

ONE CAMP. ONE REBEL. ONE CHANCE.

the General's mistress 1



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PUREBRED III

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THE
GENERAL'S
MISTRESS



Part one

WHANZI'S BOOK



The evening air is raw and shimmers in the twilight. As the huge floodlights are turned on, I duck under their harsh light, trying to keep my distance from the people running here and there, not knowing where they are going. Children are separated from their parents, elderly people fall. Everywhere I hear shouts and screams, commands and the angry growling of dogs, and I have nowhere to go. Nowhere to hide.

A few hours was all I needed. A few hours until the evening darkness fell over the labor camp, leaving large sections of the fence in darkness. But then a truck came, and the only thing I could do before they forced me onto the flatbed was to tie the knife they had used to cut my hair to my thigh. They never saw me take it. Now its sharp blade lies cold on my skin under my striped pants, and I plan to take some of them with me when they kill me. Because they kill Jews, that's what the young men and women from New Nablus said. And I am a Jew. Like them, and like Tobias.

“Straight lines,” a camp guard yells. “Straight lines!”

An older man isn't fast enough and gets a slap on the cheek

from the barrel of the gun. It could have been Tobias, I think as he falls with his arms over his head, trying to protect himself. I want to remember what that guard looks like, but there are so many of them, and they are all equally evil.

A loud screech silences the alarm and we turn toward the tall red wall that seems to have grown out of the ground in one piece. Two doors in a large black gate open to the area inside, and the guards with the angry dogs approach us and urge us forward. If I go through that gate, there is no escape. Should I die on the outside instead? Try to run and be torn to pieces by the dogs?

A child falls, a guard lifts his leg and the leather of his black boot shines as he crushes the child's head with a hard stomp. They flayed me as they stole my hair and coat, but my own wall is high too and I hurry to lay more bricks before what I see makes the wall burst. A woman falls screaming to her knees next to the dead child, and the guard raises his rifle and shoots her in the forehead. She collapses soundlessly over the child and her big, empty eyes meet mine. Another child falls, but I rush forward and pick it up before the guard can reach it. The next second it's too late, because I'm caught in the procession of huddled bodies and led through the gate with the crying little girl in my arms.



”Roll in the mud,” someone says, trying to pry the girl from my arms.

“No,” I say, hugging her to my chest.

“If you want to survive, you do what I say. Roll in the mud.”

What does he mean? People are jostling, pushing me and each other, and even if I wanted to lie down in the mud, it would be impossible with all the trampling feet and frantic movements. Voices rise above the din of bodies; orders are shouted. *You go that way, you go this way, you, come here* - and then I understand. They don't kill everyone. Thin men and women with various stages of growth on their shaved skulls and black and white striped clothes try to divide us into groups. Here are men, women and children in thick coats, jackets and warm overalls with caps pressed over unshaven skulls. There are all kinds, rich and poor, old and young, but no one but me seems to have come from a labor camp. If I roll in the mud, my red and white striped prison uniform gets dirty, and the camp guards may not notice that I'm one of the new arrivals. Maybe I will survive the night.

I allow him to rip the little girl from my arms, and I throw myself between all the legs and boots, rubbing the mud over my body. Someone kicks me in the head, another one steps on my thigh. Only when I manage to get up do I realize that the little girl is on her way to her death.

“No!” I yell, grabbing the man by the sleeve of his shirt. “Give her back.”

“Forget about her and stay close to me. It’ll be over soon.”

He is right. The splitting is done with brutal efficiency and soon large groups are sent in different directions, leaving only a few frightened young men who look at each other in alarm. They are to be saved for the work here, I understand. Everyone else must die.

The sky above the floodlights is black, and the mercilessly lit dirty, grayish clag I walk on is the reality. The man next to me talks eagerly, and I hear words like tattoo and selection as I lay brick after brick on my wall. If it collapses, I’m lost.

“Come here. We have an hour before they lock us in.” He points to a house with a peeling plaster facade near the barracks and I have no choice but to follow him inside.

“Denzo, we have a survivor. Do you have time?” he calls, turning to me. “You have to get a tattoo tonight, or they’ll find out what we did in the morning.”

“What are you talking about?” I whisper, glancing at the bare white walls and all the closed doors. The ceiling with its buzzing fluorescent lights presses my shoulders to the floor.

“Everyone who lives here is tattooed. Without a tattoo, you die. You got something to pay with? Denzo doesn’t do it for free.” He eyes me critically. “Straight out of a labor camp. It will be your body, I’m afraid.”

My body? Am I supposed to pay for this freaking tattoo with ...? “What are you? A weirdo?” I yell and back toward the door.

“Listen to me,” he says. “You need a tattoo and you need to get on the lists. That’s Denzo’s job. He is the only one who can turn you from doomed into a worker. We had orders to save only a few young men in the selection; I already said that. Either you are in, or you are leaving.”

Leaving? He means to my death. “And you?” I hiss. “What do you want from me?”

“Nothing.” Now he smiles, though it looks untrained. “Most of us just want to save lives, if possible. There is so much death here, you know. But if you can save a life every time a transportation comes in, you might make it through another day.”

A door creaks open and heavy footsteps approach. Denzo. He is tall and more powerfully built than any prisoner I have seen, and his long hair almost resembles a coiffure.

“Well, what do we have here?” he says, looking at me thoughtfully. “From a labor camp, huh? Not a regular?”

The man next to me shakes his head. “Too many guards at the selection tonight. I could only take her.” He nods at my head and my muddy prison clothes. Denzo grumbles something about understanding.

“Well, kid,” he says, looking me in the eye. “It costs, Brem told you, right?”

“I got a knife,” I say. “You can have that. Nothing else.”



P947 burns on my forearm. I lie under the blanket on the hard, thin mattress in the top bunk closest to the door, wondering if I made a mistake giving away my knife. In the stove in the center of the barracks, my red and white striped prison uniform burns.

The door opens and the woman who put the uniform in the stove comes back with washed-out white-and-black striped clothes. “Here,” she says, tossing them on my bed. “Get dressed and come down and talk to us.”

Most of the prisoners in the barracks have already laid down, and the few who are still up all look the same. They are thin, crouched, and have hollow eyes. You can hardly tell them apart from Brem, even if they are women and he is a man. How old are they? Twenty? Forty? It’s impossible to tell, and I wonder when I will look like them. The only one different from the others is the woman who gave me the clothes. She still has a glow in her eyes.

“What happened to the little girl?” I ask as I wriggle into the clothes under the blanket and jump down on the floor. “Is she dead yet?”

“Probably,” Brem replies. “You have a choice between a

pill or a shot. Almost everyone chooses the pill. They die quickly, but you can see they have suffered.”

“The purple devil,” someone says. “Come sit down, girl, and tell us your name.”

“Whanzi,” I say, and sit down next to Brem at one of the tables. “What do you mean the purple devil?”

“The pill is purple,” says the woman who gave me the clothes. “Don’t think about it anymore. My name is Siri. Her name is Maia, and over there is Claire. Brem, you should go, they are going to lock up any minute.” Siri turns to me. “Men and women aren’t allowed in each other’s barracks. If they discover Brem here, it will end badly.”

“I’m leaving right now,” Brem says. “We have to decide which group she belongs to. The gold is full, isn’t it?”

“The gold?” I say.

“The building where we sort valuables is called that,” Brem says. “It’s the best place. You find packaged food there, and it’s warm. The laundry is okay, too.”

“Maybe I can get her into the laundry,” Siri says. “Go now, Brem, I’ll take care of it.”

“Don’t put her in the selection and handling,” he says as he opens the door and looks out. A second later he is gone, and I feel strangely alone and abandoned.

“What if they discover me? What if they see I’m new?”

“They won’t. They look at our tattoos, nothing else. We might as well be faceless.” Siri leans back in her chair and closes her eyes. “Unfortunately, dinner is over, so you’ll have to go to bed hungry,” she says without opening her eyes. “Reveille is at five o’clock. We run out and line up in front of the barracks as soon as we hear it. When the inspection is over, we can go to the bathroom and have breakfast. Now listen to me, because this is important.”

Siri opens her eyes and puts her hand on mine. “In the lineup, you must stand with your back straight and avoid eye contact. Don’t forget your number. If they ask you, you have to be able to say it right away. And if they ask you to do something, you must do it immediately. Do you understand?”

I nod.

“Malda in the barracks next door works in the laundry. I’ll ask her if she can take you there tomorrow. Go to bed now.”

“Shoes?” I ask.

“You can wear the same ones you wore here. Where did you put them?”

I point to the floor.

“No, no, put them under your mattress. Everything gets stolen. Did Denzo give you a plate?”

I point to the foot of my bunk.

“Carve your number into the bottom with a rock and put it under your mattress. If someone takes it, you can prove it’s yours. Theft is punishable by death, so most people mark their plates.”

“Siri,” I say as I crawl back under the blanket. “How do you get out of here?”

“You don’t.”



The sharp signal cuts through my sleep, and for a few seconds I think I'm back in the labor camp. There it was the same signal.

"Everybody up," calls Siri, who was out of her bed before reveille had faded. "Make your beds. Hurry up."

Forty-nine pairs of tired eyes scrutinize her, but only mine do so from the bed. The other prisoners are already tugging at the blankets to make them as smooth as steel sheets.

"Come on, Whanzi, hurry up now."

"Yeah," I mutter, sliding down to the floor. It's hard to smooth the blanket in the top bunk, but I do my best, pulling at the corners as I fold it under the mattress.

"That's not good enough," Siri snaps. "Didn't you learn how to make a bed in the labor camp?"

"I was only there one night and I had a bottom bunk. You do it if it's so important."

Siri turns toward my bed, but then another signal sounds, making everyone rush out of the barracks. "We don't have time," she says, dragging me out. "Stand up straight and don't look them in the eye. Do you remember your number?"

“My shoes,” I say, trying to get free. “I forgot...”

“We don’t have time. Now shut up.”

Siri pushes us in to the straight row our fellow prisoners have turned into, and I see similar rows in front of the other barracks. I straighten my back and look straight ahead, determined to stand perfectly still, but the ice-cold mud crackles under my bare feet and the wind bites with razor-sharp teeth, and I can’t stop my body from shaking.

“Number,” a woman calls out, and I look straight into a uniformed chest. Something hard lands on my shoulder, and the pain almost makes me fall, but I straighten up.

“P nine four seven,” I say, staring at the uniform buttons.

“Stand still in line, P nine four seven,” the woman’s voice bellows, and then the uniform disappears from my view and she shouts something to one of the other women.

“We made it,” Siri whispers in relief as the camp guard finally lets us go. “If there had been an inspection and she had seen your bedding ... Now hurry up and get your shoes, and I’ll show you where the toilets are.”

Does everyone have to be so hysterical, I think, as I run after her toward the toilets and then toward the barracks and breakfast. A shrill scream freezes my thoughts and I see a man being forced onto a wooden trestle with his bare back at a camp guard’s mercy. The crack of the whip echoes under the floodlights, and blood falls like thin rain and is absorbed by the silent mud.

“Why?” I ask Siri, who has looked away after an initial involuntary glance.

“Maybe he didn’t make his bed properly.”

“It’s not like they care,” says Malda, who must have once

been fat, because thick flaps of skin hang from her forearms like sacks. If she ever gets out of here and cuts off those flaps of skin, she will get rid of her tattoo, too. “That’s not why we get clean clothes. They are afraid of bugs and diseases, that’s just the way it is. They shave our heads every other month and make us wash with kerosene. Do you know what kerosene is?”

I shake my head.

“Airplane fuel. That’s what they used before they switched to solar. There is not much left, but what they have, they use for us.” Malda shows me how to fold the striped shirts and pants and takes care of the rough, freshly laundered mattress covers herself. “And don’t think we get to wash any of what they wear, no, no, we are not considered pure enough. There is a labor camp nearby where they send their dirty laundry, and the slaves in that camp cook the food that’s delivered here. It’s just for the camp guards, the doctors, and the others. The basic food we get is barely enough to feed half of us. It’s as if we Jews aren’t human beings, too.”

It’s hot and stuffy in the laundry room, even with all the windows open. Big machines huff and puff and the white steam makes my skin shine. Black-and-white striped women and men move among the machines with sleepwalker eyes, and a guard sits in a corner with a rifle on his lap. He sees us talking, but he can’t possibly hear what we are saying.

“Doctors? Is there a hospital here?”

“Hospital?” Malda chuckles, tonelessly. “Oh, there is a hospital, but not for us, so make sure you don’t get sick. They’ll take you to the infirmary, which you rarely leave alive.”

“Is the hospital for the camp guards?”

“Don’t worry your sweet head about that, girl. How old are you?”

“Fifteen,” I answer, wondering if I can get into the hospital and find a way out.

“You look about twelve.”

“Where is it?”

“The hospital? A little ways from here. The road to it is lousy with guards. You only see it when they take you to the infirmary, and then you won’t see anything anymore. Denzo and Diana work there and they told us. You won’t get out of there unless you are lucky. God has stopped watching over us.”

“Denzo? Isn’t he the tattooist?”

“He is one of the tattooist’s assistants. He works in the infirmary when they don’t need him to tattoo. He used to work in the kitchen and cook for us, but he switched to the infirmary. Well, we know why, don’t we?”

“No,” I say, wondering if he chose the infirmary because you can escape from there. “Why does he want to work there?”

“We don’t talk about that out loud,” she whispers. “Be glad you ended up here. Thank Siri for that. I know they need people in the handling.”

“What do they do?”

“They are taking care of the corpses, and that’s enough questions, girl.”

“What do they do with the bodies?” I ask, hurrying to lay a few more bricks between the little girl and me. My wall is so thick that nothing should penetrate it, but I don’t dare take any chances.

“Are you done? Good, then you can go over there and empty the machine of blankets and hang them up.” Malda grabs me by the shoulders and pushes me against

one of the washing machines. “And stop asking so many questions. You are going to get yourself killed. Me too, maybe.”

Darkness tries to win the battle of the camp, but the fight is lost before it even begins. Nothing beats the merciless floodlights that illuminate every corner within the high walls. Malda tells me that what glistens on the white facades of the barracks is called frost, and the mud we walk on has hardened into thousands of hard footprints. The danger of stepping awkwardly and twisting your foot is so great that everyone walks with their heads bowed and carefully watches where they put their feet. I understand that you don't want to hurt yourself here, because there is always someone new to take your place.

Malda nods a quick goodbye and heads toward her barracks, but I stop and look cautiously around. Where is the weak spot to break out of? The wall turns into a fence after a while, but it's a high fence that slopes inward, with big zigzag signs and heavy, uncoiled barbed wire at the top. As far as I can see, there is no gate anywhere. It's the big black gate that applies whether you go in or out. Behind the barracks and other buildings stretch the fields, and on them work strange monstrosities of machines with glowing lamps and claw-like arms.

“What are you doing?” someone yells in my ear. I spin around and look straight into the eyes of a camp guard.

“Nothing,” I say, lowering my gaze. “I'm going to my barracks.” But it's too late. I have looked the camp guard in the eye and I know he is not going to let me go.

“One leg.”

“Huh?”

“Stand on one leg. Now.” He raises the baton and measures against the same shoulder that received the blow this morning. I hurry to stand on one leg.

“So,” he says, and begins to walk around me. “What were you looking for? Tell me.”

“Nothing. I was just resting.”

He taps the baton against his palm a few times before stopping in front of me and looking at his watch. “Then you’ll learn not to rest in the future, prisoner. One hour.”

It’s an hour that never ends. My body aches, and when I can’t stand to put any more bricks on my wall, I think of the knife Denzo took. I see it in front of me, the sharp blade, the wooden handle, smooth from all the hands that held it, and I stab the camp guard over and over again, not stopping until he finally tells me to put my leg back down and go to hell.

“Brem saw what happened,” Siri says as I limp into the barracks. “Come and sit down, I saved you your dinner.” Greedy eyes on the bunks show that the food would have been eaten by now if Siri hadn’t been watching over it. “What happened?”

“I looked around and then looked him in the eye. Won’t happen again,” I promise and accept the plate. The soup is cold and tastes mostly of water, but there are a few pieces of potato in it and I have to force myself to eat calmly.

“Malda says you are asking too much,” Siri says, sitting down next to me.

“She does quite a bit of talking herself,” I mutter, slurping down the last of the watery broth. “But she is into monologues, I suppose. If the guards had heard her, they would have caught her in a second.”

“She said you asked about the hospital.”

I shrug. “Maybe there is a way out in there.”

“There is no way out. We have already tried everything, believe me. All we can do is stay alive and hope that” Her voice trails off. There is no hope of rescue, she knows that as well as I do.

“Then there is no reason not to try, is there?” I say, biting into the bread. “How long do you last here? A month? Two? We are going to die anyway, and I’m going to die trying to get out of here.”

“Brem has been here almost a year, he was one of the first to come.” Siri puts her hand on mine. “If you play your cards right and don’t get sick, you’ll make it. Don’t do anything stupid, Whanzi.”

“Make it? For how long? We are Jews, Siri. They kill Jews. And when they have emptied the Jewish towns, there will be no reason to keep us, and they will kill us too. Don’t you get it?”

“You must never stop hoping. We don’t know what will happen. Maybe we will be saved....”

“You are so naive,” I interrupt her. “No one will save us. We can only rely on ourselves.”

“For being so young, you are pretty tough.” Siri gets up and leaves the table.

I hear the others talking about me as I crawl under the blanket. Why isn’t she crying? they whisper, why isn’t she scared? Maybe a sociopath? Probably. We need to keep our distance; she can be dangerous.

I don’t know what a sociopath is, but if sociopaths have high walls inside them, made of brick and mortar of desperate hatred, then I am one.

You quickly get used to always walking with your head down, freezing, and turning your blanket into a steel plate every morning, you get used to being beaten with batons and working until your body hurts, and people lying dead in their beds in the morning, but you never get used to the hunger.

Food. I have never thought about food so much. Every second, every minute, every hour until I finally fall asleep. I don't know anyone who works in the gold, but it wouldn't have mattered; they don't share what they find. Some of the food is spoiled, Siri says. Moldy and probably dangerous, but they eat it anyway. I would, too.

"Is there nothing to eat where you are?" I ask with my cleanly licked plate in front of me. Siri shakes her head. She is in the handling. I know they take care of the bodies of the dead, but not how. Maybe they undress them and wash them like Momma did when someone in the clan died. Brem buries them. He was a digger operator before he came to the death camp.

"Can you go to the selection tonight, Siri?" Claire says from her bed. "My legs hurt so bad."

In each barracks, one prisoner must attend the selection. No one wants to go, but everyone wants to save someone.

"I can do it," I say before Siri has time to consider the question.

"No. I'll do it, Whanzi."

"I want to save someone, too." Brem said that saving people's lives makes life a little easier around here, and I want to see if that's true.

"I will do it. You stay here."

As Siri leaves, I sneak after her and hide behind the

barracks closest to the gate. The camp guards are standing in a group talking. I can see Brem, Siri, and the other prisoners glancing at them as they wait for the gate to open. Even the harsh glare of the floodlights cannot harm the gate, it is like a black hole that swallows all light and all hope and turns it into evil, pulsating energy.

Three of the camp guards go to the gate and unlock it. It has three locks, and each guard has a key. Now comes the crucial part. If the camp guards stay in the crowd coming in, it will be difficult for Siri and the others to save anyone. If the guards stay at a distance, they can sneak someone out and take him or her to Denzo for a tattoo.

And here they come. Two long lines side by side. Hands holding hands so the rows become one. They are children. Small children. Even the camp guards flinch.

It's so quiet. No one speaks. No one is crying. The children hold hands and look silently at the barracks, the floodlights, and the prisoners, and no one is saved, because there are no children in this camp. It doesn't matter that the camp guards are backing away with their guns and batons. All Siri, Brem and the other prisoners can do is lead the children to the low building with the devil's pills.

I go back to the barracks and climb into my bed. When Siri comes, I don't say a word. Neither does she. Tomorrow she will take care of the dead children's bodies.



You learn a lot about survival when you are in a death camp. You learn that you are needed as long as there are new transportations, but when the Jewish towns dry up, you have to hope that there are Jews somewhere else to pick up, or you are done for.

“Whanzi, can you come?”

Siri stands in the doorway, trying to look like she doesn't want anything in particular. It's late and I'm tired, but they don't come and lock up for a while, so I push my aching body out of bed and pull my shoes and coat out from under the mattress. Five months have passed since my arrival and the camp has turned from damp, howling wind and gray mud to blue ice and packed, dirty-gray snow, and the frost no longer glistens only on the facades but everywhere, even in our eyes.

“Where are we going?”

“Follow me, Brem wants to talk to you.”

My fingers refuse to obey in the cold, so I give up trying to button my coat and just tie the rope tightly around my waist and shove my hands into my pockets. They gave us the dead people's coats and jackets when the cold

came, but not their warm boots, mittens and hats. I'm lucky to work in the warm laundry, but the heat there makes the cold outside worse, and I have had a cold for five weeks and it's not getting any better. You had better not catch pneumonia with that cough, Malda said to me this morning, or you are doomed.

"Whanzi, good," Brem says as Siri leads me to a dark corner behind one of the barracks. "I need to talk to you. You have been spotted."

"Huh?" I say, stomping my feet to keep from freezing to death. "Where?"

"Outside Denzo's. What are you doing there?"

"I don't know what you are talking about," I mutter, looking into his worried eyes. They are the youngest in his old face. He may not be many years older than me.

"You are going to steal something, aren't you?"

"I want my knife back."

"People see you and people talk, don't you understand? Theft is punishable by death."

The death penalty? I feel like laughing. What planet is he living on? A month after I arrived, Dorrit from our barracks landed in the infirmary, and two nights later a new woman lay crying in her bed. Two months ago, it was Maia's turn to get sick and be replaced by a crying woman. Two new transportations in three months, and then - nothing. We live on borrowed time.

"It's over, Brem," I say, wondering why I don't care anymore. "They don't need the camp any longer. We will die soon, but so will some of them. I'm going to get my knife."

"You are right about one thing." Brem looks at me with narrowed eyes. "There won't be any bigger transportations. But that doesn't mean we won't be needed anymore. We

still have a lot to sort through in the gold, and dealing with dead bodies takes time, especially now that it's freezing and harder to dig. Then we have the hospital ... The work there won't stop just because the Jews stop coming."

The hospital. That is where they conduct experiments. They test weapons and diseases on people and record the results. I snuck out and watched the last selection. No one was saved for work, but Brem and another prisoner managed to sneak one woman and two men to Denzo, a large group was herded into the low building where the purple pills are, and a group of young people were taken to the hospital. No wonder Brem feels the need to rescue someone now and then. But considering what soulless human shells the last two women turned into, he might as well have let them die.

"What do you think is going to happen? Will half of us be needed? Will they kill every other barracks? Will they draw straws to see who gets to live, or will we be selected again?" A rattling cough puts an end to my anger and Brem winces. I don't know if it's my cough or my words that scare him.

"Get her out of here before they find us," he says, and is gone.

"Do you have a plan?" Siri asks as we walk back to the barracks. At least she is not living in a made-up reality.

"I'm going to take my knife back and kill as many as I can when the day comes," I say. It's a simple plan, but satisfying. "I will start with the camp guard who guards our barracks. What about you?"

"Throw myself on the fence."

She intends to roast herself alive. Personally, I hope I get shot, and that it's quick.

The days go by, and Brem avoids me. He needn't worry, as long as I have this cough, I can't break into Denzo's house. An unpleasant worry eats at me. What if I don't get the knife before they come to kill us? I need to get better, I think, as I turn my blanket into a steel plate and follow Siri out of the barracks. When the second whistle blows, we are all standing in a straight line waiting for the camp guard, who enjoys beating me with her baton.

Is it because I'm the youngest? I don't know, but I have to strain to stand still when she comes, and quietly swallow the pain when the baton hits my thigh or shoulder or, as it did once, my stomach. At that time, I couldn't work after the lineup. Siri and two other women carried me into the barracks and laid me under one of the tables. "With any luck, no guard will come in and see you," they said before they left. The next day I was able to walk and stand upright again.

"P nine four seven," I hear before the uniformed chest of the camp guard appears. She puts her baton under my chin and tries to lift my face. I resist. You can't look them in the eye. She wants me to look her in the eye. Why? To have a reason to come at me with the baton, of course. But she doesn't need a reason. She can do whatever she wants with us.

My throat itches. A coughing fit is coming on. Something you can't help, something they don't usually punish you for, but with this woman you never know. My lungs ache, my stomach tightens as if before a fight, and it's impossible to hold it back. They pour out of me like hard, raging spasms, tearing at my throat and making the cold sweat break out and freeze on my forehead. Everything

goes black for a few seconds, then my vision returns and I stare directly into the camp guard's large, dark blue eyes.

She doesn't even smile as she swats her baton across my ear and cheek, and I lift off the ground and fly, weightlessly, before landing on the hard, trampled snow and tasting blood in my mouth.

"No!" It's Siri, screaming, protesting, then screaming again. In pain.

My head throbs, my vision disappears again, and I feel someone lift me up. Are they going to carry me into the barracks and hide me under the table? It's cold, I'm being dragged through the snow ... It can't be that far to the barracks? Something hard under my belly, and my vision comes back. I'm stuck. My arms and legs are tied, and feet trample around me, but no one says a word. It's so quiet. Until a hissing sound buzzes through the air, revealing that the first lash is about to come. The camp guard whips me unconscious. Siri's voice is the last thing I hear before I disappear. She screams my name.



Murmur of voices. Someone grabs me by the arm and turns the underside up.

“P nine four seven.” A woman. Unobtrusive and quiet.

“A girl? I already have odd numbers; do you have any even?” I recognize the voice. It’s Denzo’s.

“Three men don’t have far to go. Maybe tomorrow.”

“We are expecting a transportation tomorrow night. I must have them by then if they manage to save anyone.”

“Maybe tomorrow, I said. No one is dead yet.”

Footsteps disappear and come back. Something cold touches my lips. “You want some water? Are you awake?” The same woman who read my number.

“Where am I?” Is that my voice? Not even Toma would recognize it.

“You are in the infirmary, my friend. Do you remember what happened?”

“Whipped,” I manage to say.

“Yes, your whole back, poor child. You also got pneumonia and a nasty bruise on your face. Try drinking now.”

“Why did you say my number? Am I going to die? Will someone else get it?”

The glass is gently pressed to my lips. I realize I'm lying on my stomach and have to lap up the liquid. My lips tingle with cold, they feel dry and cracked on my tongue. The woman squats next to my head and looks at me with the same hollow stare that all prisoners have, but I see more than hunger and hopelessness in her gaze. Is it pity?

"You have three days, my friend. If you are not fit to work in three days, they will come and get you and ... well, you know."

"What if I die here? Will Denzo have my number then?"

She doesn't answer; she doesn't need to. I understand and get the explanation for my low number. P-947, someone else's number. Someone who died here and whose body they must have disposed of secretly. A new Jew with the same number, it doesn't matter if they never notice who you are.

Three days?

This was not how I was going to die.

How long have I been here?

"Wait," I say as the woman stands up. "When did I get here?"

"Half an hour ago. I honestly didn't think you would wake up at all. Are you in pain?"

"No ... I ... I can't feel my body."

"That's probably because of the shock. Soon you will be in terrible pain. I took care of your back as best I could. Let me know when you need something for the pain."

"Now," I say as a beast suddenly rips through my back. A pressure in my chest intensifies and I manage to prop myself up on my elbows, coughing until there is no oxygen left in the world.

"Here." The woman returns with a purple powder in her cupped hand.

"It's purple," I whisper.

“Yes, it’s ground devil’s tablets,” the woman says. “But it’s not a lethal dose, I promise.”

I lick the powder off her palm and the pain and reality disappear at the same time.

Darkness. Rumbling breaths. Whimpering. How long have I been out? It’s night, and I hope this is the first night here and that I haven’t been unconscious for over twenty-four hours. My back hurts, but my chest is worse. I can’t lie on my stomach. I have to get up. I have to get out of here.

Somehow I manage to pull myself up onto my hands and knees. The mattress is firm and keeps me upright, but a coughing fit sinks me immediately. It’s not quite black, I realize when I’m back on my hands and knees. A cold light pours through a window, coloring all the beds and wailing prisoners a dull blue. Is there a floodlight directed here? No, it’s the moon. The full moon. There can be no floodlights here because they swallow the moon whole. I haven’t seen it since I came to the camp.

The infirmary, I think, and carefully make my way to the floor. I’m in the infirmary. Confused, I look down at my protruding ribs and realize I’m only wearing the striped pants. Shirt, I need a shirt, but there is none here. Except for on the sick in the beds, but I won’t be able to take the shirt off any of them, I’m too weak. Too weak to walk, actually, but I have to. Because I’m going to get my knife and kill the camp guard with the baton. I will die, I know that, but she will die before I do.

The camp guard? Is there no guard here? I look around, but only sickness and death dwell in the room. Of course

there is no guard here. They are afraid of disease, and in the state the sick are in, there is no need for a guard. That is what they think.

It's what feels like a hundred kilometers to the door, and when I reach it, it's locked. My forehead scrapes against the wood as I rub my head against it. I'm so exhausted I can't even curse.

The window.

The bed isn't heavy, but it takes all my strength to push it under the window. My legs shake uncontrollably as I stand on it and release the window hooks. There is no point in trying to get one knee up and climb out. I just lean forward until I have the window frame in my stomach and let myself fall. The snow is so cold it takes all the air out of my sick lungs, but it makes me come to. Below me the floodlights shine on the barracks, the death buildings and the tattooists' house, and I realize that I'm lying on a low hill. I have never been here before. As I turn around, I understand why. A large red cross on a building some distance away gives it away. The hospital. So the infirmary is right next to the hospital, which is constantly guarded by a dozen camp guards. No one is allowed to come here without permission.

The hospital. There must be clothes there. Maybe even shoes.

I crawl to the gable, pull myself up by the drainpipe and walk as steadily as I can toward the dark hospital body, with the glowing red cross as a signpost. One step. And another. The cold is so hard that it erases all the pain in my back and lungs, and after the first indescribable ache in my bare feet, I can no longer feel them. One more step. Five steps. When I'm halfway there, I fall and have nothing to lean on to pull myself up, so I crawl. And I make it. I make it all the way to the locked front door.