the monotonous concert. They were the undisputed rulers of this forgotten kingdom.

A chill ran through me to my bones. The air down here was heavy, stagnant, laden with the decaying breath of thousands of lives that had perished in the darkness. It was the breath of Berlin, rotting from within, and we, its parasites, crawled with it, deeper and deeper. There was no easy way out. Only more descent, more darkness, more of this icy, fetid dampness.

Suddenly, Leon stopped. He raised a hand, a silent and absolute command. The silence grew even thicker, so thick that I could hear my own heartbeat, racing with tension. Ahead of us, in the unfathomable darkness, there was something. A shapeless lump. It wasn't a rat. It was bigger. The smell suddenly intensified, a sour, familiar aroma that stuck in my throat. Death.

CHAPTER 7

The Russians came, not like a stampede, but like a silent tide, a gray mass creeping through the flayed streets of Berlin. Their advance was not the heroic charge of a victorious army, but the slow crawl of a wounded predator who knows its prey can no longer escape. We were given the most thankless part of the defeat: guarding a column of prisoners. A hundred men, perhaps more, their uniforms reduced to tatters and their faces sculpted by starvation and terror, were pushed forward by German bayonets. We were the last guardians of an empire that was bleeding to death.

The squad, more like a handful of shadows, had entrenched themselves in the monotonous guard duty. León, with his helmet dented and his face a mask of frost, kept one eye on the prisoners and the other on the leaden skies that promised snow or more death. Paco lit a cigarette with what was left of his lighter, the white smoke mingling with the icy breath that came out of his mouth like a ghost. Rojas, his hands clenched around his Mauser, had his eyes fixed on the ground, as if looking for a reason to keep moving forward among the raised cobblestones. The Father murmured in Latin, pointing his bony, trembling finger at a group of prisoners walking barefoot, the soles of their feet already black. The Old Man, as always, was nowhere to be seen; he appeared and disappeared like the last breath of air in a burst lung, a presence as fleeting as hope.

"They're all the same," spat Paco, a strand of tobacco staining his chin. "Same shit, different packaging. It doesn't matter who wins."

"Some have souls to save," replied the Father, his voice as rough as sandpaper, "others don't even have a shadow of one left. Just carrion."

I looked at them, at that procession of hungry ghosts. The cold was an icy bite that gnawed at our bones. Defeat was a leaden slab that dragged us all down. German boots creaked on the cracked ice, bayonets glinted with a lifeless light, devoid of any joy. Suddenly, from the uniform mass of men, a barely audible voice broke the silence. It was not the desperate cry you would expect from a man on the verge of collapse, but a whisper that was both a plea and a lament, an exhalation that barely rose above the rhythmic murmur of their footsteps and the wind.

"Water... please... water..."

That phrase, barely a thread of life, made its way through the icy wind that lashed us. It was not German, nor Russian. Rojas raised his head suddenly, his eyes, previously absent, now fixed on the prisoner. The man was young, but emaciation had aged him, with a split lip and a lost look in his eyes. A blurred tattoo peeked out from under the sleeve of his torn uniform, a five-pointed star smudged by dirt and time. And then, the word rang out again, this time with an urgency that pierced my stomach, not only out of compassion, but out of a buried recognition.

"Water, damn it! For God's sake!"

Rojas tensed, his body straightening with a rigidity I had never seen before. I recognized the accent myself, unmistakable: the rough, weathered Spanish of a man from eastern Spain. The prisoner was one of us. A Republican. A red, in the jargon of the Wehrmacht and SS surrounding us. But for Rojas, he was a mirror, a splinter of his own past stuck in the throat of the present.

"León," Rojas murmured, his voice barely audible, as if he were talking to himself.

León, who had not stopped scanning the leaden horizon, turned his head with glacial slowness. His eyes, two cold pebbles, rested first on Rojas, then on the dying prisoner.

"What is it, corporal?"

"He's Spanish," insisted Rojas, his voice taking on a desperate urgency, and he took a step forward. "Comrade..."

"Hold still, Rojas," said León, and the order cut through the icy air like a gunshot.

Rojas' bayonet trembled, a blade vibrating against his own history. He was the ideologue, the one who had taken up arms on the other side, the one who had been forced to join the Condor Legion to avoid starving to death in a concentration camp or in exile. Now, in front of him, not a ghost, but an open wound from his own past, pleading in a forbidden language.

An SS officer, a fat captain with a face too well-fed for those days of siege, named Otto Klein, approached the group with a barrage of heavy footsteps. He had taken us under his temporary command, and his pretentious superiority smacked of pure cowardice. He had sensed Rojas' unease, the incipient disorder in the ranks.

"Is something wrong, Spanier?" Klein asked, a mocking smile spreading like a grease stain across his lips.

"Nothing, Herr Kapitän," León replied, without deigning to look at him. But his eyes remained fixed on Rojas, a silent, stony warning.

Rojas made a desperate attempt, a last cry against fate. He dropped his Mauser, the metal thudding against the ice, and took another step toward the prisoner, extending a trembling hand, an offer of salvation.

"Comrade! Here!"

The prisoner, seeing the outstretched hand, a glimmer of humanity in that hell, found a spark of hope in his empty eyes. He took a staggering step toward us, toward the promise that lay before him.

But Klein didn't wait. He didn't say a word, didn't blink. Like an automaton, he pulled his Luger from its holster. The shot rang out in the frozen air, a dry,

brutal bang that drowned out the collective gasp, the crunch of snow, and every other sound. The prisoner stopped dead in his tracks, his eyes widening, and a crimson trickle spurted from his forehead, staining the snow. He fell to his knees, then face down, without a cry, without a last breath. His hand, which had tried to reach Rojas's, lay on the ground, just inches from salvation. The five-pointed star tattoo glowed for a fleeting moment in the grayish snow, a last flash of a stolen life.

Rojas stood petrified, his hand suspended in midair, a broken bridge to a ghost. His face did not falter; it shattered. I saw rage and horror fighting in his eyes, but underneath, something deeper was breaking, the last thread that tied him to an old loyalty. Klein holstered his Luger with the neatness of a butcher cleaning his tool. "Problem solved," he said, looking at León, not Rojas, as if the corporal were now nothing more than a broken piece of furniture. "We can't allow disorder, can we?"

León didn't answer. He just looked at Rojas, his eyes hard as ice pebbles, unperturbed. Paco cursed under his breath, a hoarse whisper lost in the wind. The Father continued to murmur his Latin, but now the words sounded like a funeral litany for a dying world. I could only feel the cold, not just in my bones, but in my soul, the same cold that had killed the Frenchman in the ditch, the same cold that awaited us all like a final embrace. The prisoner's body grew cold quickly, a dark, spreading stain on the stained snow. Another ghost in the long procession of the forgotten. And Rojas had now seen not only a comrade die, but his own reflection, the last spark of hope he thought was buried.

The march continued, but the cohesion that remained in our small unit had been shattered. The silence was heavier than before, broken only by the crunch of boots in the snow and the muffled groans of the prisoners. The corpse was left behind, another sign on the endless road to defeat, fading with each step, and with it, the image of Rojas, absorbed, his gaze fixed on nowhere. There were no words, no reproaches, only a void that Klein had opened with his bullet and his smile.

The cold now seemed less physical than emotional, a chill that penetrated to the core of our already battered humanity.

Hours later, with the afternoon tinging the rubble with violet, we were diverted from the main route, away from the direct battlefronts, to an area that, according to Klein, was of "strategic importance." The cold continued to bite, but now it was accompanied by a different silence, a weight that was not only that of defeat, but of impending madness. We arrived at a huge, nineteenth-century building with boarded-up windows and a facade worn down by years and bombings. A rusty, almost illegible metal plaque read: "Heilanstalt Berlin-Buch – Psychiatric Sanatorium."

Inside, the air was no better. A stench of stale disinfectant mingled with the sweet smell of urine and the stench of fear. The long, labyrinthine corridors were lit by sparse, dim light bulbs that barely fought off the shadows. And then we saw them. They weren't soldiers, not really. They were patients. Some wore Wehrmacht uniforms, others oversized or undersized hospital gowns, armed with old rifles, bayonets, or even pieces of wood with nails.

Klein, puffing out his chest like a peacock, explained the situation to us with barely concealed contempt. "These elements," he said, gesturing toward the legion of wretches with a wave of his hand, "are the nation's strategic reserve. Re-educated. Patriotism, order, discipline... everything they need to defend the Reich. They have found their purpose in these last days." His voice resonated with the echo of madness, and his words, far from reassuring us, plunged us even further into absurdity.

One of them, an old man with a white beard, brandished a bayonet tied to a stick, his eyes fixed on an invisible point on the wall, as if fighting ghosts we could not yet see. Further away, a young man hummed a lullaby, cradling his rifle like a child. A woman with thinning hair and a look of eternal panic repeated the numbers of a forgotten phone number over and over again. Reality had not dissolved; it had rotted, fermenting in a thick broth of madness and war. The old

prophecies of the Father, which had once seemed like the ravings of a man on the brink of the abyss, now sounded like a war report.

Paco muttered something about an asylum, but his usual cynicism was tinged with barely concealed horror. León, in his usual silence, observed every corner, every emaciated face, as if searching for a tactic in the delirium. But it was Rojas who seemed to dissolve before my eyes. His dilated pupils reflected the same emptiness as those uniformed wrecks. It was as if, among them, he had found his true comrades in arms, those who had nothing left to lose because they had already lost everything, even their sanity.

The Father crossed himself, a murmur of prayers escaping his dry lips. "These are the children of Cain, punished for their sins," he said, but the conviction in his voice was weak. "Or perhaps," he corrected, glancing at Rojas, "those sacrificed on an altar of iron and lies. Here, in this place, the veil between the world and hell is thinner than ever."

Klein interrupted the contemplation with a click of his heel. "Our mission," he announced, "is to secure the south wing. A nest of Bolshevik rats has infiltrated through the basement tunnels." The tunnels. The word evoked a wave of claustrophobia. "And to do so," he continued, his voice icy, "you will have two experienced guides. Patients from the sanatorium. They know the passageways like the back of their hand. They are volunteers! Patriots!"

Two figures emerged from the shadows. One was a man with wire-rimmed glasses and a shaved head, holding an unlit pipe and a tattered botany book. The other, a young man with feverish eyes and a nervous laugh, wore a rag doll hanging from his belt next to his grenades. They introduced themselves, or rather were introduced by a nurse-soldier with a blank stare: Karl and Ludwig. Klein smiled, a deranged grimace. "They will show you the way. A great example of the Führer's will." The air grew even thicker, heavy with the imminence of deeper madness. The tunnels awaited us, and with them, the possibility that the thin line between the patients and us would be blurred forever.

CHAPTER 8

The air in Berlin was thick, a grainy mixture of dead lime and soot, steeped in the sickly sweet stench of rust and cooked flesh. We walked among ghosts clinging to rubble, not to life. The ruins stood like cathedral skeletons, black holes where windows once were, gaping maws where doors once stood. Each alleyway was a new chapter in the same misery, an open wound on the face of the earth. No one spoke, except for the distant roar of Russian shells falling to the south, a metallic, dull thud that marked the pulse of the dying city.

León led the way, his stride that of a beast that knows where its prey is. He wasn't looking for a map, but for the most direct route to the heart of the destruction. His silhouette loomed large and menacing against the smoke rising from some distant fire, smoke that promised more smoke. We followed him like hunting dogs: Paco, with his rifle slung over his shoulder and a stony grimace on his lips; Rojas, his eyes sunken, his youth turned into a shadow that dragged the weariness of a hundred years; the Father, dragging his feet, his torn cassock waving like a frayed banner of madness; and the Old Man, who appeared and disappeared among the piles of bricks as if he were an extension of the ruin itself. I walked alone, recording every detail, knowing that my only task was to remember the horror so that the horror would exist, so that it would not die without a witness.

"They look like crow's nests," said Paco, breaking the silence like glass. His chin pointed upward, toward an indistinct point in the gray sky.

The image stuck in my mind like a rusty nail, a vision that pierces your soul. From a twisted lamppost, a child's body hung, swaying gently in the breeze. Another, and another, a macabre rosary of children in Hitler Youth uniforms, executed for desertion. Their faces were masks of frozen terror, their eyes open to the gray sky that had not wanted them. Their faces still showed a hint of faded innocence, the last glimmer of what they could have been. I wondered what heaven would have done with them if it had wanted them, if it had offered them mercy.

"It's the natural order, Paco," said Rojas, his voice a metallic, biting echo. "First the children, then the traitors, then the generals. It's the logic of the snake biting its own tail, devouring itself. In the end, only the guardian angels will remain, hanging from their own balls and wondering who the hell they were supposed to protect."

Captain Otto Klein tripped over a piece of rubble and almost fell flat on his face. His once immaculate uniform was now a map of dust and fear, each wrinkle a confession. He composed himself with forced dignity, but I saw the tremor in his hands as he tried to wipe a non-existent stain from his lapel. His face was pale and sweaty, like a soaked rag. "Unit, hold the line," he muttered, his voice a thread that the wind almost carried away. He was no longer an officer; he was a mediocre actor playing a role he had forgotten, reciting lines without conviction. "We can't stop... for... for these things."

León didn't even turn around. His response was a growl, a guttural sound that meant "yes, we're going to stop, if I feel like it." He approached the lamppost and stared at it with a ferocity that was neither pity nor rage, but pure understanding. As if he were seeing the inevitable fate of us all, a photograph of our own future. He raised his rifle and fired twice at the body of the nearest child. The impact caused the figure to sway harder, like a broken pendulum, but the rope remained

intact. He wanted to give it rest, a final act of brutal mercy. He couldn't. There was no rest for anyone in Berlin.

The Father raised his wooden crucifix, his bulging eyes shining with a feverish light, as if the apocalypse were his true home.

"Quis ut Deus?" he babbled, his Latin deranged, the words lost in the howling wind, in the clamor of the wounded city. "Who is like God? These are the last days, brothers. The worm that never dies and the fire that never goes out. These children... they are seeds of hell, watered by the wrath of a god who has gone mad."

Paco crossed himself with a distracted, almost mocking gesture, like an automaton. "Damn it, Father, couldn't wrath be a good cognac? These Germans... always with their ceremonies, even for their last breath. What a habit of complicating death.

We continued on our way, the thick air still heavy with the specter of the children. Every building was an open wound. Every pile of bricks, a silent testimony to a life destroyed. Women with headscarves passed by us pushing empty baby carriages, their faces wrinkled like ancient parchment, their eyes old and tearless. Old men in uniforms too big for their shrunken shoulders carried panzerschrecks, their gazes lost in the mist of a past that no longer existed, or a future they did not want to see. The war had blurred ages and distinctions, creating a single type of existence: that of the survivors. Children hanging, old men armed, women with death in their eyes. Berlin was not a city; it was a mass grave in real time, a gigantic ossuary where every ruin was an exposed bone. And we, the rats, were digging among them, looking for something to eat, something to kill, something to make us feel that we were still alive. For now, we only found smoke and the certainty that the end was near.

A few meters ahead, Leon stopped abruptly. We entered what was left of an apartment building, barely a concrete shell. The basement, surprisingly intact, smelled of dampness and stale hope. There, in the dim light, were the last civilian defenders of that area: a young woman, Elsa, with a K98 rifle that was too big for her, her brown eyes full of contained fury; a trembling old man in a Volkssturm

uniform with a look that had seen too much; and a teenager, not much older than the children at the streetlight, clutching an MP40 submachine gun as if it were his only possession in the world. The fire from a small bonfire illuminated their exhausted faces.

"Are you reinforcements?" Elsa asked, her voice surprisingly steady. The tip of her rifle did not waver.

León let out another of his grunts. "We're heading west. Looking for a road."

The old man coughed, a dry, hollow sound. "There is no road. The bridge on Lützowstrasse... they blew it up an hour ago. Russian artillery keeps falling. There's nothing left east of the Spree."

A titanic roar shook the ground. Fragments of concrete fell from the ceiling. The Father murmured a prayer in Latin.

"Damn it," said Paco. "We need to cross the river. It's our only way out."

Elsa looked at us, weighing our desperation against her own. "There's a sewer entrance nearby. It leads under the Spree, to the other side. It's the only way. But the water is freezing and... it's not guaranteed."

"Not guaranteed?" asked Rojas, his voice thick with bitter sarcasm. "Is anything guaranteed here, besides shit and death? Tell us where it is, woman."

León nodded, his decision a foregone conclusion before the words were spoken. It was the logic of a cornered predator.

The teenager, who had been silent until then, dared to speak. "I can guide you. I know the tunnels. But... it's dark. And there are rats. Lots of them."

"A mouse more or less, what does it matter?" muttered El Viejo, his voice hoarse, emerging from the shadows. "In the end, we're all rats."

Elsa led us to a heavy iron gate in the darkest corner of the basement. The air emanating from the opening was cold and dense, laden with the stench of decay and the effluvia of a dying city. A steep descent down slippery, rusty metal stairs disappeared into absolute darkness. The light from our flashlights barely pierced the darkness that swallowed everything.

León was the first to descend, his massive figure disappearing into the abyss. He was followed by the young guide, then Paco, his rifle pressed against his chest. Rojas didn't miss the opportunity for one last bad joke about the vacation that awaited us in the sewers. The Father, after a final prayer, crossed himself and clutched the crucifix, his feet searching for the steps with the caution of someone descending into hell. Klein hesitated for a moment, his face even paler in the light of the flashlights. I gently pushed him from behind. The Old Man simply followed, just another shadow in the darkness. And I followed them all, each step a deeper descent into the rot of Berlin, toward a new level of hell that awaited us underground.

CHAPTER 9

The air hit us with a constant punch of burnt gunpowder, pulverized lime, and the sweet stench of still-warm blood. Berlin, under that yoke of rubble, no longer knew the sky. Only a perpetual dome of thick smoke and smoldering rubble, bleeding soot over everything. We moved like frightened rats through the sewers of a dead city, between alleys that had swallowed entire neighborhoods and the memory of their people. The sound of gunfire was no longer a noise, but the heartbeat of an endless hell.

León, leading the way, was a whirlwind of fists, rifle butts, and the blade of his shovel, sharp as an old machete. He cleared a path through the maze of rubble, transforming the shadows that fell upon us into bundles of inert flesh. There were no bullets left for close range; only nicked steel, tense muscles, and a silent rage that smelled of desperation. I saw his shovel strike a Russian's jaw, a wet crack that was lost in the orchestra of screams, the nearby roar of machine guns, and the distant explosion of a mortar.

Paco was panting beside me, his lungs rasping like a worn file. His T-shirt, soaked through, clung to his body like a second skin. He swung the neck of a broken bottle he was holding like a makeshift club, striking a young Russian soldier in the throat before he could raise his bayonet. The sound was like wet fabric tearing, like life unraveling. Paco didn't even blink. He just wiped the

sweat from his forehead with a forearm stained with soot and something darker, something sticky.

"One less for the slaughterhouse," he muttered, his voice hoarser than an old dog's bark. I didn't know if he was referring to the Russian who was collapsing or to us, who were still standing.

Rojas had been emptied of everything he once was. He was no longer a thinking man, but a chain reaction. He moved with manic energy, his bayonet an uncontrolled sting, his helmet lost somewhere along the way. His hair, soaked with sweat and dust, stuck to his forehead. I saw his eyes, and there were no longer any philosophical debates in them, only the fire of blind rage, his teeth clenched as if he wanted to bite the air. I saw him struggling with a Russian soldier, both rolling over a pile of broken bricks, their bodies entangled in a dance of death. A muffled gurgle, and Rojas stood up, breathing heavily, a broken brick in his hand and a dark stain spreading across the other man's chest, like ink on paper.

We were approaching a crossroads, yet another crossroads in that dismembered city. Leon pointed his rifle toward the open mouth of what was once a bakery. The windows were torn out, their sockets empty like dead eyes. The entrance, an irregular hole in the wall, promised respite, a brief respite from the open-air carnage, some cover. A chance to take a deep breath. Or to die a little slower, between the smell of stale bread and death.

The urge to reach it was brutal. The air vibrated with nearby explosions, like giant drums shaking the ground beneath our worn boots. I stumbled over a limb, an invisible obstacle, falling almost at the same time as a burst of submachine gun fire swept the wall where I had been a second before, leaving a scar of holes. My rifle felt heavy, an anchor to my exhausted body, a painful extension. The bayonet, already nicked from use, seemed to groan in my hands.

The Old Man, as always, made not a sound. He glided among us like a shadow among other shadows, more efficient than anyone else, a knife in each hand, as silent as falling snow. I saw him disappear behind a group of Russians hiding behind an overturned truck, seeking to ambush us. It was a blink, an exhalation,

and three bodies fell without a cry. The knives moved with supernatural efficiency, no splatter, no hesitation. It was like watching a wolf hunting in the night: pure predatory mechanics, without a shred of emotion or remorse. I wondered if ever, in some distant past, that man had been human.

The bakery entrance swallowed us up. A dark, protective mouth, a momentary pause in the whirlwind of battle. We rushed in, stumbling over the debris that carpeted the floor, the smell of stale bread and ancient death clinging to the walls, to every corner. The interior was a cavern of collapsed shelves, ghosts of wood and metal, sacks of flour petrified by time and moisture, the skeletal remains of what might once have been a counter. A grim sanctuary for the living seeking to hide from the dead.

The Father, who had run alongside him with a strength that did not seem his own, fell to his knees amid the flour and rubble, a white cloud rising around him. His rosary, clutched with the desperation of a shipwrecked man clinging to a plank, hit the ground with a faint tinkling sound. He looked up, his eyes glassy and cloudy, like those of a prophet who sees the end of time, and a murmur emerged from his lips, cracked with thirst and fear.

"Et terra mota est, et petrae scissae sunt... et monumenta aperta sunt..." His voice was a thread, a litany of the damned, a spell for a world that no longer listened to God.

Paco glanced at him sideways, his skepticism still intact, though fragile.

"And what does the mad priest say now, storyteller? That the dead are rising? There was a bitter, short laugh. "We were already fed up with them when they were lying down.

I leaned against a splintered wall, trying to catch my breath, which the city was stealing from me, my chest burning, each breath a fire. The sounds of the battle outside, though muffled by the thick walls, were constant, a beast roaring relentlessly, surrounding our fragile refuge with its hot breath. My mind, a jumbled mosaic of images and sounds, was beginning to fray at the edges, like an old rag. Was this now, or was it yesterday? Or last week? The faces of the fallen mingled

with those of the living, indistinguishable in my fevered memory. We were all just shadows dancing in the same endless, collapsed dream.

CHAPTER 10

The stench of burning flesh and the ancestral fear of men permeated the dense, ashen air surrounding the Reich Chancellery. No, it wasn't sugar. It was the metallic sweetness of flesh roasted by fire. We had been thrown into the jaws of a dying dragon, right where its heart, the bunker, still beat with a frantic, muffled pulse. The vicinity of the Führer's lair was a pressure cooker of madness. SS soldiers with eyes glazed over from methamphetamines ran back and forth, their screams echoing like broken echoes among the skeletons of buildings. There were children, barely able to hold up the Panzerfausts they had been given as deadly toys, their faces dusted with soot and transfigured by terror. And old men. Many old men in uniforms that were too big for them, waving rusty bolt-action rifles as if they could stop the apocalypse with a hunting hoax.

Our captain, Otto Klein, who until then had been the embodiment of Prussian arrogance and pedantic discipline, now crumbled like a rag doll under the acid rain of defeat. His darting eyes scanned every dark tunnel, every pile of crumbling bricks, looking for a crack to slip through. He had long since stopped giving us orders, reduced to muttering incoherencies about honor and glory as his shiny boots sank into the mud of despair. Leon watched him with that dangerous stillness, the same stillness an old dog devotes to its master when he has lost his mind, knowing that the end is near.

Paco, beside me, spat out a piece of chewed tobacco, his hawk-like gaze fixed on Klein.

"Look at the clown, Narrator. He looks like he's about to cry his pants off. The end of the operetta.

Rojas, his rifle leaning against a crumbling wall that still refused to fall, did not laugh. His weathered, stern face was tense, his eyes fixed on an SS soldier who, a few meters away from us, was laughing hysterically as he emptied the magazine of his Sturmgewehr into the leaden clouds.

"He's not a clown, Paco," said Rojas, with unusual harshness in his voice. "He's the scum that brought us to this hole. And scum always finds the nearest sewer. Don't expect anything else."

A cold, clammy rumor ran through the makeshift trenches and flooded basements. We had heard it before, fragmented, a veiled hint, but now it was a sentence almost whispered by the same wind of death that swept through the city. The Führer had committed suicide. The news came to us like a foul wind, a whisper that clung to the walls. León didn't even blink; for him, gods and monsters were equally useless when gunpowder spoke. Rojas let out a dry, humorless laugh. "The broad-brush painter has run out of canvas," he said. Paco just shrugged his shoulders, resigned. "Another one who leaves without paying the bill." There was no surprise in their reactions, only the confirmation of a long-anticipated farce. If God had shot himself, what the hell were the apostles doing in this hell without salvation? The idol of millions, the architect of this carnage, had collapsed onto his own throne of lies. And we, his last rats, were defending an empty tomb. The news provoked neither tears nor anger, only an even deeper resignation, a final nail in the coffin of any hope we might have had.

León had gathered us in a small room below ground level, with a ceiling that oozed moisture and dust, a constant cold sweat. It was not a refuge, it was a stone cell, a temporary mausoleum. The explosions outside shook the foundations with a dull fury, sending debris flying and promising imminent collapse. The Father, oblivious to the storm brewing, recited in Latin with a cavernous, ancient voice,

his feverish eyes fixed on a damp patch on the wall that he, in his delirium, seemed to interpret as the image of a crucified saint or a lurking demon. The Old Man sat in a corner, his back against the wall, motionless, like a sculpture of dried flesh and tendons. He did not even deign to look at Klein, who was fidgeting nervously, wiping the sweat from his forehead with the back of his gloved hand, his gestures betraying a growing panic.

Suddenly, Klein stood up with false determination, a glint of desperation in his eyes.

"We have to... we have to find an evacuation point. This is unsustainable. This position is suicide."

His voice was a precarious thread, barely audible above the incessant roar of Russian artillery, which sounded like the final thunder. But his eyes, for a fleeting moment, met León's. And in them there was not the order of a superior, but a plea, a pathetic request and an abysmal fear.

León said nothing. He just stood up slowly, his elongated shadow cast on the ceiling under the flickering, ghostly light of a tallow candle. The silence that followed was more oppressive than the cannon fire.

"Evacuation, Captain?" León's voice was a deep growl, a warning.

Klein cowered, a man falling apart.

"Yes, we must... we must regroup in another position. As far away from here as possible. There are routes, I know. We can..."

It was a crude lie, a cowardly and brazen escape. He intended to drag us with him, to use our presence as a pathetic cover for his own miserable getaway. But there was no "we can" in his tone, no "regroup." Only a desperate and selfish "I" echoed.

León's eyes, usually cold and calculating, took on a wild, primal gleam. There was no uncontrolled anger on his face, only a fatal understanding, an acceptance of the inevitable. He removed his helmet with the deliberate slowness of a predator preparing for the final blow. The heavy matte steel, dented by a thousand battles and splattered with the memory of blood, glinted faintly in the dim light.

Klein saw it. We all saw it. A silent groan choked in his throat, a bubble of air and terror. He had no time to react. The first blow struck his temple with a dry, nauseating crack, like an old branch snapping underfoot. Klein fell to his knees, his hands clutching his head, from which warm blood was already spurting, opening a path of no return. The second blow, to the back of his neck, bent him over the ground, his body shaking like a broken automaton. The third blow left him motionless, blood spreading like a dark and perverse flower in the dust that enveloped us all.

León didn't say a word. Not even a sigh. He adjusted his helmet, fastening his chin strap with a familiar, precise gesture, as if he had just crushed an annoying insect on the wall. The sound of gunshots and explosions outside filled the brutal, ghostly silence of the room once again. No one moved. No one spoke. The Father, oblivious to the violence that had just been perpetrated, continued reciting his macabre Latin, like a mantra for the damned. Paco and Rojas looked at the Captain's lifeless body, then at León, and finally at nothing, their faces impassive and hardened. The Old Man remained motionless, oblivious, like a stone gargoyle. I looked at the Captain, at his disfigured face, and realized that his uniform was still pristine, almost new. He had seen no mud other than that on his shoes. And now, even that didn't matter. Morale had not vanished; it had simply never existed beyond speeches. Only obedience, brutal and blind, to the law of survival. And, from that moment on, to León's law.

The Father, as if Klein's blood had unlocked something in his broken mind, interrupted his litany. He looked up, his wide eyes fixed on the fresh blood on the floor, but he seemed to see something else, far away.

"I've already cut it off, my son," he whispered, his eyes lost in the candle flame, or in a much older fire. "A long time ago. For the love of the sacred. A young man... a heretic. His laughter desecrated the altar. His flesh was weak, sinful. I... I was the arm of the Lord. A single cut. Clean. To restore silence to the house of God, to the sanctity that had been sullied. His blood was an offering.

The echo of his words filled the space, colder than the heat of battle. I looked at Leon, who now scrutinized each of us with an inscrutable gaze, an authority newly cemented by violence. The time for waiting was over. It was time to leave the brief respite of that cell, to plunge back into the chaos, into the maelstrom of battle. We had to find an underground escape route, a sewer, a tunnel, something to get us out of hell, as the Russian assault intensified, its scorching breath on the back of our necks. The city was bleeding to death, and we were just a drop in its final torrent.

CHAPTER 11

Hell didn't smell like sulfur. It smelled like molten iron, scorched earth, and the metallic sweetness of blood evaporating in the frozen air. The howl of the Katyushas was no longer background noise; it was the heartbeat of the dying city, a vibration that embedded itself in our bones and promised to disintegrate anything insolent enough to remain standing. The flames licked the leaden sky, painting it an apocalyptic orange that made every piece of rubble look like the silhouette of a newly awakened demon.

We had arrived at this meat grinder weeks ago, a handful of men skinned alive in Stablatt, dragging ourselves inch by inch through a dying Reich. Berlin had been our last hope, an escape from the madness, but the city was nothing more than an ossuary, a charred stage where the air itself was heavy with the sweat and fear of the damned.

We were in what remained of a checkpoint, an open scar of broken bricks and twisted beams that offered little shelter. The entrance to the bunker was a hundred meters away, a hole in the ground that no longer looked like a refuge, but the open mouth of an oven. The Russians were coming from all sides, like a plague of armored locusts. Their tanks were masses spewing shrapnel and fire, followed by infantry shouting in a guttural language, a chorus of hungry predators.

León roared orders, his voice torn apart by smoke and exasperation. He fired his MP40 in short, brutal bursts, moving with stubborn cadence among the few who still held their position. He had the unyielding ferocity of a cornered beast, a refusal to yield that understood no defeat, only rage. His eyes, reddened by soot, searched for any crack, any weakness he could exploit, as if there were still a chance to gain more than a few seconds of life.

"Fire! On three!" he shouted, pointing the barrel at a group of Russians flanking the nearest wall.

Paco, with a submachine gun that looked like a toy in his thick hands, emptied a magazine on them. A twisted smile stained his face, a mixture of terror and black humor bordering on madness. The smoke made him cough, but even so, he let out a loud laugh that barely pierced the din.

"These guys are going to find out what a funeral with fireworks is like, damn it!" His voice was pure sarcasm, a cry that denied the pain. He put his hand to his side, where an old wound had started to ooze again, without stopping shooting. The grimace of pain stuck to his laughter like an oil stain.

Rojas, crouched behind a pile of sacks that were no longer sand but dust and gravel, seemed to have reached the limit of his own disbelief. He had abandoned any attempt at harangue or discussion. His eyes, once filled with intellectual fire, now reflected only a cold emptiness. He fired his Kar98k with an almost ritualistic slowness, as if each bullet were the last syllable of an epitaph. He looked at the Russians without hatred, only with the disgust of someone watching the endless repetition of a bloody farce. It was absurd theater, and he was the last forced spectator.

A mortar exploded a few meters away, and the shock wave threw us all against the rubble. The air was filled with the taste of lime and rust. When I got up, the Father was on his knees, his arms outstretched, his cassock in tatters. He did not look like a frightened man, but a prophet in ecstasy. His eyes, once sunken, were now white and shining with a feverish light, and words poured from his lips in a torrent of Latin and broken Spanish.

"Ignis eternus! The Forge of the Beast opens! The demons of the steppe come to claim their due! O Berlin, whore of Babylon, your end has come!" he shouted, his voice barely audible above the ghostly wail of sirens still sounding uselessly somewhere in the city. His madness was a shroud of sound.

León looked at him for a second, a fleeting shadow of recognition in his feverish eyes, but he did not stop his machine gun. He was a specter, just another element in the landscape of madness. The Old Man, for his part, was not there. Or at least, I couldn't see him. His absence had become as common as his unexpected appearance. He was part of the chaos, a shadow dancing on the margins of the slaughter, waiting for the moment of his particular harvest.

I clung to my Mauser, its cold, familiar butt in my sweaty hands. Each bullet I fired was an echo, a grain of sand falling into a clock that no longer measured time, but extinction. I didn't feel fear, it wasn't that. It was a strange lucidity, the realization that all of this—the fire, the noise, the blood, the screams—was the end of a feverish dream. The war wasn't going to end us; it had already ended us. We were just ghosts dancing in the ashes, and I was the last to recognize it.

The whistle that followed the mortar explosion was not the end of the world, but its noisy dessert, a shower of hot gravel that scraped my helmet and my soul. The air, already thick with smoke, became even more opaque, laden with lime and a bitter breath of metal and defeat. I sat up with the taste of blood and dust in my mouth, my left ear buzzing like a nest of angry bees. The realization settled in, cold and complete: we were already dead, this was just the hellish epilogue.

Shadows moved among the ruins. Closer. The Russian shouts were no longer distant, now vibrating in the air like an icy slap. A tank shell tore a chunk out of the wall a few meters away, raining down debris and dust. León's eyes searched for something in the fog of gunpowder, not a plan, but pure, burning rage. With a guttural growl, he lunged toward the edge of what remained of the makeshift barricade. His MP40 spewed a burst that mowed down three dark figures that had come too close. It was useless covering fire, yes, but necessary. There was an

animal ferocity in him, the same ferocity that had allowed him to survive so many hells. But even the strongest will erodes.

Paco coughed harder than before, the blood no longer concealed by smoke, now staining his beard. He crawled next to me, his old submachine gun scraping against the concrete. The skin on his face, weathered by a thousand hangovers and a thousand battles, now had a greenish, almost deathly hue.

"Damn these Russians, they have no manners!" he said, his voice hoarse, the same crooked smile, now more tense than ever. "Not even a shot of vodka before gutting you! How inconsiderate!"

His fingers trembled visibly as he reloaded, but he didn't stop aiming. The wound in his side must have been hell on earth. He could see it in his eyes, in the nervous twitch of his jaw, but laughter remained his last and most desperate shield.

Rojas no longer made any sounds, not even grunts of annoyance. His face was a mask of soot and exhaustion, his skin taut over his sharp cheekbones. Each shot from his Kar98k was more of a sigh than an offensive, a mechanical gesture of exhaustion. He looked up for a moment, and his eyes met mine. There was a silent plea, a question that needed no words: What for? It was the echo of all the ideological arguments, of all the broken ideals, summed up in the emptiness of a gaze.

The Father had risen completely, ignoring the shrapnel whistling around him. He stood in the center of the fire, like a beacon of madness. His cassock, soaked with sweat and grime, fluttered like a rag in the wind of devastation.

"The horsemen ride! The ungodly souls will be purified in this crucible of metal and fury! Here, in the tomb of empires, the seven-eyed Lamb unleashes his wrath!" His voice, raspy and mystical, was barely audible above the roar of battle, but his presence was imposing, almost ghostly, a walking omen.

There was no comfort in his words, only confirmation of the barbarity. I watched the Father, Leon, Paco, Rojas. We were pieces of a broken machine, each with our own way of falling apart. The end was imminent; we could feel it in

the thick air, in the creaking of the crumbling buildings, in the metallic stench of death that clung to our clothes. It was not defeat, it was dissolution, a return to the nothingness from which we should never have emerged.

A Russian tank, a T-34 covered in mud and debris from some previous battle, turned its turret with menacing slowness. Its cannon, thick and dark as a bottomless pit, pointed directly at our position. Time stretched out, became dense. We knew what was coming. There was no escape, nowhere to run. Only to wait for the blow that would blow us apart like empty shells.

León, who had seen the same deadly threat, roared. Not an order to a man, but a beastly warning.

"Down!" he shouted.

And without waiting for anyone to react, he lunged toward an abandoned MG42 machine gun a few meters away, among the smoking rubble, as if he alone could stop the advance of an entire army. It was madness. A final act of defiance, an explosion of rage before the end. He wasn't fighting to win, but to give his all for every inch of this fucking hell, taking as many souls with him as possible.

The steel beast roared. A blinding flash spat out shrapnel, and the world became a hammer blow on a giant anvil. The impact threw us into the air, a whirlwind of dirt, bricks, and twisted metal. The air condensed into an invisible fist that squeezed our chests until it knocked the breath out of us. Then silence: not real silence, but the silence of broken eardrums, a sharp, cruel ringing that replaced the roar. I fell face down on a bed of gravel and dried blood. My helmet had cushioned some of the blow, but the back of my neck hurt as if I had been beaten.

When my vision cleared, or at least stopped dancing, I saw the crater. A jagged, smoking mouth where the makeshift barricade had once stood. The T-34 had taken its toll. The MG42 machine gun that León had tried to reach was now a tangle of molten iron, embedded in the concrete. All that remained of León was a blurred silhouette in the center of the newly created hell, a motionless form that was beginning to fade into the smoke and dust. He had thrown himself forward.

Toward death. He had served as a shield, as a last act of rage, and in doing so had given us a few seconds, a breath of life more. It was his way of dying, without giving up an inch.

Paco, beside me, was convulsing. His submachine gun had disappeared, and now he was clutching his side with both hands, his fingers white on the dark stain that spread mercilessly. His eyes, fixed on León's figure, had lost what little hilarity they had left. A deep cough shook his body, and a trickle of blood spurted from his lips, mixing with the soot.

"León... that bastard," he murmured, his voice barely a muffled croak. "Always the same... always rushing into the fire.

There was no reproach in his words, only bitter resignation, that of someone who had seen his brother fall as he always knew he would. It was a hoarse lament, the last joke the war would allow him, that of mourning a dead man who had sought his own death with honor, not for his own sake.

Rojas, miraculously unharmed by the explosion, remained crouched behind what little remained of a wall. He did not shoot. His Kar98k lay inert on the ground. His gaze was fixed on the exact spot where León's body was disappearing. There was no emptiness in his eyes now, but a cold, devastating, contained rage. He brought his hands to his face, a slow, painful gesture, as if trying to tear off his skin so that the air would not burn him. He had hated him, he had argued with him ad nauseam, but León was the axis, the magnet that held them all together. Without him, Rojas's internal compass, and ours, had been completely thrown off course, leaving us adrift in a sea of meaninglessness.

The Father, however, seemed to have been given new life by the explosion. Shrapnel had torn his cassock even further, and a superficial cut was bleeding on his forehead, but he didn't notice. He had approached the edge of the crater, his mouth open, his arms outstretched toward León's figure, as if blessing or cursing him.

"The Lion has fallen! The beast has been struck down in its fury! The spirit of the flesh returns to the mud! Praise the Lord who has shown us this!" he shouted,

his words charged with insane euphoria. His voice rose above the distant rattling of machine guns, a mad chant in the midst of the apocalypse. He believed that León's death was a sign, a sacrifice, another piece in his puzzle of revelation.

I crawled toward Paco, the Mauser hanging from my hand. My skin bristled as I felt the cold absence of the Old Man. He wasn't there, of course. He was never there when you expected him to be. It was the only certainty in that chaos. His instinct had taken him away before the impact, or perhaps he had simply dissolved into thin air like a wisp of smoke. He was a ghost, a shadow. And now that Leon had fallen, that shadow of the Old Man was the only constant force, the only promise of unpredictability we had left.

The world continued to turn around us, relentless. The Russians, emboldened by the explosion and the relative silence of our position, advanced faster. I could hear their boots dragging over the rubble, their guttural voices already too close. The line between fighting and surrender blurred with every passing second. Without Leon, the fight had a different taste, bitter and lonely. We were just drifting pieces, waiting for the next tide to hit. We weren't men in retreat, we were simply what was left, the detritus of a war that had already been won.

The scrape of boots on pulverized concrete, the guttural shouts—the Russians were already upon us. The smell of burnt metal mingled with that of their bodies, sweat, and fresh gunpowder. There were too many of them, a relentless tide pouring over the ruins, their silhouettes magnified by the distant fires. They were no longer a threat; they were an inescapable sentence.

Paco was struggling with a wet, wrenching cough. The stain on his side had spread, dark and sticky, and his fingers were visibly trembling. He tried to sit up, a grimace of pain contorting his face, but his eyes searched the leaden sky, where smoke mingled with low clouds. He wasn't looking for God, but for a target for his last blasphemy.

"Fuck you all!" he spat with a last breath of rage and bile, his voice a dying rattle. "All of you! And the one above first! Bastards!"

A final violent cough shook his body, and a thicker stream of blood escaped from his mouth, mixing with the soot on his lips. His eyes remained fixed, glassy, on the sky that did not respond to his challenge. His hand, still clenched over the wound, relaxed. The submachine gun, abandoned, rolled to a stop next to his head, a silent witness to his last act of bravado. Paco the Sergeant, the jester of the apocalypse, had met his end laughing at the abyss. Or, at least, insulting it with everything he had left, sarcasm his banner until the very last drop.

Paco's death was the catalyst for Rojas. A flash crossed his empty eyes, not of hope, but of icy fury. He didn't reach for his rifle. His hands clutched a pile of grenades, as if they were the last arguments in a lost argument against human stupidity. His gaze lingered for a moment on Paco's lifeless figure, then on me, and finally on the torrent of Russians already climbing the nearby rubble.

"I've had enough of listening to your bullshit!" he shouted, his voice, once sharp and cerebral, now a primal roar that rose above the din. "Choke on your fucking victory!"

With a cry that was a mixture of despair and defiance, he lunged at the Russians. He didn't run; he threw himself. His silhouette rushed forward, the grenades in his hands like macabre offerings, the rage of trampled reason. There was a series of deafening explosions, an orgy of fire and metal that took out several Russians and, undoubtedly, himself. The wall of men cracked for an instant, a respite that only served to accentuate the void it left behind. His sacrifice, as futile as all the battles we had fought, was a final act of protest against a universe that was determined to erase any glimmer of meaning. He did not want to die without his death carrying with it a modicum of incendiary rage.

The Father, oblivious to everything, followed his own gospel of ashes. He had moved toward the red and orange light of the nearest fires, like an insect attracted to the flame. He did not look at the Russians, or at the bodies of León or Paco, or at the cloud of smoke where Rojas had disappeared. His arms were raised again, his scorched cassock fluttering in the hot wind. Shrapnel had torn his tunic even

further, and a superficial cut was bleeding on his forehead, but he did not notice, immersed in his vision.

"The great whore is consumed! The incense of her iniquity ascends to the throne of the Lamb! O children of the night, your punishment is fire and eternity!" His eyes, fixed on the sky, seemed to see beyond the battle, beyond the ruined city, in a macabre ecstasy, his mouth drooling. He seemed to be inviting the fire to consume him, to merge with the destruction he had so often prophesied.

I remained silent, clutching my Mauser, the only piece of metal that felt familiar in that madhouse of flesh and fire. The Russians were regrouping, their voices angrier, their boots heavier. The brief respite that Rojas had bought us was coming to an end. I was alone, or almost alone. You can't fight the dead. You can't reason with the mad. I felt the pulse of despair, not as a shrinking fear, but as a cold rage settling in my chest. Run away? Where to? Berlin was a trap of flesh and bone, and the outside world, if it still existed, was not waiting for us with open arms.

The Father's voice, delirious and melodious, pierced my skull. Was the war the final judgment or just a bloody farce? I crawled to where Paco had been. The metal of the Mauser burned my hand. One last look at the lifeless body, then at the smoking stain where Rojas had immolated himself. The Father, consumed by his vision, was no longer of this world. And the Old Man... the Old Man, of course, was gone. He had vanished, as always, when the air became too thick with death. As if the earth swallowed him up and spat him out into another hell, he was the only one who knew how to truly disappear.

But the Old Man's disappearance was a skill I would never possess. My feet did not know how to float, my bones refused to dissolve into smoke. I was flesh, earth, and memory, and the ground clung to me stubbornly. The sharp hiss of a nearby flame made me turn my head. The Father had moved even closer to the fire, the tongues of flame already dancing around his cassock. He had not fled, no. He had surrendered himself, a lamb on the pyre, his face illuminated by a yellow glow that stripped him of any human features.

"Amen! Amen to the great bonfire! Glory be to the Lord!" he cried, his voice, once hoarse, now strangely clear, almost heavenly, as if finally freed from the flesh.

The flames engulfed him without resistance. There were no cries of pain, only a murmur, a final prayer lost in the crackling of burning wood and fabric. His silhouette distorted, melted away, until all that remained was a column of black smoke rising into the ash-filled sky, another fleeting monument in the city of the dead. The incense of his iniquity, or his faith, rose. Nothing remained of the Father, only the echo of a self-fulfilling prophecy, a final grotesque lesson on delirium in hell.

I stood motionless, staring at the spot where the Father had been consumed. The blast from a Russian submachine gun passed a few inches from my ear, tearing splinters from the wall behind me. I was no longer a passive observer. Now I was the prey. The last one. A new explosion, closer, shook the ground. I felt the animal urge to crawl, to look for any crack, any shadow, any hole in the ground that hadn't already claimed me. I wasn't thinking about escape, but about hiding. Berlin was no longer a stage, but a mass grave in which I was trying not to be the next body.

The Russians did not shout victory, they just advanced. They were hunting dogs, and I was the last rat cornered. I looked at my Mauser. I had barely a handful of bullets left. What for? For whom? León had died of rage. Paco, of sarcasm. Rojas, of a final outburst of protest. El Padre, out of insane faith. I had none of that. Only exhaustion, a dull emptiness, and the need for the pain to end. But not with the roar of a grenade or the cold of a bayonet. I needed it to be my way. If there was still a way, in this labyrinth of death.

The ground shook again. The light from a nearby fire reflected in a pool of dirty water and blood, showing me my own face. Disfigured by soot, several days' stubble, eyes sunken into dark sockets. I didn't recognize the man staring back at me. He was a specter, witness to his own extinction.

CHAPTER 12

The mud had become a second skin. The season mattered little; whether the rain soaked to the bone or the pale sun struggled to break through the perpetual clouds of soot. The mud clung to my boots, my pants, the folds of my memory like a shroud. Each step was a sigh dragged by the dead earth, an echo in the mud. He had left Berlin as one leaves a corpse, without a last glance. Or perhaps I was the corpse, and Berlin had spat me out into a life that no longer belonged to me, empty and without footholds.

I walked west. The direction was nothing more than a broken compass, a vague idea that only meant "away from here." Away from the stench of burning, away from the sterile echo of gunshots, away from Paco's last mocking glance, from Father's last sententious word, from Leon's last relentless gesture. My companions. My ghosts. I no longer had names for them. They were just blurry silhouettes dancing in the corners of my mind when the night became too quiet, like shadows without substance.

The villages were black holes, open scars on the earth. Chimneys that did not exhale smoke, blind windows. The bombings had redefined the concept of home. Now they were broken ribs of a giant skeleton, arranged for the wind to whistle through them with its lament. I wasn't looking for people, or even food at first.

Just the silence, dense and omnipresent. The only comfort the road offered, a blanket of oblivion.

Hunger became a constant companion, a dull pain that scratched at my stomach. I learned to look for roots, to recognize the tender shoots that the earth, with stubborn determination, still dared to offer. I ate like a cornered beast, mud stuck to my lips, tasteless, only pure primal need. Water came from puddles or streams that carried the detritus of war, a grayish soup. I no longer cared. Distrust was a shield thicker than mud, a crust over my soul.

I slept in empty barns, under the remains of a dilapidated roof, or directly in the field, if fatigue overwhelmed me. The cold, an invisible predator, was a constant guest. I curled up, trying to extract warmth from my own flesh, or from the rags that covered me. I didn't dream. Or if I did, the dreams were the same as the day: wisps of smoke, crumbling ruins, the crunch of bones under my boots. The difference between wakefulness and rest had been erased, melted into a perpetual fog.

My name. One of the first things to fall away from me, like a layer of old, dry skin. One day, while crossing a frozen river, the question of my identity bounced around my empty skull. There was no answer. It didn't matter. No one would ever say it. I had become the voice that narrates, without identity of my own, just a walking witness, an echo without origin.

Spain. That word was now a distant rumor, a rotten promise on the palate. Would they wait for me with open arms, or with loaded guns? I didn't know. And I no longer cared. The war hadn't killed me, but it had emptied me to the core. I was a shell that still moved, propelled by inertia, by a strange and inexplicable inability to fall completely. Other ghosts, the truly dead, walked among the living. I was one of them, a shadow among shadows.

Sometimes I saw others. Columns of refugees, hunched figures crawling toward a better place or simply toward somewhere else. We passed each other without looking, without recognizing each other. We were specters inhabiting the same hell, each in our own separate circle of desolation. A silent nod. A silence

that said it all. Empty, lifeless eyes. No one spoke. There was nothing to say that the landscape, a silent witness, did not already say for itself.

The days merged into a shapeless, indistinguishable mass. Time had lost its meaning and its anchor. The only thing that was real was the next step, the next sip of murky water, the next makeshift shelter from the elements. The road was my only purpose, the most basic survival, an inescapable mandate. And deep down, a frozen certainty, like a knife in my chest: I kept walking, but inside, I was carrying my own grave on my back, an empty coffin that was myself.

That tomb, though ethereal, had an undeniable, real weight. It manifested itself in the absence of surprise, fear, even relief, as if my soul had turned to lead. Each new horizon of ruins was identical to the previous one, a carbon copy of the horror. Every dawn (if the dense fog and perpetual smoke allowed one to be distinguished) was the same gray gloom. My eyes saw, my ears heard the howling of the wind among the charred bones of what was once a tree or a house, but my brain only registered data without emotion. Like a war machine without fuel, which for some reason insists on moving, propelled by a remote, almost forgotten impulse.

The smell of cold had lodged itself in my nostrils, a pungent mixture of rusty metal and frozen earth. Sometimes, a faint trail of charcoal smoke rose, a sign of some stubborn life clinging to existence. But it was not the life-giving fire of a home, but the trace of desperate survival, of organic matter burning to avoid freezing. One morning, as I crossed an open field, I saw a fallen bell tower. Its bell, broken in half, lay in the snow like the cracked skull of a giant. Not a single sound escaped from its broken bronze. Only silence, dense and white, covered everything with its blanket of oblivion.

Figures moved in the distance, in a forest of stunted, skeletal pine trees. They did not hide, but they made no noise either, as if they feared that any sound would disintegrate them. Women and children with bundles on their backs, dragging themselves like aimless shadows. Their eyes did not seek help, they only avoided it, mirrors of my own futility. Mine did not seek to connect either. They were ghostly reflections. I was a reflection. Humanity had been reduced to shapes moving in a blurred landscape, each carrying their own silence like an invisible burden. There were no words on their lips, nor on mine. Only the crunch of snow under our boots, a monotonous melody.

Sometimes, an echo. Not a clear voice, but Paco's defiant laughter, or Rojas' sarcastic comment, both blurred into a single harsh melody. Or León's silhouette ahead, relentless as a rock, against a low, smoky sun that stained the horizon with blood and soot. They were sparks from a pyre that had already been extinguished, flashes without heat, ghosts of a life that had been pulverized. Berlin had taken care of erasing the rest. It didn't want its memories. They were like shrapnel embedded in flesh, impossible to remove without tearing away what little remained. There was no physical pain, but there was the stinging irritation of feeling the constant rubbing of that absence, like a phantom limb.

The West was not a destination, but an imposed direction, a residual mandate. An atavistic magnetism. The animal instinct to get away from the shredder, to flee from the jaws that chewed civilization. There was no map or goal, only the blind persistence of movement. The legs moved, the lungs breathed with a hollow gasp, the heart pumped stale blood through hardened veins. It was a rusty mechanism, an efficient automaton, programmed for the last leg of an endless, purposeless race. Where to? It didn't matter anymore. As long as I wasn't standing still, as long as I didn't allow myself the luxury of feeling the full weight of immobility, I continued to exist. One way or another, carried by the wind.

The notion of day and night had become completely blurred. The Father, with his calm and wise voice, had once said, "The day no longer begins as it used to." And he was right. There was no longer a before. Only an eternal now, a perpetual

present of biting cold and frozen mud. I slept and woke up, heard the wind howling and saw the clouds drifting by, but there was no rhythm. The cycles of life had been torn out. It was a broken ticking in a clock without hands, oblivious to time.

My fingers, stiff with cold, clung tenaciously to any edible root I managed to dig out of the hardened earth. My nails were black, the dirt encrusted under my skin. I was like a mole, a blind and voracious insect. There was no longer any dignity in the way I sought sustenance. Only basic voracity, the primal response to a brutal need. It reminded me of Paco, not because of his jokes, but because of his strange ability to find life in the most rotten places, like those tenacious fungi that grew on his feet. Now I was the fungus, growing silently in the detritus of civilization, feeding on its rot.

The world had become a desolate canvas, a mural of death where I was just another stain, moving without tracing a discernible path. I didn't expect to find anything at the end of my journey. No forgiveness, no peace, not even death, a rest that was denied me. Only the continuation of this inertia that carried me, like a dry leaf, swept along by the last breath of a storm that had swept away everything, even my own soul. The tomb followed me, and it grew lighter and lighter, because what it contained was fading into oblivion, evaporating.

The tomb was still on my back, now so light that I could barely feel its presence; what it contained was fading into oblivion, grain by grain. It was no longer a dead weight, but an absence that was becoming more and more pronounced, more hollow. The faces of my companions, which had once assailed me on the threshold of sleep or in the silence of a ruin, were now blurred sketches, faded caricatures. Paco's laughter, so full of life and irreverence; León's roar, an order that inspired respect and fear; Rojas' cynical speeches; the Father's enigmatic

parables: everything had become an indistinct murmur, as if the corpses had decided to take their voices with them to the other side of the veil.

My body was a puppet, moved by invisible strings. My legs moved forward, driven by an energy that was not will, but the simple residue of inertia, an echo of life. A rhythmic heartbeat, automatic breathing, a soulless pulse. I was a machine that, once started, had forgotten how to stop. Muscles contracted, bones bore the weight of the empty shell. And somewhere inside, deep within that rusty mechanism, I was the silent passenger, observing the gray landscape through alien, glassy eyes. There was no longer a driver at the wheel, only the road that lay before me.

The cold, biting into the very essence of the air, had ceased to be a nuisance and had become the atmosphere itself, dense and cutting. I didn't feel it on my skin, I breathed it in with every breath, and it was like inhaling the icy breath of a cemetery, a glacial fog. The snow, fine and grayish, fell at times, but it did not whiten the earth; it only covered it with another shroud of despair, a dirty veil. The trees, black skeletons against a leaden sky, looked like statues mourning a past that no one remembered. I moved among them, another ghost in the macabre procession of desolation.

Walking westward was not running away, but simply changing the direction of my being's free fall. The war, with its steel fangs and gunpowder breath, had been left behind, like a sated predator that had abandoned its prey. But the mark of its claw was on every destroyed village, every mutilated tree, every frozen puddle reflecting a sky without promise. And on me, of course. Depersonalization, complete and absolute, was the last poisoned gift of the carnage.

Sometimes, when passing by a house that still had a wall standing, a rancid smell, like mold and neglect, reminded me of something: cheap tobacco, fermented wine, stale bread. Smells of a life that no longer existed, olfactory ghosts that vanished as quickly as they appeared, leaving only a bitter trace. They did not evoke nostalgia, only a distant recognition, like someone looking at a yellowed photograph of a stranger who once bore their name.

I crossed paths with others, shadows wandering the same apocalyptic canvas. A few soldiers, unarmed and disorganized, with the same absent, lost look. Families crammed into carts pulled by skeletal horses, their heads bowed, as if the leaden sky were too heavy to lift. Our paths crossed in a brief silence, a tacit communion of specters. There was no direct eye contact, only a mutual awareness of shared misery, an unwritten pact. It was a desolate courtesy that required no words.

One afternoon, I stopped at the foot of a hundred-year-old oak tree, now a burnt giant, its crown reduced to black, twisted branches. The wind moaned through them, a ghostly lament. I felt neither cold nor heat, only unfathomable emptiness. I took a piece of dry bread, as hard as a millstone, from my bag and chewed it with my tired jaw. Eating was just a mechanical act to keep the machine going. The taste was nonexistent, like ash. The tomb became so light that sometimes I wondered if I myself still existed, or if I was just the echo of a man who had vanished with the last explosion. Oblivion no longer amputated memory, it only hollowed out the soul. Absence was the only content, the only truth.

Beyond hollowing out, oblivion had already consumed all content, leaving behind only the most absolute emptiness. And that emptiness was the landscape that stretched before my eyes, a vast expanse of nothingness reflected in every pore of my skin, in every pulse of my blood. The boundaries between the outside world and my own non-existence had completely dissolved. I was not a man walking through Germany; I was the silence of Germany moving through a body, a hollow resonance in the desert of my being.

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cemetery, a glacial fog. The snow, fine and grayish, fell at times, but it did not whiten the earth; it only covered it with another shroud of despair, a dirty veil. The trees, black skeletons against a leaden sky, looked like statues mourning a past that no one remembered. I moved among them, another ghost in the macabre procession of desolation.

One afternoon, I stopped next to what was once an iron bridge. Now, only the broken pillars emerged from the frozen river, like amputated fingers pointing at the gray sky. A piece of twisted metal, with rust barely shining under the frost, hung precariously like a trophy of destruction. There should have been a noise, an echo of the explosion that brought it crashing down, but there was only the ghostly moan of the wind. My eyes registered the shape, the color, the deterioration of its iron entrails. But my mind, a smooth, polished surface like a mirror without reflection, did not retain the impression. It was a fact without resonance, an echo that did not return.

The hunger was still there, a constant murmur in my belly that no longer aroused urgency, but it had lost its sting, its torturous fire. It was no longer a pain, but a vital function, a signal on the dashboard. I ate whatever I found with the same lack of emotion, without discernment: the tough flesh of a rat frozen to death that I found under a rock, the bitter shoots that the earth offered with a perverse obstinacy. I chewed, swallowed, my esophagus a simple conduit. The body demanded fuel, and the machine provided it, without disgust, without pleasure, without the slightest nuance. The act was as mechanical as breathing, as lifeless as the landscape.

On the few occasions when I came across other survivors, the ritual was identical, unchanging. Emaciated faces, sunken eyes that looked at me without seeing me, as if I were just another ghost. No words were exchanged, only a mutual recognition of the unfathomable abyss that separated us from the rest of the world. The children, little specters with old eyes, watched me without the slightest hint of childish curiosity, without the innocence that had been taken from

them. They were part of the landscape, blurred figures in a mural of desolation. I moved among them like a cold draft, invisible and intangible, leaving no trace.

The idea of Spain, which in the early days had been the embers of a distant possibility, a dying ember, had completely disintegrated. There was no homeland on the horizon, only wasteland. There was no home, only makeshift and ephemeral shelters. The road west was no longer a journey toward something tangible, but a departure from nothingness, a perpetual escape from a void that, paradoxically, already inhabited me entirely. The war had not ripped my life away, it had taken away my purpose for living, the ultimate reason for being human.

My body was a shell that dragged itself along, driven by residual inertia, a muscular memory. The memories of my companions, if I ever had any, were now silent shadows, without form or voice, mere scribbles. Paco, with his cheeky laugh; León, with his stony silence; Rojas, with his venomous diatribes; the Father, with his obscure advice; the Old Man, with his steely gaze: their names were just hollow sounds, echoes of a melody that my brain could no longer reproduce. It was as if they had been erased from my internal hard drive, leaving only the empty, cold space they once occupied, like tombstones without epitaphs.

The nights brought no dreams, only mechanical rest, a brain blackout. I would lie down on the frozen ground or in the corner of some dilapidated barn, and my body would shut down completely. There were no images, no voices, no torment of nightmares. Only the deep, impenetrable blackness of the unconscious, a relief I did not feel, because there was no feeling at all. Upon awakening, the cold was my first contact with a reality that no longer concerned me at all. The light was the same grayish gloom I already knew, a dawn without promise, a simple change from darkness.

I had become a tiny dot on the horizon, an indistinguishable speck on the desolate canvas of the postwar period, just another stroke of the brush of destruction. The question of my name, my origin, my past, no longer arose from the mire of my mind. It was meaningless, an echo without an answer. I was the nameless narrator, the silent witness to a catastrophe that had transformed me

into an inherent part of it. The grave was not an object I dragged behind me, it was the very absence of what I once was, an absence that became more and more absolute with each step, a void that filled itself. The end of the road stretched out before me, not as a goal to be reached, but as the infinite continuation of this nothingness that completely inhabited me.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As I reach the end of this tortuous journey through the ruins of Berlin, I feel the strange stillness that only the culmination of a long siege can bring. It is a relief, yes, but also the satisfaction of having given voice to the echoes that dwell among the rubble of history.

My deepest gratitude goes to my editor, whose temperance was the only light in the darkness of this manuscript, and whose patience rivaled that of the protagonists themselves in the face of the inevitable. Thank you for believing in the importance of unearthing this truth, however harsh it may be. And to the entire editorial team, whose expertise turned this delirium into something tangible.

To my family, for being my impregnable refuge, the silent counterpoint to the shrapnel and mud I lived in for months. Your presence, your love, and your infinite patience were the anchor that kept me safe as I explored the depths of despair.

To my friends, who endured my nocturnal ramblings and the echoes of the horrors I explored, thank you for your attentive listening and your unconditional support.

To the historians and all those who, with their tireless work, preserve the fragments of a past that must not be forgotten, my admiration and gratitude. Your testimonies were the foundation on which I was able to build this particular hell.

And finally, to you, brave readers, who dared to tread the sewers of Berlin alongside "The Unmentionables." Thank you for your willingness to listen to the whispering of rats, the wailing of ghosts, and the roar of a war that no longer made sense. I hope that, when you close the book, you feel that, despite everything, it was a journey. And that it was worth venturing into its shadows to remember what we were, and what, in an instant, we could become again.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

When the idea for *Berlin Didn't Want Us* began to take shape, I wasn't looking for a story of heroism or redemption. Instead, I was obsessed with the image of men who, for one reason or another, didn't fit into peace. Soldiers who, even with the war in its final throes, felt more comfortable in the mud and shrapnel than in the quiet of a home that no longer existed. They did not fight for ideals, but because chaos had become their only language; hell, their only homeland.

I wanted to explore the soul of that "squad," those "Unmentionables," a disparate group of exiles, criminals, and madmen who cling to toxic camaraderie as their only raft in a sea of delirium. The Narrator, a cynical observer, was my gateway to this hell; his sarcastic and lucid voice, the only beacon in the darkness. And at his side, León, brute force and relentless code; Paco, the rude jester who laughs so he won't cry; Rojas, the frustrated ideologue who still seeks a battle for his mind; and the disturbing shadows of El Padre and El Viejo, who elevate madness to a mystical and primal dimension. They are specters that refuse to dissolve, each in their own way, into nothingness.

Berlin, in the early months of 1945, is not just a backdrop. It is a dying entity, a city resisting its own end, devouring those who still dare to inhabit it. Its ruins, its flooded basements, its sewers, become a labyrinth where the cunning of survival

mixes with the crudest despair. The war here is not grandiose; it is a stench, a constant sound of collapse, a meaningless reflex action.

If there is a message in *Berlin Didn't Want Us*, it is not one of hope, but of brutal honesty. It is an unfiltered look at the human condition when all layers of civilization fall away, and all that remains is the will to breathe one more day, to laugh at death so as not to surrender to it. Because sometimes the real tragedy is not dying, but surviving without knowing why, dragging the weight of a hell that has shaped us in such a way that we no longer know how to live without it. This novel is a bitter toast to those men, to their absurd persistence in a world that did not want them, and to the impossibility of escaping what defines us, even when it is self-destruction.