

OLES HONCHAR

MAN AND ARMS



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and
ARMS

A novel

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ОЛЕСЬ ГОНЧАР
ЛЮДИНА І ЗБРОЯ
Роман

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Oles Honchar is one of the leading Soviet Ukrainian writers of the past four decades. He debuted as a novelist shortly after WWII with his trilogy *Standard-Bearers* (three State Prizes for Literature 1946-1948) which was soon translated into about fifty languages and published in many countries. Other well-known novels by this author include *Tavria*, *Perekop*, *Tronka* (1964 Lenin Prize), *The Cyclone*, *The Brigantine* and *Your Star* (1982 State Prize). Oles Honchar has also published many collections of stories, long and short.

"*The Standard-Bearers*," the author wrote in 1961, "is a story of the final stages of the war, when the sun of victory was shining through the blood and smoke. But I still had to write, some time or another, of the most tragic period; I had to tell the story of how it all began..."

"The first news of the war found me at my books: I was a third-year student of the Department of Philology at Kharkiv University and was preparing for the last examination of the year. Then came the radio announcement, the alarmed crowds in the streets, the darkening faces of the men, the tears and horror in the eyes of the women..."

"I was not liable to mobilization. Like all students I was exempt from military service until I had completed the university course, that is, for another two years.

"A few days later, however, volunteer student battalions marched out of the city, I and many of the men of my year with them.

"The trenches were our second university..."

"Today, when millions of people are passionately defending the cause of peace, literature can play an important part by telling the rising generation the stern truth of the horrors of war, by fostering in them a burning hatred for militarism, by telling them of the thorny path, of the sufferings through which the men of today advanced toward that blessed spring morning when the last shot of the Second World War resounded over Europe."

This novel, titled *Man and Arms*, was completed in 1959. It was awarded the 1962 Taras Shevchenko Prize for Literature.

As yet everything was the same.

As yet those who would be standing their ground on the front lines, fighting their way through encirclements, burning in the crematoria of concentration camps, and storming Budapest and Berlin were walking around the city unalarmed; as yet the massive gray building of Red Army Hall was standing on a rise in the center of the city, where eventually, on a spot cleared of rubble and ruin, the Eternal Flame would be lit at the Grave of the Unknown Soldier.

As yet life was following its usual course.

And as yet the students — having scattered about the parks, libraries, and the lecture halls of their departments early that morning — were sitting over lecture notes, cramming for their final examinations.

Two of them had barricaded themselves behind the door of an empty lecture hall in the history department.

When they arrived in the morning, Tania set about blocking the door with a chair. Bohdan watched her with a smile. Her energy and zeal far exceeded the strength of her hands. Still, her persistence enabled her to cope with the heavy chair, and she barricaded the door just as she wanted — solidly, as if to block the whole world out. Of impetuous nature, her hair disheveled, she turned to Bohdan:

"Now no one will take you away from me!"

They looked at the barricaded door and burst into laughter: indeed, they were alone with their love!

Only yesterday they had made up after a bad quarrel followed by days of separation. It was one of those quarrels which springs up between sweethearts from trifles, almost from nothing but means to them much more than the most serious problems in the world. Now they realized the quarrel hadn't been worth their while, so they didn't want to recall those painful, groundless

jealousies which had deprived them of so many happy days. Having made up, they seemed intoxicated anew by their recovered feelings so painfully missed, which made them the more desirable and sweet. Had it been up to Tania, she would have sat kissing and kissing Bohdan the whole day through on the occasion of their reconciliation, forgetting about lecture notes, examinations, and everything else in the world. Standing on tiptoe, she brought her face up to her sweet Bohdan's to be kissed.

He picked her up easily in his arms, and covering her face with passionate kisses, carried her to the farthest corner, sat her down on a chair like a schoolgirl, and said, "Sit here!"

In front of her he put her carelessly rolled lecture notes with traces of drops of rain from the parks, and added sternly: "Study!"

So she found herself sitting there cramming for an examination. To tell the truth, she was not so much cramming as reveling in her dreams and girlish fantasies. Now and then she glanced furtively at him in a happy roguish way.

Deeply engrossed in his lecture notes, Bohdan was sitting at the other end of the lecture hall right in front of the lectern. Presently he brushed back his shock of black hair with his hairy hand — the strong hand of an athlete. Knitting his brow, he again plunged into the Middle Ages. His thoughtful look as well as his worn, checkered shirt, its sleeves rolled neatly above the elbows, was what made Bohdan particularly likeable to her. She seemed to have noticed for the first time a manly dignity in his carriage, proudly erect neck, and unsubmitive shock of hair swept back. Even when he sat as he was then, his straight tall neck betrayed a well-proportioned figure. Swarthy like a Gypsy, he was a handsome man, as the girls said, but for her he was more than that: for her he was happiness incarnate.

When they had broken up, she thought she wouldn't live through it. Unhappy, tormented by jealousy, and crushed by grief, she wandered like a sleepwalker through the streets in the evening, living with but one hope — to meet him by chance somewhere, or at least to catch a glimpse of him from afar as he was returning to the dormitory from the library. Most of all she feared

seeing him with some girl of exceptional virtues of whom she was jealous in advance, so intensely jealous it blurred her mind. However, he returned to the dorm not with a girl but with the boys, walking gloomy and unapproachable among them, his lecture notes and a loaf of bread under his arm.

Hiding in some shadowy corner, Tania would watch him hungrily until the group of boys disappeared into the depths of the darksome street.

On one such night of loneliness and restlessness, Tania retracing the path of her love, inadvertently entered Free Academy Street where she had met Bohdan for the first time, and from there, something led her to the students' "Isle of Love" on Zhuravlivka Bluff, where she had experienced the dry, hot taste of his kiss for the first time. The bluff dominating the light-studded Zhuravlivka, which had been a favorite haunt for many a generation of students, and the distant hoots of the night trains only enhanced the pain of her loss. When she returned to the dormitory, listening to the nightly noises of their boisterous student republic, she expected a miracle to burst the murk of her despair and rekindle her hope that sooner or later, he would come back to her, because it was in him alone she found meaning for existence.

Now they were together. Her heart bloomed! That's how she would have described her feeling toward him. There he was. She could silently steal up to him from behind and embrace him, pinch him on the ear, tousle his hair. But no, this she could not do, because he was entirely absorbed in work, assaulting the Middle Ages. The only thing she could do was make a paper ball and throw it at him, as she used to do for sport during lectures; the paper ball would fall in front of him on the desk, and he, unrolling it with a frown, would read the message: *Je vous aime!*

As he furiously assaulted those kings and popes, nightly campaigns and customs, he did not realize that for her, he was the greatest knight in the world. How she loved him for his knit brows, for that persistence and relentless severity with regard to himself. He was of a Spartan cut. Learning came hard to him, much harder than to her, yet pride and ambition kept him from ever

attempting to crib his way through an examination; nor did he want to trust his luck: he liked to take examinations with firm confidence in himself and his ability lest anyone or anything make him swerve from his purpose.

Life itself had moulded his nature, which was stern, dogged, and ready for any hardships. He grew up without a father since his early teens. To make it on his stipend, Bohdan unloaded freight cars at night. He also worked during the summer holidays. Last summer he had taken up with a fishing artel, catching fish with heavy trawls somewhere on the reed-covered flats along the Dnieper. When he came back, he smelled of the Dnieper, the fishermen's shacks, and the smoke of evening campfires. His tan never disappeared. Even in the middle of winter, he came back from his holidays as brown as if he had been under a tropical sun, and then he simply couldn't hide the tenderness shining in his eyes at the sight of Tania.

"Bohdan's back from the Sich!" his friends joked. "He's back from the Kish *!"

Everyone at the history department knew that Tania Krivoruchko and Bohdan Kolosovsky had been sweethearts since their first year at the university.

They were facing their final examinations, and summer, free and colorful, would begin for them. Oh, if only time would pass more quickly, if only they could stop poring over their lecture notes and go out of town together beyond Forest Park where the streetcars rushed right into fields of rye.

For them, spring had passed by imperceptibly; the only thing they saw from the windows of the lecture hall were the rains falling in sheets of gray along the horizon; they heard only the raindrops rustle in the leaves of the trees, ringing faintly as they dropped onto the rooftops and the warmed bricks of the buildings. It was the music of rain. Then it was sunny again — the asphalt steamed,

* Allusion to Bohdan Khmelnytsky, Ukrainian Cossack general and statesman who led the national liberation movement against the Polish feudal lords in 1648-1654 which culminated in Ukraine's reunification with Moscow. Zaporozhian Sich — the Cossack settlements on the lower reaches of the Dnieper. Kish — a Cossack encampment

as did the glistening foliage — and somewhere right behind the Southern Railroad Station and the glittering rain-washed roofs was a rainbow.

To the rainbow and the suburban expanses — that was the place the students' hearts longed for.

But instead, spring was spent in poring over lecture notes, without the concerts of nightingales.

This summer, however, would be different: for the first time they'd be together at an archeological dig. Many of the students would be going on digs this summer — some to the Crimea, others to the Stone Barrows on the River Molochna where prehistoric drawings had supposedly been discovered in the caves of primitive man, while Tania and Bohdan were offered the chance to go to Olbia by an old professor who was an expert on this ancient Greek city-colony on the Black Sea. It was what they had dreamed most of all. Olbia, or the Happy City as the name meant, had interested both of them for a long time: they wanted to research and excavate its sand-covered site to find out why it had died and what had made people abandon it. Fifteen hundred years ago the city had teemed with life; ships arrived from the sunny shores of Greece; the market buzzed with throngs of people; in the stadiums, the townsmen hailed the athletes in the sports competitions, and in honor of the winner, the city would later on carve special decrees on marble slabs: "Pourpheos, son of Pourpheos, in the capacity of *archon*, won the javelin and discus." An *archon* was about the same as the present-day chairman of a town council, and Tania smiled imagining a modern chairman running around the arena to win first place for his city.

"Pourpheos, son of Pourpheos..." Tania started to declaim from her corner, imitating the voice of the professor, but Bohdan did not fall for her tomfoolery or turn round; the only thing she heard from him was "Don't bother me!"

This, too, she liked about him — when he raised his voice at her as he did now, that athlete of hers who might also have won "the javelin and discus." Tania was in no mood to read. Her imagination constantly conjured up the picture of a summer steppe and the broad Olbian sky under which she and Bohdan would

be together. The fairytale Olbia, the moonlit nights, the quiet estuaries — everything there would be just for them.

Then an unexpected banging on the door startled them. Bohdan got to his feet, surprised.

"Who's there?"

Without waiting for an answer, he rushed to the barricaded door.

Remember that moment! Remember forever that last lecture hall of your student days on the third floor of the history department where you were met by the horrible, crushing word that burst through the barricaded door:

"War!"

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Was it a new Lake Hasan?

Or Khalkin-Gol?

No, it seemed to be something more terrible.

In the doorway stood the clumsy looking, broad-shouldered Stepura, their friend and fellow classmate. Tania had never seen him in such a state before. His lips were pale, his breath came in gasps; he wanted to say something but could not, as if he were choking.

"What is it, for goodness sake!" Bohdan said, growing increasingly annoyed.

With difficulty Stepura forced the words through his thick lips that seemed to have been scalded:

"Kiev... Sevastopol... and some other cities were bombed last night..."

"How do you know?"

"The whole city knows about it; you're the only ones acting as if you live on a desert island. I was sitting and reading until I went out to buy myself a pack of cigarettes, and out there, everything was in an uproar. Loudspeakers blaring, thousands of people milling on the square. That's how it is, brother Tania..." Stepura gave the girl a bitter look; and although at any other time, that "brother Tania" would have made her smile, her compressed lips did not move at all. "Bombs are falling. Was it so long ago we were singing 'If Tomorrow There's War?' That tomorrow's already come, see."

He produced a pack of cigarettes and wanted to light up, but the matches broke in his fingers one after another. At last, after he had lit one and brought it up to the cigarette, Tania saw that his coarse hand was trembling slightly, and he himself, for all his clumsy burliness, seemed surprisingly helpless to her at that moment.

"They attacked us like bandits," he said. "Without so much as a warning, treacherously, dishonestly..."

Bohdan stood frowning over the opened lecture notes on the desk, as if he were trying to recall something. Then he closed the notes with a resolute movement and placed the notebooks in a neat stack. Tania's eyes involuntarily registered his every movement. How long was he stacking up his lecture notes? When would he open the notebooks again?

She came up to him, took his hand, and looked into his eyes. In them there was a grim determination and estrangement.

"Let's get going."

Stepura, with a bony stoop to his shoulders, made for the door first.

In the corridor, Tania still didn't let go of Bohdan's hand. Once she took it in the lecture hall, she instinctively held it as if she were sensing the imminent and inevitable parting.

There was a general din in the corridor. Students of different years had gathered in groups here and there, talking and arguing in agitation.

"We should've expected it."

"But what about the non-aggression pact effective for ten years?"

"Fascism is fascism."

The doors of the lecture halls were wide open — studies were the last thing on anyone's mind now. They all wanted to get out into the streets — and fast. What if... Wasn't a miracle possible, after all? Everyone hoped to hear that it was all just some horrible misunderstanding; perhaps there would be a press release or reassuring news that the conflict, having burst out unexpectedly, had ended just as suddenly, and everything was the same as before.

Walking past the military instruction room on the

first floor, they saw the red head of Dukhnovich through the half-open door. Lean, hunched, and with spectacles on his nose, he stood in the middle of the room bent over a relief map of broken terrain, although it was obvious that in his mind he was elsewhere; judging by his calm and, as always, slightly ironic and introspective expression, he was in a state of ignorance and more likely than not was thinking not about this plaster-cast relief or about war, which had already burst into the silence of lecture halls, but about something remotely different.

"Miron, get off that cloud you're on and come down to this sinful earth, brother," Stepura said, pushing the door wide open with his shoulder.

"Has something happened?"

"Sure."

"What?"

"War!"

Dukhnovich's face twitched in a disbelieving smile.

"Stop kidding me — I scare pretty easily, you know."

But when his friends had entered the room, they had too peculiar a look to make him think they were simply joking.

"Unfortunately, I mean it."

"It's highly symbolic that news of such an event should have caught up with you right in this place."

They looked around the room as if they had never been there before.

In this room, the head of the department of military instruction, a carping, pedantic major, had coached them so tediously they had grown sick of the military posters on the walls as well as of the cutaway gas mask and the black training machine gun with a hole drilled in the side of the barrel standing in the corner. Stopping by the huge table with the mock landscape, they seemed to be looking with new eyes at the broken terrain of miniature hills and rivers of plaster and painted sawdust for grass. The unnatural yellow of the wheat fields, the serpent green of the meadows, the river, and the little wood — it all looked squalid, unreal, and dried up, as if war itself was emanating from the plaster cast in all its ghastliness and lifelessness. This plaster-cast landscape occupying half the room was so vastly different from what their imaginations pictured as a real

steppe with ripening grain fields swept by the winds, a sky filled with the twitter of larks, and rainbows shining radiantly over the fields. Bombs had dropped on the grain fields that day. Somewhere, they were being crushed by tanks and gouged by shells. Would the war reduce the whole beautiful world teeming with life into such a ghastly, dead landscape as this one?

On the edge of the table, Dukhnovich's bag lay across the plaster-cast hills. It was stuffed with books, among which there would surely be Hegel, Skovoroda's parables, and Spinoza, while on top of it were some much-fingered army regulations which Dukhnovich had failed to master thus far and was probably cramming for again to pass his test after a second try. He, the department freethinker and philosopher who eagerly delved into subjects not included in his course of studies, still couldn't grasp the wisdom of guard duty regulations or salute properly or move along an azimuth with a compass: during field practice in the Forest Park, Dukhnovich always got lost, which made his fellow students laugh and his instructor scowl with displeasure.

"Well, did you finally get them down pat today?" Bohdan asked Dukhnovich, motioning to the army regulations.

Dukhnovich made a wry face, which was supposed to express a smile.

"Those regulations arouse a supernatural terror in me. They seem to be written in Sanskrit: however much I try to decipher them, I can't make heads or tails out of the mess."

"I'm afraid that's a thing of the past," Stepura remarked sadly. "We'll have to pass a different set of tests now."

"Forget it for now," Tania said, touching Dukhnovich with a notebook. "Enough of that Sanskrit for you."

Together they went out into the street. Everything seemed to be just as it had been before. The trees were serenely turning green and the day was calm — neither sunny nor cloudily, swathed in a warm haze, but with a tangible alarm in the air which had penetrated the city and the hearts of people.

Sumska Street, the main thoroughfare, was in turmoil. A crowd had gathered at a crossing under a loud-

speaker. Here people still hoped that everything would return to normal. What if it was only some local border conflict? The people waited for some news to dispel their oppressive uncertainty, but the loudspeaker continued blaring out martial music.

The biggest crowd was in the park by the monument to Shevchenko. Noise, intensely excited voices, everyone was awaiting something and not dispersing. The frowning Bard of bronze, standing with head bent above the people, was silently absorbed in his thoughts.

Stepura saw Mariana and Lagutin in the crowd. They were standing with their arms around each other's waists, a liberty they had previously never allowed themselves in public. His face was pale and concentrated and he seemed indifferent to her presence, while she was pressing herself to his shoulder as if to say: you're mine, mine, none of this concerns you; no one's going to take you away from me.

Looking at Lagutin, Stepura couldn't understand how this long-faced rival of his could be indifferent to her now, not feeling how passionately she wanted to be with him. Oh, if only she, Stepura's secret love, were clinging to him like that. How many nights had he dreamed of her, how many of his poems had he dedicated to her, yet all of her passion and rosy-cheeked looks were destined for another, who seemed quite accustomed to this infinitely generous gift of fate!

Overhead, between the trees, the bronze figure of the Bard gleamed in the sun, and down below around the pedestal, were the bronzes of Katerina with her illegitimate child in her arms, the peasant rebel with the scythe, the convict breaking his bonds, and the revolutionary worker holding a cracked flagstaff in his hands. Wasn't this the people's fate of yesterday and today cast in monumental bronze everyone was looking at now?

Carried away by the sight of the monument, Stepura didn't notice how Mariana and Lagutin had disappeared in the crowd. Looking round, he saw a woman with a child in her arms nearby; her face was stained with tears and in her wide-open eyes was a plea for help and a look of despair: was there really a war on? Couldn't anything avert it? She looked at Stepura as if he could

do something to refute this horrible news which must have ruined all her family happiness.

"Are you coming?" Stepura heard Bohdan's voice behind his back. "Tania and I are going to the dorm."

"I'll come with you."

After they got out of the crowd, they walked uphill along Sumska Street in the direction of their student republic. Dukhnovich also trudged along, although he lived downtown with his parents. They crossed wordlessly to Basseina Street and turned into a store where they used to buy bread, but now the shelves in it were swept clean — there wasn't a crumb of bread on them. At another store there was a noisy melee of people — as it proved, they were buying out everything they could lay their hands on: soap, matches, salt...

"I don't understand," Dukhnovich said with a shrug. "Why do you need so much salt?" he asked a woman who came running his way with packages under her arms.

"You ask why?" snapped what had seemed like a rather polite city woman, instantly turning viscious. "Can't you figure that out for yourself, you numskull?" she snarled at Dukhnovich. "That salt and cake of soap might well save my kids' lives!"

She rushed past them, glaring at the students so harshly Tania didn't feel quite herself, for the woman's words and the packages she had wrested from the counter augured another reality — the cold breath of Kharkiv winters, the as yet unimaginable grief of the unfortunate mothers and soldiers' wives who would hitch themselves to sleds and drag them through the snowstorms, bartering those cakes of soap and matches for some scanty food in their occupied land and freezing with their children in the snowdrifts by the roadside. This hadn't happened as yet, and Tania never even considered the possibility of it, yet the words of the woman, who must have experienced a lot in her life, impressed deeply on her mind and weighed on her soul with dismal foreboding.

On the corner by the hardware store, there was another unruly, scrambling, yelling crowd. Some strapping oaf was roughly forcing his way out of the store through the crowd, pushing the people aside and almost climbing

over the heads of the women; his brick-red face was awash in sweat, while he himself was loaded with hooks, pots and pans, ropes of different thickness, and a ring of cable which dangled around his neck like a yoke.

Bohdan looked at the ropes with scorn and indignation.

"About to string yourself up, or what, fellow?"

The oaf, who was probably of the type used to the squabbles of speculators, blinked at the students with contempt.

"I'd rather string up somebody else!"

Catching his breath, he started elbowing his way through the throng of women more energetically; his hooks caught on an old woman's kerchief, and without so much as glancing around, he pulled it off her head.

"Hey, you Satan, what are you doing? Hold on! You'll tear my kerchief!" the woman wailed, but he paid her no heed and kept ramming his way through the crowd.

"Stop it! Stop!" Bohdan blocked his way, and starting forward, grabbed the fellow by his gear. "Couldn't you be more polite, you hick?"

"You're the hick as far as I can see!"

His teeth clenched in rage, Bohdan pulled the lathered-up customer out into the open and gave him a good shake.

"Fighting the war already, are you? With women, eh?"

Bohdan pushed him aside with disgust, and spinning him around, kicked him so hard from behind that the fellow flopped smack on the sidewalk.

"Wow, that was quite a jump," Dukhnovich remarked. "He could easily qualify for his physical fitness badge!"

The fellow looked round, setting his gear straight.

Bohdan expected him to come back and pick a fight, but he only shot back a threat, "I'll remember you, you Gypsy bastard," and trudged across the street to the jangle of his hooks and pots.

"Thank you! At least a student stood up for me," the old woman said, looking with gratitude at Bohdan. "The war is still far away yet, but here our own people are already trampling us underfoot."

Tania took Bohdan's hand again, and they walked on with Stepura and Dukhnovich. The city looked different

now than it had the day before. On their way, they seemed not to recognize the familiar neighborhoods, streets and houses. Someone was gluing strips of paper crosswise on the windowpanes from inside, and everywhere they stood out white like the Roman numeral XX representing the twentieth century. In one yard, the residents got to digging trenches and bomb shelters in response to an order of the Air and Gas Defense Headquarters.

At one of the dorms they saw a shortish Red Army soldier with a brush gluing a freshly printed notice on the wall of a building.

They went up to it and started reading the large black print of the notice. It was a mobilization order with an appeal to people the war was calling on to be the first to fall under its bullets, followed by a long list of draft ages.

"All my brothers fall under it," Stepura said with a husky voice. "And my father, too."

"Mine's been there for ages," said Dukhnovich whose father was a medical officer. "Mother will probably also be called up; they'll need her. Seems I'm the only one who's not much use."

"Do you think you won't have to drink the bitter cup?" Bohdan said, and Tania discerned anger in his voice. "Are we rejects, or what?"

Dukhnovich blinked with a look of dismay.

"What about our deferment?" His lean freckled face with red eyebrows betrayed alarm and surprise. "We've all got call-up deferments until after graduation."

"No deferments for us now," Bohdan said with a frown, and turned to Tania: "Where are we going to have lunch?"

"Let's try the municipal canteen," Stepura suggested.

The three of them went for lunch, while Dukhnovich, barely nodding his head by way of parting, trudged off to the streetcar stop in a depressed mood, his shoulders more stooped than usual because of his heavy bag.

The city had sunk into darkness.

Never had it seemed so dark as during those first alarming nights of the blackouts. The dark bulk of the buildings had gone blind; the parks and public gardens were filled with an air of mystery. The black sky hovered over the city, the unusually starry heavens amazing the city dwellers, few of whom slept at that time.

Air defense sentries were posted on the roofs and on the ground. Every tiny chink of light in a window triggered off a whistle from the militiamen.

Streetcars with blue headlights crawled down the streets, snatching the blue figures of running pedestrians out of the darkness. People's faces looked frightened whenever they got caught in that streak of deathly blue creeping close to the ground. Now and then a pedestrian flitted by; a streetcar rattled down the tracks; a column of bloody red fire engines whizzed by with a wild scream of sirens down the street.

Instead of mail carriers, runners from the military registration and enlistment offices were going from house to house, from doorway to doorway at this late hour. Their firm footsteps sounded from the darkest alleys, and one of them, stopping in front of a house, was heard asking the janitor loudly:

"What's the number of this house?"

Another runner was inquiring just as bluntly and impatiently across the street:

"The number, what's the number?"

In all the districts of the city, war came knocking at the doors of thousands of homes to deliver call-up notifications.

The students' dorms were the only places the runners did not disturb. So far the students could sleep serenely — they had deferments till graduation day. But for all that, sleep evaded them that night.

Armed Young Communist League members did shift duty by the telephone in the superintendent's office of the history students' dorm, while a sentry with a gas mask and rifle stood on guard at the doorway. It wasn't a small-bore training rifle — the student was shouldering a real combat rifle. The office was now known as

headquarters and its windows were tightly blacked out with blankets. Spartak Pavlushchenko, a member of the department's YCL bureau, was in charge. During the Finnish War, he had been assigned to a ski battalion, and although he had never made it to the front line, he returned to his studies as a sort of frontline combatant, and from then on he was elected to the presidium of all the meetings where he sat with the look of a battle-weary veteran. Since he was almost a military man, Spartak wore an officer's service shirt along with a shoulder belt and a burnished buckle. There was one thing, though, Pavlushchenko lacked to complete his look — he was perhaps the shortest student in the department, although he had plenty of dignified respectability: it was obvious in everything — in his gait, the turn of the head, his coldly jutting shoulders, and the way his elbows stuck out in a peculiarly bossy manner.

Whenever the telephone rang in the superintendent's office, Spartak rushed headlong to it:

"Historians here! Local air defense headquarters!"

His ear pressed tightly to the phone, he listened with as much intensity as if he were being spoken to by no less than the People's Commissar for Defense. At such moments, Spartak's round, ruddy-cheeked face was full of concentration, his fixed gray eyes were filled with resolve and readiness to carry out any order.

Someone on the other end of the line must surely have been pleased to hear Pavlushchenko's disciplined, clipped replies:

"I'll bear that in mind. We'll do it. I understand."

Whenever possible, he left the office, and the heels of his boots clopped loudly down the lobby as he went to check on the sentry posted by the doorway. Slava Lagutin was on duty that night. He was a reliable YCL member Spartak had no reason to distrust, but what irritated Spartak was that the dark-haired beauty of their department Mariana Kravets was always hanging around Lagutin as if she had nothing better to do than come running over from the girls' dorm at such an hour for a date.

"How many times do I have to tell you that a duty post isn't the proper place for a date," Spartak told her in a peevish voice.

"I'm going, I'm going now," Mariana said, retreating a step and pretending she would leave right away.

"I've heard that already, but the moment I turn my back you're here again."

"What'll happen to you if I stay around a while?"

"To me — nothing. But there are rules. And generally, why argue about it? I told you to go, so go if you don't want any trouble for yourself and for him," he said nodding toward Lagutin to whom Mariana was sidling up again.

"Why don't you tell her to leave?" Spartak snapped at Lagutin. "You know the rules, don't you?"

"Really, you'd better go now, Mariana," Lagutin said to the girl, reluctantly pushing her away. "See you tomorrow."

Before she left, Mariana's face passed close to his, as she either kissed him or whispered something in his ear, and on going her way she swung her braid with such a proud toss it hit Pavlushchenko's shoulder.

For some time Pavlushchenko looked at the retreating figure of Mariana. Convinced that she had disappeared into the darkness, he turned round to Lagutin.

"Now you keep a good watch out here. Keep your ears pricked and your eyes peeled."

"I'll be all eyes and ears," Lagutin said, a ring of risibility in his voice.

Spartak came up to him closely and lowered his voice to a whisper:

"We've just gotten the word that saboteurs are being dropped behind our lines. Some of them are even dressed up militiamen. Is that clear?"

"Clear as a bell." Lagutin stopped smiling.

"Keep a special lookout that way." Spartak nodded warily in the direction of the cemetery as if the saboteurs were already crawling out of its dark thickets and stealing up to the dorm.

Left alone, Lagutin couldn't tear his eyes off the dark thickets behind the cemetery enclosure where he had sunbathed with Mariana the day before while they were preparing for an examination.

The cemetery and its wild tangle of shrubs and bushes was a favorite haunt of the students. The whole spring through, they sunbathed in pairs, studied their lecture

notes, necked under the bushes, or came in crowds to have their photographs taken under the winged angels and at the gravesides of their glorious ancestors. In this suburban cemetery, many of the university professors and rectors were buried, among them the fabulist Hulak-Artemovsky, Academician Bahliy, and artist Vasilkivsky — the “heavenly” Vasilkivsky — Lagutin adored. Last spring there were also people in hospital gowns walking about this cemeterial wilderness, because nearby was an army hospital and the wounded and frost-bitten soldiers spent the whole days in the cemetery as they convalesced after the Finnish front. They had made friends with many of the students, and one of the officers even tried to steal Lagutin’s Mariana, but for all that the men parted amicably in the end.

Now he had to watch with the vigilance of a sentry and listen intently to the slightest rustle in the lilac thickets of what had once been such a convenient place for rendezvous, and should any suspicious person suddenly jump over the enclosure, he’d have to stop him with the challenge:

“Halt! Who goes there!”

This time it was Pavlo Drobakha, a trifler and gallivant who came from the Donbas and wasn’t afraid of either devil or dean — in olden times such fellows made libertines and merry duellers. Night after night, Drobakha disappeared beyond the cemetery wall where his unpretentious love bloomed riotously amid the thickets of lilac and stinging nettles. The war didn’t seem to have changed any of his habits. After clambering over the fence in a practiced manner, the merry looking, tousled gadabout approached Lagutin and asked for a cigarette.

“No smoking here,” Lagutin said, and added: “I almost opened fire on you.”

“You’d never have hit me. And even if you had, the bullet wouldn’t have pierced my hide: it’s too horny for that.”

“I know. Gallivanting I see. Been out with a new girl?”

“What else is a poor student to do? I wandered around hunting for amusement. Drinking in the joys of the world, as the poet would say. The way I see it, he’s

the fool who can't drink life with a tilt. From a dipper filled to the brim at that!"

"Do you think this is the proper time?"

"Why not?"

"The life you're talking about is being encroached upon now by the enemy."

"Hope to hell you're right!"

"What do you mean?"

"We'll give the nazis a rap over their knuckles all right, so don't you worry!"

He went into the lobby whistling.

Soon afterward yet another figure, tall, well-proportioned, and dashing, appeared before Lagutin out of the darkness. It was Bohdan Kolosovsky. He must have been seeing his Tania off to her dorm. Bohdan walked toward Lagutin, smiling with embarrassment: it was obvious he felt a bit awkward at such a time: others were standing guard and doing their duty, while he was returning carefree from a wonderful date. Tactfully, Lagutin didn't ask where Bohdan had been — why ask, when everything was already quite clear, for which Bohdan was grateful to him.

He stopped beside Lagutin and asked:

"Isn't it time for you to be relieved? If you want, I can take up your post."

"You'd have to ask Spartak first."

"What for?"

"You can't do anything without his approval. He's got a list of sentries in there."

"All right, let's go see him, then."

In the superintendent's office, Spartak was talking on the phone. "All right! All right!" he said resolutely into the receiver now and again, while a group of boys, Drobakha among them, was sitting on chairs in a semicircle around the table looking silently at Spartak — at times gloomily, at others with amused interest — watching him in the new capacity he seemed to be enjoying immensely.

When Pavlushchenko was finished with the conversation, Lagutin reported half in jest, pointing at Bohdan:

"I've 'apprehended' this character. May he take up my post?"

Spartak looked sullenly first at Kolosovsky, then at Lagutin, after which his round curly head bent over a list lying on the desk in front of him.

"Permit me to relieve Lagutin," Kolosovsky said to Spartak after a long pause.

"Lagutin is to be relieved by Sitnik," Pavlushchenko said in an icy tone, and called to the group of boys in the corner: "Sitnik, go take up your post!"

Sitnik, a lively first-year student with a crew cut, took the rifle from Lagutin with an overly serious mien and bolted out of the door to take up his post, while Kolosovsky, in the complete silence of all those present, came closer to Spartak's list.

"So when will my turn be?" he asked.

Frowning in a bossy way, not realizing that his expression clashed with his plump childish ruddy cheeks, Spartak searched for Bohdan's name in the list for a long time and then declared with displeasure in the end:

"Your name's not on here."

"What do you mean?"

"It's not on here, that's all."

"Who made up the list?"

"That's common knowledge. The YCL bureau and me."

Kolosovsky bit his lip, keeping his peace for a while under the attentive eyes of his fellow students.

"Why didn't you include me in the list?"

A chair creaked.

Spartak's round face bent down again, the curls scattering on his head above the important paper.

"We don't include just everybody, you know."

The remark triggered off indignant rejoinders from the boys.

"And you don't think he should have been?"

"He's an excellent student. A top-class marksman!" the comments were hurled from everywhere. "What more do you need?"

"Add his name to the list!" Drobakha said, jumping down from the windowsill. "Just have the guts to say you omitted him by oversight or because of your ignorancel"

But Spartak put him in place right away:

"You'd better wipe that lipstick off your cheek! For some there's a war on, while for others there's nothing but fun."

Rubbing the traces of lipstick off his cheek with his fist, Drobakha stuck to his guns nonetheless:

"You're a worse shot than he, but here you keep bugging others and don't trust him. Why can't you trust your fellow classmate to stand an hour at your silly post?"

The remark seemed to cut Spartak to the quick. He got up from behind the desk.

"I see your personality must also be given some thought if you dare to call our post silly," he said with a threatening ring to his voice as he blinked sulkily at Drobakha. "Do you know what a post is? Do you know that martial law has been declared?"

This didn't throw Drobakha off balance, though. He stepped closer to the desk.

"So what? What's that got to do with anything?"

"We must treble our vigilance now!"

"With regard to whom?"

"To everyone! To you! To me! To everyone!"

Coming up from behind, Lagutin calmly put his hand on Spartak's shoulder:

"Stop reeling off speeches here, Comrade Cicero, and come to the point: why wasn't Kolosovsky included in the list? Who gave you the right to scorn and push aside an honest, reliable friend of ours at such a time?"

"Don't try to tell me what I have to do," Spartak angrily shrugged off Lagutin's hand. "And the rest of you stop holding meetings around here. Democracy's come to an end. I know best who should be included and who shouldn't!"

He sat down at the desk again, his scowl more pronounced than before.

"You still didn't explain anything," Drobakha stood his ground.

"Ask him to explain!" Spartak yelled, not looking at Bohdan. "Ask him where his father is now!"

Bohdan felt his face flush. Nothing could have cut him more painfully now than this reminder about his father. Bohdan was the son of a man who had been declared an enemy of the people and sent to fell timber

in the taiga. Some of the boys knew about it and secretly sympathized with him, but still he felt guilty for some reason in front of them just then, as if he had kept it all a secret. There were no words to counter Spartak's argument, so Kolosovsky could do nothing but leave the office, checking the pain in his heart. He turned around and left the room, evading his friend's eyes.

Going up the stairs in the dark, he felt his face burning and the blood throbbing in his temples.

Once in his room on the second floor, Bohdan collapsed onto his bed without undressing and buried his head in the pillow. A vindictive feeling choked him; the pain of the insult hurled at him a moment before agonized his heart.

Spartak, that ultravigilant department activist, probably hadn't an inkling of the deepness of the wound he had touched in Bohdan. Again he was branded with distrust — a distrust voiced quite brutally and outspokenly. Spartak boasted that he had made the decision himself; perhaps it was so, or maybe someone of his elders had prompted him. After all, when Bohdan had lost his father, there were people who demanded and even kindly advised, lest he ruin his future, that he renounce his father publicly.

Stepura stirred on his creaking bed in the corner. He wasn't asleep, as it turned out. Catching a sigh, he addressed Bohdan:

"Will you have something to eat? There's bread and jam on the bedside table."

Bohdan did not respond.

"I lie here and keep thinking that my brothers have probably received their draft notices already," Stepura said after a while. "I can just imagine their homes filled with cries and wailing..."

In a dull bass, he kept on talking about what Bohdan had heard a dozen times about his elder brothers, one of them a tractor driver, another a combine harvester operator, and the third a stableman, all of them married and with a host of children. Then he said something about his father, who'd also be called up, and about his deferment which gave him an advantage over his brothers.

"For what, I wonder? For what merits?"

Bohdan kept silent. His teeth biting the pillow hard, he still hadn't gotten over the insult, tossing from side to side, balling his fists from the mental pain that racked him unremittingly. At this terrible, grim hour, when his country was in danger, he had been denied the trust of his fellows: he was not allowed to bear arms.

It was hot and stuffy in the room, although the window was open. Flushed from the heat, he jumped up from his bed and went over to the window. Right across the street, the dark cemetery stretched into the distance. Far away, in the industrial part of the city, a searchlight blinked to life. A moment later, its shaft swept downward, the light went out, and it became darker still. Bohdan recalled the sky over Zaporizhya glowing from the furnaces of the huge steelworks. His father had been taken into custody in Zaporizhya where he had worked at the city military registration and enlistment office. Bohdan recalled that night. No one in the family slept that night, though the hour was late. They were listening for the footsteps on the stairs — a lot of families were listening like that during those nights. When they entered, Father was in uniform; he looked at the warrant he was shown, but didn't say anything. Then he kissed Bohdan on the head; after that he kissed Bohdan's brother and mother. Tears rolled from his eyes; he turned to face the corner when they started taking the honorary revolutionary weapons he had been awarded for the routing of Makhno's bands down from the wall. He left home in a greatcoat and spurs. In his heart, Bohdan did not believe his father was guilty, so he did not renounce him when he was demanded to do so back in school, nor would he renounce him in the future no matter what insults and injuries he would have to bear.

Bohdan saw before him Spartak's cold watery eyes: "So if you think that just because my father's been arrested, the fate of my people and country is the less dear to me, his son?"

The door banged shut. Shtepa entered. Without turning the light on, he started rummaging in the bedside table near the door where he slept.

"Aren't you asleep yet?"

"What's up?" Stepura responded.

"Someone just fired a flare."

"Where did you see it?"

"Bezuhly and I were standing guard on the roof when suddenly — swish! — we saw it streaking up into the sky over the Forest Park. So there must be someone out there sending signals, eh?"

Bohdan felt that Shtepa's suspicion at that moment was directed primarily at him, and it looked as if he were waiting to see what Bohdan would say. Or he might have simply invented that flare — Shtepa was capable of much worse than that. What if he was acting on Pavlushchenko's instructions to see what Bohdan's mood was like? Looks like I've got a persecution mania, Bohdan thought.

It was dark behind the window and sultry in the room. He wished Tania could be with him now. She alone knew how his wounded pride and dignity had suffered from those endless suspicions; like no one else Tania knew how to alleviate his burden and share his pain at such difficult moments.

As if sensing Bohdan's mood, Stepura got out of bed and walked over to the window.

"Why don't you go to bed?" he asked, touching Bohdan on the shoulder.

"Oh, it's nothing..."

"What happened? Another quarrel with Tania, or what?"

"No."

Bohdan did not want to confide his troubles and doubts to Stepura while Shtepa was around. He heard Shtepa fussing by his bedside table in the dark as he ate the bread and sausage that crunched so deliciously under his teeth.

"Tomorrow our boys will go and hand in their deferment papers," Stepura said quietly to Bohdan.

Shtepa overheard him.

"Why do those deferments trouble you so? The state's given it to you, so it knew what it was doing. How do you like those heroes just raring to go so they won't miss their part of the action!"

"You can bide your time if you want," Stepura rejoined angrily.

"That's exactly what I intend to do. Will you go, really?"

"I will," Stepura answered after a pause.

"And you, Bohdan?"

"Me, too."

"Oh well, as you like" — the sausage crunched under his teeth again. "If you want my piece of mind, I'll tell you this: since I've got a deferment, I think I'm needed more here than there."

After having had his fill, Shtepa undressed, got into bed, and began to snore soon thereafter.

Stepura and Kolosovsky remained standing by the window for a long time. Bohdan told him briefly what had happened in the superintendent's office.

"Don't worry," Stepura said. "Sooner or later everything will fall into place. The war will write off many things — that's what I heard on the street today. But I don't think it will write off anything. On the contrary, it will write the truth for each one of us in steel and blood."

His serene reflections seemed to have cooled Bohdan down a bit. But even after they had gone to bed they couldn't fall asleep, what with the agitation they had lived through that day.

Summer nights are short, but this one was unusually long and seemed endless in fact.

4

Was it the sun? Yes, it was still in the sky.

It shone on Zhuravlivka, the plants, Dzerzhinsky Square, and the huge ferroconcrete State Industry Building, the first Ukrainian highrise.

A crowd had gathered by the State Industry Building since early morning, which made the place look like an assembly point of some military registration and enlistment office. But no such office was there, as a matter of fact. It was the site of the Dzerzhinsky District Party Committee. In its offices, commissions were meeting for hours on end, considering the volunteers' applications.

Today, the students were besieging the Party committee. That same morning, they had been informed that only applicants from the humanities departments would

be handled, but the others who were to come next day did not leave: they milled about on the square, by doorways, and in corridors. Everyone was waiting. For what other reason, then, had they hurled wooden grenades and practiced on the shooting range with small-bore rifles while studying at the university?

The Party committee was in charge of putting together raiding battalions — something nobody had ever heard of before — as well as sabotage groups that were to be dropped behind enemy lines, and companies of draft reinforcements scheduled to leave the city soon.

It was impossible to breathe freely for the cigarette smoke in the narrow corridor packed with history, philology and geography students. Everyone felt as if he were trying to pass the hardest imaginable examination of his life. Just like during exam time, the nerves of the students were taut in the extreme; all their attention was riveted on the door behind which the commission sat, and all their eyes were pinned on those who emerged from there. When someone came out, he was surrounded on all sides; the gleam in his eyes would let them know that everything was all right, and he would be congratulated by a merry chorus:

"Fit!"

Those who had already passed the commission, would take him into their midst, because he was theirs, a brother, a friend for life or a friend in death, perhaps.

Occasionally someone would come out with a look of disappointment on his face.

"Well?" he was asked.

He'd try to give some explanation: people were needed here, too; then there was his poor health to be reckoned with, and so on and so forth. He'd seek empathy but get none. He was shunned wordlessly. He'd leave and be struck off their minds.

"Next, please!"

The boy who was about to enter kept his YCL card with the deferment notice in it handy. Though no more than an ordinary slip of paper, a deferment had gained tremendous power that day and weighed a lot in the balance of the destiny of everyone who had come here. Should he keep it, he'd remain outside the line of fire and continue with his studies, but should he put it on the

table here at the District Party Committee, he'd no longer be a student but an infantryman or a sapper, whose path would lead him into the black, raging maelstrom of war, where the situation was much worse than it had been at Lake Hasan or Khalkin-Gol, and where his counterparts now killed themselves with their last grenades in the concrete pillboxes along the border to evade capture by the enemy.

The first to pass the commission were the department's Party Organizer Diadchenko, the Trade Union Organizer Bezuhly, and the members of the YCL bureau, Spartak Pavlushchenko among them. He had somehow acquired himself the right of a manager around the place, by virtue of which he entered and left the office as he wished. Every time he appeared before his friends, he had a more worried and serious look as if his duties were bearing heavily down upon him. Availing himself of his right, he tried to get some teachers' college student into the office at the head of the line, saying he was a *summa cum laude* student, but there followed a surprisingly concerted uproar in the corridor — all YCL members were equal, so let it be fair field and no favors! Pavlushchenko was put to shame, and his protégé wasn't let in; there had to be a single stream of applicants regardless of their scholarships, marks, or biographies.

On one occasion as he came out into the corridor, Spartak was sincerely surprised to see the lean, round-shouldered figure of Dukhnovich in the line.

"Are you here, too?"

"Why not: am I a fortune's pet, or what?"

"Well, not exactly a pet, but frankly speaking I didn't expect seeing you here, what with your moods."

"What moods are you talking about?" Dukhnovich asked, blinking with his lashless eyes.

"You refused to volunteer during the Finnish war, didn't you? Remember what you said when they were recruiting men for the ski battalion?"

"I've forgotten all about that."

"But we haven't."

"The Finnish war was a different thing," Dukhnovich said and got off with an awkward joke: "It's freezing up there, and I catch cold easily, you know."

"Do you think it will be warm in this case?"

"It's likely to be hot, I'd say. Be that as it may."

Whenever Spartak passed Kolosovsky, who was conspicuously nervous as he waited for his turn, Pavlushchenko averted his eyes sulkily, as if he wanted to make him understand that he disapproved of his presence and that Bohdan had no business hanging around that sacred door.

Kolosovsky was one of the last to enter the office. He had a feeling the commission met him all too warily and formally as if he had been spoken about just a moment before.

A buxom middle-aged woman with full lips, a birth mark on her cheeks, and a tight bun sat at the table holding Bohdan's application; she wasn't looking at it but at Bohdan as her new object of interest. She looked at him silently and, as it seemed to him, with hostility and suspicion lurking in her narrowed cold eyes.

"Kolosovsky Bohdan Dmitrovich?" she asked in a frosty voice.

He confirmed with a nod, almost angrily.

"So you want to volunteer for the Red Army?"

"Yes."

"Into the trenches? Under the bullets and tanks? To a place where the possibility of death cannot be ruled out? Did you weigh the consequences?"

"Yes, I did."

"We give your patriotic feelings their proper due. But if you've made your decision in the heat of the moment, yielded to the general mood, or were simply given to youthful haste, there's still time to take the application back: here it is."

The woman put it on the edge of the table.

"No, I'm not taking it back."

"Think hard about it."

"I've already thought about it."

On her right was a civilian with a clean-shaven head, sitting upright in a military fashion, and behind him a swarthy officer with graying temples and eyes puffy from fatigue. His collar tabs showed him to be a commissar. Both the civilian and commissar listened attentively to Kolosovsky's replies without interfering in the conversation. When he refused to take back the appli-

cation, the woman, spurred by his obstinacy, pounced on him with a new set of questions:

"Where's your father?"

"I've answered that in the questionnaire."

"He was arrested, wasn't he?"

"Yes."

"So he's an enemy of the people?"

Kolosovsky clenched his teeth and kept silent.

"As far as we know, you were to be expelled from the Young Communist League when you were still in school? Is that true?"

"Yes, it's true."

"What for?"

"For the same reason."

"What do you mean — for the same reason?"

"Because of my father, and my refusing to renounce him."

"Why did you refuse? He's an enemy of the people after all, isn't he?"

"He isn't an enemy. He's a Red Army officer decorated with the Order of the Red Banner for the Battle of Perekop and awarded with honorary revolutionary side arms."

"So you believe he suffered unjustly?"

"Yes, I do."

"Which means you don't believe in our justice?"

Bohdan kept his peace.

The woman exchanged glances with the commission members and with Pavlushchenko, sitting at some distance by a telephone, and said in a frosty voice:

"You may go."

Bohdan did not budge.

"What do you mean 'go'?"

"Go and continue your studies."

With her plump white hand she put his application in a separate pile from the others lying in a neat stack in front of her. So he had to go and continue his studies as if nothing had happened. For her he wasn't the son of a Red Army officer, and his father's honorary side arms meant absolutely nothing to her. She regarded his father an enemy and the son as just about the same — in any case, he was a questionable, unreliable character.

He headed for the door, trying to walk straight, although his vision was blurred; he felt so depressed it seemed that the weight of all twenty stories of the State Industry Building above his head were bearing upon his shoulders.

Bohdan was almost at the door when a calm, deep voice suddenly said behind his back:

"Just a moment, young man."

Bohdan looked round: it was the commissar addressing him. He held Bohdan's application and questionnaire in his hand.

"Kolosovskyl"

"Yes."

"Come here, please."

Bohdan returned to the table.

"Give me your deferment paper."

Bohdan extended it to him.

Smoothing out the paper, the commissar put it on the table in front of him and read through it. After that, he wordlessly took a pencil and — scratch! — a thick red streak ran obliquely across the deferment blank, followed by another one crosswise.

Kolosovsky felt emotion gripping his throat; his nerves would break any minute now, it seemed to him. The unexpected support of a stranger, the trust and what looked like the outright incomprehensible readiness of the commissar to vouch for him and his whole future struck Kolosovsky so intensely it took all his effort to keep himself from bursting into tears in front of the commission. The civilian with the clean-shaven head seemed to be at one with the commissar, because right away he gave Kolosovsky a kind smile with lips colorless as paper. Even the woman, who but a minute ago had questioned him in her frosty voice, became somewhat kinder now; her beautiful eyes with prominent whites took on an animated, glittering look which seemed to say: I was probing your determination to see how firm your decision and desire were.

Well then, he, too, was fit!

His deferment paper was now lying on the very top of a stack of similar papers canceled for good with the "X" mark of a thick red pencil.

There'd be trenches and attacks. There'd be nights of

conflagrations and days when he'd have to look death in the eye a hundred times, but never would he regret the day he voluntarily put his deferment notice on the table at the District Party Committee during a time of severe trial for his country.

5

Tania knew Bohdan had gone to the Party committee. He could not have done otherwise when his peers were changing into military uniforms at recruiting stations all over the land.

It was good that he had gone. Tania knew like no one else the acuteness of the feelings that made him take such a step. Once he told her half in jest that back in his teens, he had written an application to join the Republican forces fighting against Franco in Spain. Your Spain has come, my dear Bohdan!

Tania couldn't stop worrying about him. What decision would be awaiting Bohdan at the Party committee? Although she realized that the future of their love was being decided then and there and it would perhaps mean the end of their meetings or — most horrible thing of all! — separation with no hope of recapturing their sweet happiness, it would for all that be an even greater sorrow if he were rejected for one reason or another. Knowing his nature all too well, Tania simply could not imagine how he would live should he not pass the commission.

The tragedy of his father was the most painful wound in Bohdan's life. How often had Tania wanted to help him ease the bitterness and chase away the profound gloom that showed almost constantly in his otherwise sparkling dark-brown eyes. The grief and deep ever-present sorrow that stood in his eyes even when he laughed was what struck her the most when she met him for the first time in the main university building on Free Academy Street. They found themselves side by side quite by chance as they were standing in front of the alphabetical lists of those who had been accepted into the department of history, looking for their names.

After having discovered that they were both among the fortunate ones, they went for a jaunt — also seemingly by chance — around the city.

Three years had passed since that happy day. They had lived through quarrels, disagreements, jealousies, and the happiness of reconciliation and responsive affection.

Bohdan was well-liked in the department. In his relations with his classmates he was equitable and reliable; the girls called him the conscience of the department. When candidacies for increased stipends were discussed, his was proposed unanimously. There were more than enough reasons for the choice: he was an excellent student, took an interest in scholarly work, published in the university scientific journal his first article on his archeological finds at the site of the Dnieper hydropower station, and was working on a new article about the Scythian steppe barrows. Yet neither the Scythians nor the finds from his digs helped him, and the stipend was awarded to somebody else.

In the rector's office where the question was discussed, a fiery speech against Bohdan was delivered by Spartak Pavlushchenko, and Spartak was supported by yet another opponent of Bohdan's — a perpetually gloomy female graduate student as skinny as a dried sea-roach, so in the end, Bohdan was proclaimed unworthy of the honor.

Bohdan was outwardly calm about the incident with the stipend and even joked about it with his friends, but at heart — and that was something he could not hide from Tania — he was quite distressed about it, hurt not so much by having the honor denied him as by the belief that he had been treated unjustly and that in the decision, there had again been an element of discrimination because of his father as well as a shade of distrust and vindictiveness.

Tania was afraid something similar would happen again at the Party committee. Deep in his heart, he was really ready for heroic deeds, what with that Soviet Spain he had dreamed of. That's what she wanted most and pleaded for in her mind as she hurried with the girls across Dzerzhinsky Square toward the sunlit ferro-concrete bulk of the State Industry Building.

Tania was on her way there with her friend Mariana (who wanted to see her Slava, of course!), two girls from the philology department, and Olga, a Greek girl so swarthy she looked older than she really was. Tania had been sharing a room with Olga for two years, but the only thing she knew about her was who she was going to see now.

"Look, those are our boys over there!" Mariana exclaimed.

In the crowd of students they saw the lean Dukhnovich. Beside him Drobakha was gesticulating. He was probably telling a joke at the moment; with them were Stepura, Lagutin, and the fourth-year students Moroz and Pidmohilny, who were Bohdan's friends from gym class. Bohdan wasn't there, though.

As the girls learned, the boys were waiting for him to come out of the interview.

"They're keeping him in there a long time. What if he winds up a field marshal?" Drobakha joked, although Tania discerned a ring of bitterness in his joke.

"Pavlushchenko must be listening to his confession in there," Stepura said. "Once he gets at someone, he's like a leech."

At last Bohdan appeared. By his beaming smile and the way he bounded lithely down the steps and tossed his hair backward, Tania guessed that everything was all right. Instantly she felt relieved.

Cheerful, restored to vigor, Bohdan approached the group. The boys met him with a chorus of jokes.

"The Cossack's fit, he is!"

Bohdan, all smiles, said to everyone and to Tania, in particular:

"The problem's settled."

Tania appeared at his side in a trice, took his arm above the elbow, and squeezed it hard. That gesture — inconspicuous to the others — told him everything: she was glad for and proud of him, and she'd wait for him however long it would take, because for her, there wasn't anyone like him in the whole world.

"If only they don't send you off in a hurry," Mariana said, glancing into Slava's eyes, "so we all could get together and have a party. What did they tell you to bring along?"

"Attention! There's been a question!" Drobakha said in a dry, screeching voice, imitating one of the university instructors. "The question: what must be taken to camp? The answer: a woman, a wardrobe, a bed, a couch, and a piano. But all that must be left at the gates of the camp. The only thing you'll take to the tents will be a toothbrush and a change of underwear!"

Everyone laughed. Tania seemed happier than the rest, alternately squeezing and stroking the hand of her volunteer soldier in a gentle way. The others couldn't help noticing it.

"Come on, Tania, give him a proper hug! With all the passion you can muster in your young heart! Don't be ashamed!" Drobakha teased the girl.

But she wasn't ashamed at all. To be as madly in love as she — was that a sin? She hadn't hidden her affection toward Bohdan before, so why should she do so now when their impending separation seemed to give her the right to everything.

"You, girls, can sleep serenely now," the stocky, broad-shouldered Moroz smiled, addressing himself chiefly to Halia Klochko, a tall blond from the philology department he was far from indifferent to. Only today had she humbled her pride and come to see him as all the other girls had come to see their sweethearts. "We'll defend you like lions."

"You bet, with such grenadiers as we," said Pidmohilny who looked like a bit of a weakling. "Why, when we advance and strike them their feathers will be flying!"

"Maestro Dukhnovich here is sure to throw them into quivering fright," Lagutin remarked. "Before you, brothers, stands a widely known expert on tactics and strategy!"

Everyone burst into laughter, recalling Dukhnovich's constant conflicts with the military instructors.

"Miron, tell us how you got nabbed today," Ste-pura said, putting an arm round Dukhnovich's shoulder.

"Yes, I did get into a mess," Dukhnovich confirmed. "Some women took me for an Aryan paratrooper in disguise. Simply fantastic. Now tell me, girls, what kind of an Aryan would I make? I'm a freckled redhead. Or

maybe that was why they pounced on me. Some people just don't like redheads..."

"Don't you vilify yourself like that," Mariana said laughing. "Why, you're a real beaut! Eyebrows as soft as chick's down! As a matter of fact, you're all beautiful today, especially Stepura!" She playfully turned to look at Stepura, who blushed to his ears. "But why are we just standing here? Let's go!" she said and hooked Slava's arm first and then Stepura's.

The big, sunlit Dzerzhinsky Square spread out before them.

Linking arms, the boys and girls walked through the middle of the square as if through a steppe. They walked in file as they had done many times during demonstrations and evening jaunts, laughing and joking. How good it was to feel that they had done their duty and could now look openly into the eyes of every passerby.

The sun stood high in the sky, pouring its profuse rays onto their open, youthful faces. There were no clouds in the sky which had seen neither exploding shells nor shrapnel for over two decades now; there had been only birds and rainbows in the heavens. Could such a gorgeous sky possibly turn black with smoke and blaze with conflagrations?

They firmly stepped along, the girls filled with confidence that as long as their boy friend volunteers were in this world no outlander's foot would ever tread on this broad, sunlit square of their youth, the square they were so proud of, for it was the largest in Europe.

6

On Basseina Street at the stop where Dukhnovich stayed behind to wait for his streetcar, they met the Administrator — as they had nicknamed Mikhailo Shtepa who kept in touch with the city's theater administrators, selling tickets at enterprises in his free time and organizing cultural outings, which earned him some extra pocket money.

He was on his way to take an examination on the Middle Ages. Come what may, he grabbed his student

record card, stuffed his pockets with crib sheets, and hoofed it to the professor: a passing mark was all he needed to get the dratted exam behind him.

"You'll flunk again," Tania said merrily.

"Where'd you get such a forecast from?" Shtepa smirked with his curled-up lip. "Or is that what you want to happen?"

"You almost guessed right."

Tania could not stand Shtepa, although he shared the same room with Bohdan at the dorm. He was a quiet fellow, neatly dressed, with smarmed-down hair, but his crown was already balding. His tie was always immaculately knotted, and the smile never left his lips, perhaps because his upper lip turned outward, which made it look as if he were smiling at everyone and everything all the time. Right then he was also smiling at the boys, but without understanding their mood or excitement.

Shtepa hadn't gone to the Party committee. When Tania dropped in to the boys' room in the morning, she found only Shtepa there. He stood near the wardrobe in front of a mirror, painstakingly tying the knot of his thin necktie. She asked him where Bohdan had gone.

"Bohdan must imagine he's either Minin or Pozharsky *," Shtepa said, without interrupting his meticulous efforts. "He left to hand in his legal draft deferment, along with his noggin perhaps."

"And what about you?"

"I'm not a YCL member, only a trade unionist, you know. I'll stay behind with you to finish university, so I'll get the worst of the bargain."

On meeting the boys, Shtepa didn't feel any pangs of conscience with regard to them, which he certainly should have.

"Well, well, volunteers," he bestowed his smile simplemincedly on each of them in turn. "And you've volunteered, too, my little Miron?" he addressed Dukhnovich derisively.

"I'm ashamed to say I did, Father."

* Kuzma Minin, one of the elders of Nizhny Novgorod, and Prince Dmitriy Pozharsky organized and led an army of civilian volunteers who liberated Moscow from the Polish invaders in 1612

"Oh, that is highly commendable, my boy."

"And why weren't you there?" Olga asked Shtepa sternly.

"Well, you see, I'm er-r not a YCL member. I'm over the age limit, or whatever you call it."

"I'm afraid you never came of age in the first place," Mariana blurted out.

"What a hornet!" Shtepa remarked, giving her a reconciliatory smile as well.

"I don't seem to remember: were you ever in the YCL?" Pidmohilny asked, surprised.

"No, he was born a trade union member, and that's all," Drobakha joked.

Indeed, why had Shtepa evaded membership in the YCL? He was only a bit older than them, yet he hadn't joined the organization, and the fact had somehow slipped by unnoticed. Selling theater tickets — now that was an altogether different thing.

"I look at you, Michel" — Drobakha came up to him — "and see that your affairs are going from bad to worse. In cunning you're a Talleyrand, but when it comes to besting the Middle Ages... Have you learned all the dates by heart at least?"

"That's my worry."

"All right then, tell me in what year did that illiterate brigand Pizarro conquer the Incas?"

Shtepa's eyes rolled with a blank expression.

"What are the Incas to him," Lagutin remarked. "The theater world — that's his field. They say you finally made it onto the big stage?"

"I had a go at it."

"In what role?" the girls feigned interest, although they knew pretty well about Shtepa's recent "opera debut."

"I'm not choosy," Shtepa said, and Stepura elaborated: "Did you see the scene in *Quiet Flows the Don* where the Cossacks run across the stage with wooden rifles? He was running with them. Breeches with stripes, a fake rifle, and a face contorted with fury — just the role he'd been dreaming of!"

"Soon you'll be running, too, but not with wooden rifles," Shtepa rejoined, the smile still on his curled-up lip. "Or were you declared unfit?"

A gloomy expression instantly settled on Kolosovsky's face.

"What makes you think so?"

"Well, I see you walking along so merrily... so I was just wondering what made you so happy."

"That's something you'll never understand, my little Shtepa," Drobakha said and his heavy big-boned face grew serious.

"Why?"

"Because" — Drobakha slightly tugged at the end of Shtepa's necktie — "you're either stupid or an outright fool."

Shtepa broke into a little chuckle as if he had been complimented.

"In Latin, it's *stultus*," Dukhnovich added, making for the streetcar that was approaching the stop just then.

The streetcar was crammed full of passengers. Jumping onto the step, Dukhnovich waved his hand in parting.

"*Aufwiedersehen!*"

The foreign word immediately put a gruff looking janitor standing nearby on guard.

"That's just our friend joking around," Drobakha said to put the janitor's mind at ease.

"You'd better be more careful with such jokes now," Shtepa warned, and turning away from the janitor, said a bit lower: "There's a real spy mania all over town. Everyone's being taken for a saboteur. They say some women beat up a militiaman with their baskets, thinking he was a German in disguise. You know what aroused their suspicion? His exaggerated politeness."

"Shtepa, don't spread rumors," Drobakha cautioned intentionally loudly to scare him. "All right, you get off to your exam and try your luck."

"I certainly will. Are you coming with me, girls?"

"We know the way ourselves," Tania shot back icily.

The girls also had to go to the department, but so as not to walk with Shtepa, they deliberately crossed the street.

On the way to the Party committee, the boys had decided not to take the exam, for they were free as birds now.

"I feel a bit embarrassed about the Old Man," Bohdan said, having the professor in mind. "Let's hope he'll forgive us."

"We'll take the exam after the war," Drobakha rejoined lightheartedly. "To the pounding of kettledrums we'll come and take all the exams at once."

"Won't we have forgotten everything by then?" Lagutin asked thoughtfully, as if he were talking to himself.

"Do you think the war will go on for just a few days, or what?" Kolosovsky asked ironically.

"Well, if not a few days, then in two or three months everything will be finished and Hitler will be whimpering."

"The time of Thirty Years' wars is long gone," remarked Pidmohilny, in support of Lagutin's view. "Maybe they'll be busted right on the border."

"Let's hope for the best," Stepura said mirthlessly.

"If only it doesn't drag on till winter... Remember how many men were brought back from the Finnish war with frostbite?"

In the lobby of the dorm, the snack bar was open as usual. A crowd of hungry students stood at the counter, among them long-legged Ivan Khimochka, a happy-go-lucky fellow who loved to entertain the inner man; he was munching on something just then and gestured for the boys to join him.

"Go for it, boys. They've got fresh sandwiches!"

"Before lunch you struggle with hunger, and after lunch, with sleepiness, isn't that so, Khimochka?" Drobakha didn't fail to note. "All right, fellows, let's have a dozen kefirs!"

Spurred on by hunger, the boys bought a mountain of sandwiches and a battery of kefir bottles — there was no need to save their stipends, since they would be on army rations soon.

They hadn't finished eating their sandwiches when a noise and shouting reached them from outdoors. As they spilled out of the building, they saw an unforgettable scene: walking down the street, two robust women janitors, accompanied by a huge crowd of onlookers, were escorting a saboteur they had apprehended in the person of... Shtepa! His necktie was askew, his shirt

pulled out of his trousers, and his hair, which he always smarmed down carefully to hide his balding crown, was sticking out on all sides like the horns of a faun.

Although he was rumpled and ill-treated, his curled-up lip smiled at his friends from afar.

"Spy mania just like I told you, and here's the first victim for you!"

Spartak was already up front, and by his look the women janitors quickly guessed that he was the boss around the place.

"We've brought one here — he yours?"

"What do you mean ours?" Drobakha exclaimed, staring fixedly at Shtepa as if he were a total stranger.

"We've never seen him in our lives!"

"See!" the women exchanged glances. "And he says he's a student and keeps shoving some record card at us, but it's a fake document to be sure."

"But I also showed you my deferment card, too!"

"What deferment?"

"A postponement of induction."

"How do you like that! A healthy young man without any sense of decency at all! What deferment are you talking about at such a time? He's nothing but a paratrooper in disguise. Check him out!"

While they were arguing, Shtepa managed to regain his composure: he tidied up his hair and put his tie straight with an imperceptible movement of his hand. The fact that he was among friends raised his spirits.

"You'd better check out them not me, Comrade Pavlushchenko," he said to Spartak, shaking his chin almost like a goat. "Yes, yes, check them out. I demand it in all seriousness. They didn't bring me here — I brought them!"

"Have you lost your mind?" one of the women yelled, flabbergasted at the sudden turn of events.

Her partner also took alarm:

"How do you like that — twisting everything around!"

"Yes, yes," the Administrator went after them with a fiendish smirk. "How else? I've lured you to this place deliberately! You'll be sent off to the proper place and checked out all right! Maybe you've got German radio transmitters in your bosoms?"

"Have you lost your senses? Are you nuts, or what?"

the women yelled, clutching at their bosoms. "If you want, you can see what's hidden there; it should be obvious enough to anyone who hasn't gone blind altogether!"

At that, even Spartak, forgetting about his airs, couldn't keep himself from smiling.

"Please calm down, ladies, and thank you for your vigilance," he said to the women. "You may go now; we'll attend to the matter ourselves."

Once the women had left, the students closed in on Shtepa with roars of laughter, asking him how he felt being a paratrooper dropped behind enemy lines.

"You may guffaw as much as you want," he waved them off. "But I'm taking my passport — and it's off to exams. Even a passing mark will do for the Middle Ages!"

7

Back in his room, which he entered with the boys, Shtepa changed his shirt before going to the examination: in the scuffle, the women janitors had dragged him against a fence, so his shoulders were smeared with dirt.

"Oh my, to spoil such a thing," Shtepa complained, reaching into his suitcase for another shirt.

The boys also got out their suitcases, but for a different purpose: to pack their belongings. Nobody knew when they would be told to leave — in a week, perhaps in two or three hours, but they had to be ready to go at any time. The dorm superintendent suggested they leave their things in the cloak room, as they usually did when they went on holidays in the summer.

Bohdan pulled his suitcase out from under the bed and bent over it, sluggishly and seemingly reluctantly picking through his things. There were a couple of shirts that were quite worn out from constant washing at the university laundry, a pair of recently acquired soccer jerseys, and the rest was mostly books, photographs and notes. One photograph showed a group of boys and girls amidst the shrubbery by the graveside monument to the father of the Ukrainian theater, Marko Kropivnitsky.

Then there was a picture of their May Day outing in the forest, with a laughing Tania dangling from a branch as if it were a horizontal bar. He'd probably take along the photographs, but where should he leave the thick notebooks and drafts of his would-be thesis on the uprising of the slaves of the Bosporan kingdom? The marble stelai represented those anonymous slaves minutely small compared with the king who sat so huge and puffed up on the throne. The ancient Bosporus, the city of Olbia, the steppe Scythians and Polovtsi, the Zaporozhian Isle of Khortitsya near which the Dnieper hydropower station had now been built — all these were his favorite subjects. He was sure he would never have tired of digging, studying and researching his sunny steppes from their hoary past on to the turbulent days of the Revolution when his heady young father scudded across the steppes in a machine-gun cart.

Opposite him, Stepura was leafing through some notes near his bed, and farther away, in a corner, Moroz was rummaging in his sturdy little oaken trunk; they, too, were packing their things, each absorbed in his thoughts.

"If I were you, I wouldn't hand in the suitcases," Shtepa reflected aloud, tying the knot on his new tie. "To entrust your goods to the superintendent at such a time... do you realize what you're doing?"

"And what will happen to them?" Stepura asked, raising his head.

"You're a naive squirt. There's a war on! Or do you think our city's immune from it? Just imagine what'll happen when the front line approaches the city?"

"Now get this through your head once and for all, Shtepa" — Kolosovsky gave him a cutting look from under his knit brows — "the city will never be surrendered."

"And what if it is?"

"If it is, we will no longer be."

The forthrightness and conviction of the reply seemed to have touched some chord in Shtepa's heart.

"Oh boys, boys," he sighed by the mirror, smarming down his hair. "You must be thinking none of this pains me any, and nothing is dear to me. Or do you reckon Shtepa hasn't anything to lose? My mom and dad are simply peasants with no education, my grandfathers

were illiterate and so were my great-grandfathers, and here Soviet power has given me, their descendant, the right to enlightenment and education, the university and knowledge. I understand that well enough, brothers, and although my stipend has been withdrawn for poor grades, by conviction I'm a Soviet man through and through. Had I been told by the proper authorities: Shtepa, hand in your deferment to the dean's office, get your leggins and rifle, and go shoot and kill, do you think I'd refuse? I'd go and kill. But doing it of my own free will like you are... Oh no, I'm not of the kind to go looking for trouble."

With these words he straightened his jacket, picked a piece of thread off his arm, and made for the door.

"Now watch out, don't fall into somebody's clutches again," Moroz said sarcastically to his back. "Or they'll drag you back with a noose around your neck."

"The hell they will! I've got my passport with me!" Shtepa said, disappearing into the corridor.

"Who knows, but he'll live out his whole life just like that," Stepura said after a while. "He'll huddle in a crevice and sit out all storms."

"I don't envy people like him," Bohdan said. "He's one of those who's born to crawl."

There was a knock on the door.

By its light and playful sound, Bohdan recognized Tania.

Indeed, a moment later her suntanned feet and gleaming white skirt appeared in the door. Generally, his Tania gave the impression that she didn't walk but drifted along in her skirt as if on a parachute, easily and without any outward signs of gravity. A jaunty skirt, a happy smile, and a look of amiability — that was how he remembered her when they had met for the first time in the main university building three years before.

"I passed!" she said, lightly tugging Bohdan by his hair.

He raised his swarthy, animated face from the suitcase.

"What did you get?"

Tania spread out five fingers: she'd aced the exam!

"She's just lucky," Bohdan said to the boys. "She never studies for exams; skips through epochs and dates

like a goat, and gets the highest mark. The professor must have a liking for you."

"Not just me but you, too," she said and tousled his hair again. "'Where's your friend?' he asked me. 'Why didn't he come for the examination?'"

"Did you explain everything to him?"

"Of course, but my explanation didn't satisfy him: that's no reason, he said. To volunteer is a good thing, so to speak, but exams must be taken anyway. He asked me to tell you to come take your exam by all means. So you'll have to go! The Old Man's waiting for you!"

Bohdan exchanged glances with the boys as if to say: wow, what a fix I'm in now.

"Well then, go," Stepura advised.

Bohdan wondered himself why he didn't go after all. In the heat of the moment, he had just decided to skip the exam. Indeed, why not go? He was still a student, nobody had relieved him of his student duties yet, and being a volunteer wasn't really a valid reason to evade the inevitable meeting with his demanding examiner. Mikola Yuvenaliovich, their gray-haired, ruddy-cheeked professor, must be sitting now in the lecture hall before the examination cards spread out on his desk, while in a corner stood his cane with a silver knob in the shape of a small Scythian idol. Whenever someone ventured to use a crib sheet or tried to cover up his ignorance and fool him, Mikola Yuvenaliovich began to breathe heavily in stifled rage, his face flushed bright red up to the hairline, and it seemed he'd grab the knotted cane any minute and bring it down on the student's back for his cheekiness. Bohdan's failure to appear for the examination would probably be interpreted as negligence or, even worse, as disrespect, although Bohdan was filled with sincere respect and gratitude to the professor for the knowledge he had gained from him. So he surely didn't want to offend him upon parting. A scholar with a broad range of interests, a friend and associate of the famous Ukrainian historian Yavornitsky, the professor had been at all the largest digs of the Scythian barrows throughout the south, studied Olbia thoroughly, and was constantly on the lookout for a worthy assistant or follower, among the students perhaps. Bohdan had a feeling the professor was sizing him up with particular

attention and pinning particular hopes on him, and here he had showed such ingratitude to the old man by thoughtlessly skipping his last examination.

"I'll go," Bohdan said with determination and jumped to his feet. "Will he still be there, though?"

"Sure he will," Tania encouraged him. "There were three students in line after me."

Half an hour later Bohdan was already in the lecture hall, standing before the professor. He was the last examinee to enter, leaving Tania behind in the corridor. On greeting the professor, he went up to the table as usual and picked out a card with questions from the array spread out face down before the professor. The Netherlands, Marco Polo, the Inquisition — all the topics that fell to his lot were well known to him.

While Bohdan was thinking over the answers, sitting at the edge of the table, Mikola Yuvenaliovich got to his feet, took his cane, and tapping with it lightly across the floor, went to the open window. The slanting sunrays shining through the crowns of the trees made them look filled with a green light. From somewhere below in the street came the sounds of military commands and the measured tread of feet: the mobilized men must have been passing in formation.

"I'm ready," Bohdan said.

The professor turned round and looked through his spectacles at Bohdan as if he hadn't recognized him right away or had suddenly seen in him something he didn't understand at all or hadn't identified to the end, something he wanted to grasp, decipher and explain for himself right away.

"What have you got there?" he asked at length.

Bohdan read out the questions and was about to answer, when the professor waved his hand in a melancholy way and asked something quite unexpected:

"On what day did Napoleon's troops invade our country in eighteen twelve?"

Bohdan's brow creased in thought.

"Did you forget?" the professor asked, and prompted: "On June the twenty-fourth. Remember that. On the evening of June the twenty-second, the French crossed the Nieman. On that same day — exactly one hundred and twenty-nine years later — those others crossed the

Bug River. A coincidence. An occasional coincidence, of course, but it makes you think... This war will end in disaster for them, too — you'll see," he said pointedly and beckoned Bohdan to the window. "Look there!"

Through the branchy trees lit by the setting sun, column upon column of draftees marched down the road below. All were still in their civies, each dressed differently — some in caps, others bareheaded, with bundles or knapsacks over their shoulders or with suitcases in their hands. The commanders striding alongside, turned round now and again, issuing orders, getting the men in line or closing them up, and their voices sounded angry, almost rude, while their faces seemed cruel and distressful from afar.

"Wars have been the primary cause of the downfall of all civilizations," the professor said sadly. "It's enough to recall Troy or Carthage or the flowering cities of the Orient trampled by invaders, and during excavations it's enough to see our dead kremlins burned by nomad hordes to become convinced what a tragedy war has always been for the common people. Twentieth century man could have evaded this tragedy — at least that's how it seemed to us, the cranks of my generation. But obviously there are forces that are stronger than human reason, forces, which given a chance to develop, will lead mankind to self-destruction. Year after year, we've been scaring you with images of the medieval Inquisition, but that was mere child's play compared with the devilish actions of the modern inquisitors. Oh, how they've run amok! Bonfires of books are blazing throughout Europe. The Sorbonne is no more. Prague's Charles University is no more. There are concentration camps, fascist barracks, and the filthy stench of racism in the heart of Europe today..." the professor fell silent, sadly watching the endless column passing by. "I, too, have a son. He's with paraborne troops. He's the only one I've got, and should anything happen to him, it will surely break my heart. But believe me, there is something much dearer to me now than my son's life, let alone my life — it's what might be called the great legacy of the human spirit we inherited in the form of the culture of the Greeks and the as yet little-studied culture of the Slavs. Homer and Dante, Mickiewicz and

Shevchenko, Tolstoy and Tchaikovsky — they all are on this side of the barricades. Life in its entirety is under a real threat now; surely you understand this no less than I do, but I want the realization of this to give you strength."

Bohdan felt the professor's hand on his shoulder.

"Look how many are marching there. There go tomorrow's soldiers, ordinary people taken away from their machine tools and plows. Most of them probably haven't any idea about the frescos of Kiev's Saint Sophia. Nor do they know about Raphael, but they all are friends of Raphael and Pushkin and Gogol, and their only defenders. Only people like you, like my son, like these men marching down there give us any hope. It might seem strange to you that I have broached this subject now. But I know you've volunteered and you've got a hard path ahead of you, so I wanted you to remember the most important thing of all before you set out on this path; in our cruel age, amid blood and savagery, that great humanist tradition must not die! It must be preserved, and you will be the ones to preserve it!"

In his excited state, the professor took his old-fashioned spectacles off his nose and started to wipe them with the tip of his white canvas jacket. After wiping them, he put them back on his nose, and coughed gruffly.

"All right, give me your record card."

Bohdan handed it to him, and the professor, leaning against the windowsill, put down the mark in clear handwriting: excellent.

"As for Olbia, we'll dig it yet," the professor reminded Bohdan when he shook his hand on parting. "Good luck to you, and don't forget your alma mater! I don't believe it's taught you anything bad."

8

It was evening.

In the student dorm, farewell parties were on: it had been announced that the boys would hit the road the next morning. From one of the rooms on the second floor came the shouts of "Bitter!" now and again — Mariana and Lagutin were holding their wedding party.

The day before they wouldn't have believed it, but when it became known that Lagutin would be leaving the next day, Mariana stunned her friends with the unexpected invitation:

"Come to our wedding!"

Bottles of *zubrivka* * were standing on the table beside heaps of cookies, brown bread and fresh greens Mariana's mother had brought from their home by the Tractor Works. Mariana's parents were sitting among the students at the table — the mother, deeply moved by the event, was wiping away her tears, while the father looked sternly now at the bright-haired lanky bridegroom and then at his friends, who from lack of habit had gotten drunk fast, lost the color in their cheeks and drunkenly shook their long-haired heads which their thin students' necks seemed barely strong enough to hold erect.

"Bitter!" they shouted to the newlyweds.

Indeed, the wedding was bitter and mirthless in a way. Everything had been done hurriedly and in a slapdash manner. Mariana's mother had known for a long time that her daughter had a fiancé, a lanky boy with blue eyes that were a bit mocking and willful. He had visited their home many a time. At twenty years old, he exuded a freshness, youth and purity of an early periwinkle. A fine son-in-law, he was. But for how long? All these young, healthy boys at the table would join the ranks tomorrow and abandon their textbooks and studies. But would all of them return? And would they ever meet again? It was not the kind of wedding Mother had dreamed of. She had thought that after the children graduated, they'd have a real wedding, prepared for properly with their relatives and friends invited. There'd be Slava's parents who were schoolteachers in Sumy Region. The wedding would be held at home in the orchard and not in such a stuffy room blacked out with blankets; there'd be long tables laden with food, garlands of electric lights hanging in the trees (some of their relatives were electricians, so they'd do everything!).

* *Vodka* flavored with southern sweetgrass (*Hierochloe australis*)

There would be bright, merry music and songs would sound till morning, and the entire workers' settlement would know that veteran of the Tractor Works Severin Kravets was celebrating his daughter's wedding.

But instead, there was this hastily prepared party, and like a grim reminder of the impending separation, their son-in-law's canvas knapsack, ready for the march, was lying on the wardrobe.

"Bitter! Bitter!"

Slava seemed to be ashamed of his hasty marriage, and it looked as if he regarded it a bit ironically trying to get off with jokes at the shouts of "Bitter!", when by custom he had to kiss Mariana publicly to "sweeten" the guests' drinks from which the newlyweds themselves had to refrain. But nothing could be concealed from his mother-in-law, for now and again she saw how a profound gentleness and sadness showed through his youthful bashfulness and jocular mood whenever he looked at his bride.

Mariana was nervously merry throughout the whole party. Her affected abandon seemed to have seized total control of her, yet at times her mirth waned, her eyes became languid, and then she would look at her elect as if memorizing his features. At moments like these, she forgot about her guests and saw only him. Slava's bright, handsome face, straight nose with sensitive nostrils, childish full lips that had been kissed just now, and the misty blue of his eyes — all this was hers, hers! Looking into his eyes, she forgot about everything else, her face all aglow; then suddenly it would turn pale from some gloomy foreboding, and the traces of color that lingered on her blanched cheeks would become somewhat pitiful and forced. He alone was present for her here; she kept looking at him and his kind clear smile, hardly noticing anyone else — or noticing without really seeing. When her eyes fell on his knapsack by chance, she seemed to want to cry out aloud and, oblivious to all those present, she would openly cling to him. She was frank in her burning and nervous anticipation of the hour, the minute they would be alone together at long last.

Mariana had insisted on the wedding when she learned he was to leave the next day. It had to be marriage,

marriage right away! To tell the truth, she, too, had imagined her wedding party would be different from this one, held hurriedly on the night of their parting when the whole city was engulfed in darkness, alarm and agitation, with air defense sentries stationed on the roofs, and future widows weeping in their homes after they had surrendered their dearest ones to war. In bright sunshine — that's when their wedding should have taken place. Instead, it wasn't the sun illuminating their union for life, nor a frolicking song, but sadness, anxiety, and the bitterness of parting. She felt Slava's warm hand in hers and didn't let go of it for the whole evening.

Next to Slava sat Mariana's father, a stocky, mustached man with thick eyebrows that were still black, though he was advanced in years. He had been against this hasty marriage. His attitude toward Slava had always bordered on suspicion, and only after he had drunk a good deal did he turn to his son-in-law:

"To tell you the truth, Slava, I wasn't in favor of this premature marriage. That's not the way it ought to be done. Oh well" — he leaned closer to him — "we're living through hard times. Everything we did before the war is being eradicated. At the tractor works, we're all digging trenches now and switching over our shops to a new line of production. If the management would let me, I'd go with you too for all my years. I suppose the time has come to go through trial by fire to find out what we and our deeds are worth. Since you've volunteered, son, do what you have to. But the main thing is to keep your morale high once you get there. Do you know where you're going?"

"More or less," Slava said with a smile.

"You're going to the forge. At our works we choose people with lots of guts for the forge; a lazybones won't last long there. The same thing's true in the army. Don't become some lousy clerk at headquarters — be an honest man and join the infantry; that'll be your forge."

Slava listened to the old man attentively and seemed not to feel how Mariana ardently stroked his hand under the table.

"When he's made up his mind, Dad, you can rest assured he'll do his best," she said with pride.

The boys put on the gramophone, but its wheezing sound was unpleasant to the ear.

"Let's ask Olga to sing a song instead," someone suggested.

Everyone knew the Greek girl Olga sang beautifully, so it didn't take long to persuade her. Everyone fell silent, and from the corner where she sat flowed a little-known song Olga had brought to the university from the Ukrainian-Greek settlements on the Sea of Azov: "Low is the valley, tall is the cranberry bush..." As she sang, her plain face took on a wistful charm, and her luminous eyes looked across the wedding table toward the blacked-out window as if she were sending her sad song somewhere beyond it.

In the meantime, Stepura was standing on guard by the doorway, having volunteered to relieve Moroz who had gone to bid farewell to his relatives. It was Stepura's last student guard duty, and he, too, heard the shouts of "Bitter!" from above now and then as well as the song that was taking his love away from him and giving her to another forever that night.

Slava Lagutin had interfered with Stepura's path in life. If he hadn't been at the university, she might have fallen in love with me, Stepura thought now. Isn't there really anything in me to make a girl like me? Didn't all my poems to her mean anything after all?

Stepura was a poet. He wrote lengthy, somewhat sentimental poems about unrequited love, vernal nights with nightingale songs, about the moon and stars over his Vorskla, the limpid, translucent river in southern Poltava Region where he hailed from. And although his poems weren't published anywhere except in the department's wall newspaper, his friends nonetheless regarded him as a real poet. Why, he wondered now. Perhaps only because of the truth and sincerity of feelings he put into those awkward verses, for he wrote about what he loved and had experienced himself. Mariana, whom Stepura had been hopelessly in love with for the third year, was given now in marriage to another, and he who had conquered her heart, making Stepura miserable, was sitting up there right now; the shouts "Bitter!" were meant for him so he could kiss her publicly on her parted lips, her eyes burning with desire, and her cheeks

flushed dark-red like apples. By all good and holy, she belonged to Lagutin. Whenever Stepura compared himself with Lagutin, he always found himself coming up short. His rival was clever, handsome, and an excellent student, while Stepura was slow-witted and uncouth, with a square-jawed face and a nose as flat as a duck's. In moments of despair, Stepura thought she must have taken him simply for a prehistoric cave man with an ape jaw, and then he would despise his appearance and rustic ways. Though he was strong, there was something of the peasant's strength in him, heavy and clumsy, and when they took turns on the horizontal bar during gym class, Lagutin had the advantage in this case as well. Doing the giant circle no worse than Kolosovsky, Lagutin swung easily and gracefully through the air, and Mariana watched him with undisguised adoration in her eyes, but when Stepura grabbed the bar it bent under his weight and the whole apparatus creaked and rattled, sending the girls running in all directions for fright that Stepura's heavy bulk might fall from the bar and maim someone. He remembered how in their first year, Mariana had asked the boys what sports sections they would attend. She had entered Lagutin in track and field then, while Stepura, even without so much as his consent — and probably to mock him — was put in the weightlifting section to lug around the heavy barbell. Still, he did attend the workouts, heaving that idiotic barbell, and wrote his hopelessly overemotional verses dedicated to Mariana.

Once Stepura overheard Lagutin comment critically on his poetry as he and the boys were standing by a new issue of the wall newspaper. Slava was wondering where a weightlifter could have gotten so much touching sentimentality and all those eyes and sighs and skies.

And although he spoke jokingly and without malice, Stepura, who was standing not far away, wanted to strangle him. Since that incident Stepura had been irreconcilably alienated from Lagutin. The dark forces of jealousy, the very same forces that had boiled in the blood of his country forefathers who, with fence poles in their hands, had carried on in the village streets at night, breaking down wattle fences and carrying off gates to rankle their rivals, surfaced in him as well,

searing his conscience, inflaming and deranging his reason.

He almost never talked with Lagutin after that. An intense enmity sprang up between them. Lagutin wondered why, but in Stepura the enmity grew into a furious, inextinguishable hatred, especially when he saw how Mariana kept running after Lagutin or waited for him meekly near the library, while he took her half-heartedly by the arm, as if she were his by right.

Their wedding had turned into a torture for Stepura. They had invited him to the party after his round of sentry duty, but that would have been too much for him to bear.

After his relief arrived, he sneaked down the corridor like a thief. In passing the half-open door where the wedding party was in progress, he saw for a fleeting moment an excited, glowing Mariana. She was telling Slava something just then, laughing, looking into his eyes, her delicate hand resting devotedly on his shoulder.

Stepura scurried past the door and disappeared into the club room. It was empty and dark. He sat down by a potted rubber plant and began to smoke greedily. The distant noise of the wedding reached his ears, but before his eyes she stood in all her vividness — ivory teeth, red cheeks. Had he been a sculptor, he would have moulded that high forehead of hers. Had he been a painter, he would have limned her cheeks the color of cranberry. Had he the right, the happy right to be loved, how madly he'd have kissed those starry eyes full of ardent intoxicating brilliance. Why am I wasting my time on fantasies? he thought. None of that is yours! he told himself. You're an outsider, you're not wanted. It's his blue eyes alone that are dear to her, and she doesn't want to know any other!

9

"Historians, fall in!"

Dukhnovich tore himself from his mother's embrace and rushed to the column. For a moment, she held her arms outstretched, feeling the emptiness between them. Her son was now beyond her control, in a place where

other, strict rules prevailed, where other, strict words resounded:

“Forward march!”

How many of them were there from the departments of history, philology, geography, biology, and chemistry... They marched sharply down the cobble, and soon her Miron would disappear from sight. Presently, he turned around for a moment, waved his hand, and even at this painful moment of parting, he could not help joking, as he saluted her on the way and said with a smile:

“Goodbye, Mama, and don’t miss me!”

Instantly the phrase was picked up by the column and transformed into a song:

*Goodbye, Mama, and don't miss me.
Wish me luck. Goodbye, and kiss me!*

It gave her the shivers to hear her son’s random, jocular words now ringing out in a vibrant song over the column like a mighty farewell cry bursting forth from youthful hearts. They were all so young and handsome, marching and singing cheerfully with smiles on their youthful faces and the glitter of the sun in their eyes, yet under this boisterous, almost rollicking song were hidden tears. The column flung the song of farewell into the mother’s face, and her heart bled from the melody that seemed to have escaped from the university corridors and their recently carefree YCL get-togethers.

The street emptied — Free Academy Street which had seen students’ barricades in 1905 and the turbulent meetings of 1917 — and only the bronze monument to Karazin, the founder of the university, stood all alone opposite the deserted white university building. The column of students had come out onto the central thoroughfare, Sumska Street, moving in the direction of the industrial part of the city.

Passersby stopped and watched the column. Who was marching in it? Who was being seen off this time?

It was the student battalion of volunteers marching through the city.

Student Battalion — a strange word from now on sealed on the mother’s heart, a constant part of her life and the cause of her sleepless nights and anxieties. She

hurried down the sidewalk along with the group of people seeing off the students, barely keeping up with the column, from which gleamed knapsacks and the students' shaggy manes, and out of which jokes and encouraging farewell smiles addressed to mothers were scattered left and right. So far, there were only smiles and jokes, but her mother's fevered imagination already saw them in a welter of blood on the operating tables or killed, wounded, or missing in action.

Till the last day, she didn't know her son had been at the District Party Committee and volunteered for the front line. She learned about it only when his knapsack had to be packed. As an army medic, she barely managed to obtain leave from her superiors to see her son off, while Father couldn't come at all: also an army medic, he spent days and nights at a military registration and enlistment office, examining an endless stream of mobilized men bound for the same destination as his son.

The Dukhnoviches' neighbor, who didn't conceal her desire to see Miron her son-in-law, came running into their kitchen all agog on learning of his departure and outwardly seemed more alarmed than his mother.

"Where are you letting him go? What are you thinking of?"

"What am I supposed to do?"

"You're both doctors, so couldn't you get him a certificate?"

"What kind of certificate?"

"About his state of health."

Miron had come into the kitchen just then, and from habit made a joke of it all.

"I see you've got a rather poor opinion of my health, neighbor," he said, brushing his empty knapsack against her back lightly. "Take a look at these fine biceps! Besides, I've got some muscle in my brains. You offend me with all this talk about a certificate. The only possible certificate now is me myself."

All joking aside, his mother knew like no one else the actual state of his health. He easily contracted all sorts of illnesses, and who would be there to ward them off in the trenches without her around?

Near the bridge she started to lag behind as the student battalion quickened its pace, moving down the

sunlit streets of the industrial district past the plants and factories and on to the Chuhuiv Highway in the distance.

Looking round for the last time, Dukhnovich saw the silhouette of his own mother among the others, and everything he wanted to tell her at that moment throbbed inside him, constricting and searing him. He had never thought it would be so hard to part with her. Today was the first time he had seen his mother in uniform: a brand-new, crisp service shirt, tabs at her white wrinkled neck, and a service cap that looked quite out of place on her gray hair. Now her sorrow and love seemed to have enveloped the whole city, a city of barricades, a bastion of enterprises, a fortress of industrial might created by the people amid the picturesque plains of Slobodian Ukraine. How dear all that sunheated bulk of brick blazing on either side had suddenly become to him, and how everything he saw now excited him. Looking at the walls, he wanted to cry out: "I love you, walls!" Looking at the stones, his heart wanted to shout: "I love you, stones!" They were the proverbial stones he thought of as sacred. As long as he lived, his love for the city of his childhood and youth would not wane.

In the trenches, on the darkest nights of his life, when his weakened heart craved for support, it would be comforted by his recollections of the sunlit city where he had left his dear ones, its squares, libraries, and Free Academy Street — the very name of which filled him with tremulous excitement, for there stood his alma mater!

They were leaving the city, and none of them knew who would come back and who wouldn't. But Dukhnovich was not beset by fear. He was almost happy to feel the aching desire for self-sacrifice, the desire to dedicate himself to everything he was leaving behind and to shield with his body this city — to save and preserve it. As they marched on and on, their backs covered with sweat under their knapsacks. There was some shade under the trees by the roadside, but it was not meant for them. Farewell, trees! Farewell, factories! Farewell, iron and gray stones which he thought of as sacred...

As they marched out of the city, they saw that not all who had been accompanying the column had lagged behind. There was still a group of girls from the university whose vigorous feet had carried them this far. It was a small group of the most ardent girls: Mariana Kravets, Olga the Greek girl — nobody knew whom she was seeing off — Lidia Cherniaeva, an attractive, buxom blond from the chemistry department, and Tania Krivoruchko who with her sincere smile would unhesitatingly follow Bohdan to the end of the world for all her seeming jauntiness. Bohdan was marching right-flank, his lanky figure looming up front; Stepura was at his side, then there was Dukhnovich not far away from him, and other still taller boys.

The girls kept at some distance from the column in which they could only see the knapsacks, heads and sweating backs of the boys. Now and then, the boys turned around and urged them to go back, since nobody knew their final destination or how long it would take to get there. But the girls would not listen; they took off their sandals and carrying them in their hands, kept following the column with a look that seemed to say they were ready to accompany the boys not only to Chuhuiv but to the end of the world for that matter.

"You've come far enough, go back now!" the officers finally shouted.

And only after this did the girls stop; when the boys turned around, they saw them huddled in a group by the roadside. They stood there humbled, sad and still. After some time the haze drifting across the fields enveloped them, and for the boys, they took on the appearance of the eternal maidens of folk songs who saw off their sweethearts on campaigns beyond the Danube.

10

In Dnipropetrovsk, a little upstream from Komsomol Isle is an inlet where boats are moored and the crooked city streets run right down to the water so you can pull up your boat right to the threshold. The water laps against the foundation walls the whole summer through, and traces of spring floods stretch in stripes along the

walls of the little houses like waterlines on the hulls of ships.

Life here flowed on for everyone to see. The hung-out wash could be seen from up and down the Dnieper as were the piles of trash dumped from the shore and someone's tumbledown dovecote roofed with rusty sheets of tin.

It looked somewhat like Venice with water glittering under the windows, washlines, and green tents of acacia crowns that mirrored in the calm blue of the river on a sunny day. Apart from acacias, a number of poplars grew around the place; wild grape vines wound up around the verandahs, and in one of the backyards, amid rusty tin fences and old payed boats that had cracked from age and the elements, there glimmered hollyhocks.

The poplars, hollyhocks, tin-covered dovecote, and the overturned payed boats that had rotted through all blended into a panorama of life in the center of which sat a pig-tailed, round-faced girl, Tania Krivoruchko, who was neither good nor bad looking.

Tania was eight or ten years old.

The lopsided porch stairs ran straight down into the water. Under the windows facing the Dnieper, there was a whole fleet of boats which were looked after by Tania's grandpa, who was the spitting image of a Zaporozhian Cossack. He had a long white beard and was so strong he could lift some three hundred pounds of anchor chain all by himself. Tall, always engrossed in his thoughts, and gray like Homer, he would stand on the river bank in the evening, pondering on something for a long time, after which he'd say all of a sudden:

"The czars were an ignorant lot."

Then he'd fall silent again.

He had his own ideas and opinions about everything, and Tania liked him for never being afraid of anyone and talking about the Dnieper and the Dnieper rapids as if they were his patrimony in his own backyard.

Most of the boats chained up at the marina had names by which the identity of their owners could be guessed. The big *Argus* belonged to a professor from the mining college who was marrying for the third time; a little farther away was the *Yermak* of an old rolling mill operator; behind it was the steelworks' sailer *Scythian*;

and right at the dock was Father's modest two-oar *Dream*.

Tania's father was a rolling mill operator, and in his free time after work, he was transformed into a passionate fisherman who spent many a night beside the fishermen's campfires on the Samara, a left tributary of the Dnieper. Her first childhood impressions were the hoots of the steelworks' whistle calling Father to the morning shift and the smoke belching from the tall chimneys of the steelworks on the left bank; yet another recollection was the two white arcs of the steel bridge spanning the Dnieper beyond the crags of Komsomol Isle and the isle itself, the glittering rocks of which seemed to be wrapped in the veil of Grandpa's legends. On this island, Princess Olga and her fleet took shelter from a storm, Prince Svyatoslav had rested there when he went on his campaign against Byzantium, and from its craggy heights, the Cossacks must have scanned the land for a site of their future encampment when they sailed downstream.

The upper reaches of the Dnieper are beautiful and it is truly enchanting at Kiev, yet it is no less lovely here at its confluence with the Samara, for it flows broadly and freely through the steppe sprawling to the south and east. Nowhere is there such sweep and expanse as here where the Dnieper spills across the steppe like the sky. At the isle it seems to concentrate all its might on trying to move the rock, negotiate the crags, and burst forth with greater momentum across the rapids. From the Tatar land, the Crimean hordes came galloping to these rises beyond the Samara with their wild horses and twanging bows, and somewhere around this place, the *Ballad of the Three Brothers of Azov* had its origins.

In the evening, when the moon rose out of the blue mist hovering over Tatary beyond the Samara, Tania would settle down at Grandpa's feet and listen to his sad, endless legends. Since olden times, this area had been a winter refuge for the Zaporozhian Cossacks and Dnieper pilots, brave and courageous men who knew all the whims of the rapids, and at the risk of their lives, guided the princes' ships, merchants' barges, and the seasonal laborers' *chaika* boats.

Grandpa's legends, recollections, and stories about olden times must have aroused in Tania's heart a particular love of her native land, and from her school days she nurtured the dream of studying these island and steppe barrows which had been dug all his life by Grandpa's acquaintance, Academician Yavornitsky, an indefatigable collector of the treasures of the southern steppes.

When the doors of the university opened to her, a workers' daughter, and she became a student of history, it seemed that her most cherished dream had come true. The university, however, surpassed all her dreams: it gave her love as well. Her first love! Before she met Bohdan, her wildest fantasies could not have projected the extent of the charm, torment, and happiness which this human emotion harbored.

Just when this feeling had fully matured, and her academic interests in the Scythian barrows had retreated before love, her heart had been filled to the brim with the bitterness of parting and hers was now a life predominantly of anxiety for him, the dearest person in her life, whom the war could snatch from her forever at any moment.

The column of the student battalion disappeared in a gully and reappeared on the opposite rise, after which it vanished out of sight.

With Bohdan's departure the city became empty for Tania just like the dorm, to which she had no desire to return.

Sensing her mood, Mariana suggested, "Let's go to my place," and Tania readily agreed.

Mariana's smile was gone, she herself seemed dwarfed by depression and the tiring walk. Her parents lived in the settlement of the tractor works bordering on the industrial district. It was a long way to the university, so Mariana had applied for a place at the dorm. Now there seemed no need for it.

At the settlement, they were met by a scene of riotously blooming cherry orchards. Tania had been here before. Although outwardly it did not resemble the place where she had grown up — here everything was measured and planned, with all the houses newly built and a modern looking movie theater that was partially sunk into the

ground like an air raid shelter — the very atmosphere of the workers' suburb reminded Tania of home. She always liked being among these ordinary working people. In the evening, the gramophones were turned on; the settlement rang with music; in the gardens, the greens and flowers were watered, and at the tables the men played dominoes, banging them down so hard it sounded like the hoofbeats of a cavalry passing through the neighborhood. Now nothing of all this remained but a dispirited, tense, cheerless atmosphere.

At the wicket gate, they were met by Mariana's mother. She had an unfriendly, angry look as she carried a radio set under her arm with parts of an antenna and earthing wire trailing at her feet.

"Where are you taking the radio, Mama?" Mariana asked.

"To hand it in."

"Why?"

"It's an order."

"But how will we listen to the news then?" Mariana asked in surprise.

"That's exactly why we have to hand it in — so we won't be listening to anything or hearing anything either. Klava's come home, and the tales she tells make my blood run cold!"

Klava was Mariana's elder married sister. They met her in the orchard sitting at a table, breast-feeding her child.

"Klava!" Mariana rushed up to her. "Did you come straight from there?"

"From there" meant the western border where her husband, an army lieutenant, had been stationed. She was still quite young but looked utterly jaded, sitting there hunched over, her hair, just as thick and black as Mariana's, spreading in a heavy tangle of braids across her shoulder. Klava's almond-shaped eyes were filled with dejection and lingering grief from the horror she had lived through.

"Tell us what's going on there. Is Ivan still alive?"

"I don't know. I don't know anything." Klava sighed deeply. "When it all started, he dropped in for a minute. 'Klava, take the child and go to the railroad station,' he

said. The station was ablaze by then, tank cars were exploding, and the grain was burning in the freight cars. It was just the grain we had been about to deliver to Germany. I rushed out of the house with nothing but him." She pressed her infant to her breast.

"It's all right; you'll be living with us. I'm a soldier's wife, too, now. We'll live together until all this is over. I'm sure it'll end soon."

"Hardly. They've got so many tanks there, and the sky's black with planes. Simply amazing how our troops are still holding out after being taken by complete surprise. Right before the attack, our artillery pieces were sent off for repairs — of all the things to do..."

Then she told how they were bombed along the way and how the railroad stations were going up in flames. At one of them, she was nearly killed, while her friend, also the wife of a border guard, was blown up into pieces along with her child right before Klava's eyes. Her story conjured up a picture of their country engulfed in conflagrations, carnage, and the tragedy of an unequal battle.

Soon afterward, Father came back from work. His greeting was restrained as if he weren't at all surprised to see his elder daughter and had in fact been expecting her. Taking the child from her arms, he looked at it attentively.

"Well, border guard? So you got away?" he said.

After slightly tickling his grandson with a stiff whisker, he handed him back to Klava.

"Where's your mother?"

"She went to hand in the radio set," Mariana said.

"What radio set?"

"Ours, of course."

Father snorted gruffly, went up to the washstand under a tree, and angrily clanging the tap, set about washing his hands.

Looking at his hands, Tania made a mental note that they were just as big and work-hardened as her father's; also, these hands had once fought at the barricades for the Soviet way of life which Bohdan and the boys had gone to defend today. What price would it cost to defend? Whose life and whose blood?



The girls laid the table for lunch in the orchard under the overhanging branches of a cherry tree. They all took their places at the table and waited for Mother.

As Klava retold Father her ordeal, he sat silently, gazing somewhere down the street at the far end of which opened a field with the bluish rye crop of a collective farm. It must have reminded old Kravets of a similar open plain and rye field that had been here ten years before on the site of what was now the settlement and the tractor works farther north. When the tractor works was being built, its first director, a retired Cheka officer, had gone around the construction site on horseback, because it was impassable in the autumn mud. They had lived in a barracks then; there weren't enough engineers for the project; to top it off, his home was a veritable dormitory where five of his nephews had taken refuge, having come to the project with their little wooden country trunks. He had taught each a trade, found each a job, and thus, they had enlarged the working class. All this seemed to have happened only recently: the director riding about on horseback, and the first tractor leaving the shop to the strains of a brass band, and Mariana at school among her foreign schoolmates — in those days Americans, Czechs, Germans and Englishmen had come to work at the project along with their families. Among the Germans, there was a shop instructor the girls had nicknamed the Fascist. "*Russki remont — kaput mashina*" was his favorite phrase, which was supposed to mean that once the Russians started repairing the tractors themselves, the machines would never work. The works had been operating without foreign specialists for years now, and the tractors hadn't gone "kaput." Thousands of tractors had been sent to the farms, and the workers themselves had moved from the barracks into these cottages immersed in cherry orchards that had grown luxuriantly; the branches had already spread across the fences and into the streets. Busying himself around the strawberry patch and orchard had become a second occupation for Kravets, and to him and to his friends from the forge shop, there wasn't a finer plant or a better socialist settlement in the world.

He heard Mariana telling Tania how the first trees

had been planted here and how Father and Mother had argued about what to plant:

"Papa was for cherry trees, because each tree would bring in at least a pailful of cherries. But Mama insisted on poplars! 'What's the use of them — there'll only be fluff flying around.' 'Oh no, poplars give you a sense of pride.' So in the end, they planted both cherry trees and poplars, as you can see."

The cherry trees had long been bearing fruit; the fluff from the poplars flew everywhere when the trees were in bloom in early June. And how Mariana loved that fluff!

Mother came home without the radio set, but her mood was slightly better than it had been when she was leaving home.

After sitting down at the table, she said:

"We've just been fortune-telling with roosters at the Pisarenkos'. At first 'their' rooster was on top all the time, but then 'ours' spread his wings and put up such a fight it sent Hitler's feathers flying!"

At any other time, such a way of foretelling the future would have been funny, but nobody was laughing now; Klava's child was in a playful mood and smiled in its puerile innocence, trying to catch a bud on a branch of the cherry tree with its hands.

"Don't lose heart, little Cossack," the old man said quietly to his grandson. "Once the bombs didn't take you in the cradle, you'll go on living."

Klava and her child went to bed early that day after the tiresome journey. Tania and Mariana remained standing at the wicket gate for a long time, as if they were waiting for someone, and listened to the rustling crown of the poplar which was of the same age as the tractor works.

11

The students' bushy manes were flying from their heads!

Lying on the ground in a tangled heap of blond, black, dark-brown and light hair, it was all being trampled underfoot and rudely matted together.

Bursts of laughter and shouts sounded now and then in the shade of the green branchy trees near the bath-house where the volunteers' hair was being cut.

"Finished! Next!"

From all over camp, the men had come to have a look at this procedure for the fun of it.

It was a truly wonderful opportunity to vent one's passions. The haircutters from among the soldiers were given a hand by Sergeant-Major Gladun, assistant platoon commander from First Company, who had recently reenlisted and was obviously deriving true pleasure from clipping the manes of the academics. His boots trampled with unequivocal contempt on all that blond and brown hair which the girls had probably stroked tenderly only a short while ago. His teeth clenched in grim determination, he ran the clippers over the students' heads, while the unlucky customer who had fallen into his clutches only groaned and wailed when he couldn't bear it any longer.

"Hang on tight, academic, and you'll make a dough-foot yet," Gladun would mutter through his teeth. "This is the army, brother, not some university where you can toss around your mane!"

No sooner did the boys sit down than their hair was off, and with their bald pates, they could just as well throw their combs away into the bushes. They looked funny once they had had their hair clipped. Some heads were bumpy; one had a lump sticking out on his crown, another a leftover tuft of hair behind his ear, while Dukhnovich had a touchingly pathetic look without his thick dark-brown mop: his head was elongated like a melon with huge red ears sticking out awkwardly; he instantly became the butt of all their jokes.

Those without the flops of hair seemed dwarfed. Outwardly, they took all this matter-of-factly, teasing one another and exchanging banter, but in their laughter and jokes, there was a ring of regret for the loss and a discernible feeling of being humiliated by the procedure. Along with their hair, a mark of their individuality, which had made each unlike the other, seemed to have been cast into oblivion, just like their past days of liberty, breakneck lightheartedness, and habits of living and doing what they liked. Instead of a diversity of shocks of longish hair there were now only a series of bald pates the Sergeant-Major had reduced to conventional army standard.

With this new look, they dropped their university wisdom and instead eagerly took up the humorous soldier's precepts they had heard from a regular:

1. Keep away from the brass, 'cause you might get detailed for fatigue.
2. Keep as close to the mess hall as you can.
3. If you don't understand something, turn in.

Since all of them had the rank of cadets, they were issued officers' uniforms along with fine knee-high yuft boots that must have been lying around army depots for years waiting for the war. While issuing the boots, Sergeant Gladun could not conceal his jealous envy of those who received them, because for all his stature as a reenlisted serviceman, he went about in kersey boots and was not eligible for yuft boots even now.

"Why must you be the ones to get them?" he asked, carelessly throwing a pair toward Dukhnovich. "To earn them a common soldier's got to go through hell and high water. And what about you? What's so special about you, after all?"

"It's because we're intellectuals," Dukhnovich replied quietly with a mysterious look.

When the boys were alone, they exploded in laughter:

"He'll go and squeal on you, take our word for it."

"You'll get it for that intellectual stuff," Drobakha said. "I heard an artist once almost landed in the clink for calling himself a seascapist."

The relationship between the student battalion and Gladun developed into reciprocal enmity right from the first day. Assigned to command the historians, Gladun saw it as his duty to break and hobble what he looked upon as a herd of wild horses he had been given to handle. He had to rein them in, and above all, try as quickly as possible to put on every one the army saddle provided for by each and every service regulation. For this purpose he had, first of all, to kill that free-thinking spirit they had brought along with them to camp from the university. His favorite phrase was: "This ain't no Free Academy for you; this is an army camp. Is that clear?"

Even among the other men who had reenlisted, he was remarkable for his smart military bearing and gallant, dashing look.

Huge and stocky with bulging muscles fit to bend fellies, he closed in on his subordinates with an icy chill in his eyes, while his mean forehead looked hard enough to ram through any wall. He had gained quite a few victories out of camp among the Chuhuiv girls, and it was rumored he secretly kept a register of his victims. There was no one in camp who could match his dashing look: everything he wore fit him as if he had been born in uniform; his service cap was exactly two fingers above his ear, and the collar around his burly red neck gleamed with a snow-white lining even in the hottest weather. He wasn't just a platoon sergeant, but the living incarnation of camp discipline itself and the indestructible letter and spirit of army regulations. The camp, its sand-strewn walks between centennial trees, sentry shelters, tents, bullet-riddled targets, gymnastic apparatuses, and all sorts of obstacle courses — all this was a world that was unimaginable without Gladun, and Gladun without it.

He took pleasure in his power over the students and in his right to burst into the tents at dawn and jolt the morning drowsiness out of their intellectual occupants:

"All right, get up! Reveille! Enough of snoozing! Today we've got drill and that's no binomial theorem for you!"

He chased them around the drill field till they were dripping with sweat. The deepest ditches, the prickliest thistles were chosen from them to crawl over their bellies for kilometers under his watchful eye, and if somebody couldn't take it or tried to complain, all hell broke loose. The others would have their rest, but for that unfortunate soul there'd be no mercy. He'd be drilled in the blazing sun or do additional bayonet exercises, stabbing the straw-stuffed dummy again and again.

Such a lot fell mostly to Dukhnovich, of course, but even after the additional drill assigned him by the sergeant, he still couldn't keep his mouth shut.

"What's the idea, anyway?" he asked, spitting out the sand he managed to get into his mouth every time he crawled. "Is this some drilling from Czar Nicholas' time? Another Kos-Aral *? Only Shevchenko got pushed around like that."

* Military outpost in Orenburg Province to which Taras Shevchenko was exiled — Tr.

That was enough to keep Dukhnovich's shirt dripping wet the whole day through.

"I'll show you what Kos-Aral was all about right now!"

"Mind what you say."

"What difference does it make?"

"It makes no difference to you, but it does to me."

"If you want, go and complain to the commissar about me! Do you think you'll get a feather in your cap for that? No, Cadet Dukhnovich, we've broken in fellows a lot stouter than you." Gladun said all that with a crooked, malicious grin and a mean glint in his eyes, narrowed in hostility. "On your feet! Who do you think I'm talking to? That tree over there?! Now down on your belly and crawl over to that horse — there and back — go!"

Dukhnovich still thought Gladun was only joshing him, so he was in no hurry to carry out the order. But Gladun shouted menacingly:

"Carry out your order!"

Having just settled down by his friends who were studying the ARs, Dukhnovich had to throw himself into the dust again and crawl across the sun-scorched drill field on his elbows all the way to the horse grazing on the horizon. In response to the order, he sunk onto the dust with his awkward lanky body and crawled sluggishly away.

"Look at him swimming. He'll sink to the bottom any minute now," the Sergeant-Major said with contempt.

It was a painful sight to watch Dukhnovich crawling. His dust-covered boots barely stirred across the drill field, and even at a distance it was obvious with what effort he struggled for breath in the hot air and dust with every jerk ahead.

Kolosovsky gloomily watched his friend for some time, then he got to his feet unexpectedly, righted his belt, and addressed Gladun in all due form:

"Comrade Sergeant-Major, if this is necessary, by all means, permit me to crawl the assigned distance for him!"

Gladun was sincerely surprised that Kolosovsky, one of the noteworthiest right-flank cadets who was laconic and had more respect for military science than the others,

should suddenly stand up for Dukhnovich, an obvious failure as far as military service was concerned, and a firebrand to boot.

"Why are you so worried about him, Comrade Kolosovsky?"

"He's a friend of mine," Bohdan said. "Besides, his health is frail."

"So what is he doing here then? What made him join up? Some volunteer for you! We could've done without him! But once he's here, he's got to learn that this is no place for weaklings. The army gets rid of defective material in a jiffy."

"Senseless cruelty can't be justified anywhere," Kolosovsky said with a firm ring to his voice, swallowing his chagrin.

Standing face to face, they seemed to be sizing up each other before the final showdown.

"It doesn't become you, Comrade Kolosovsky, to stand up for such a person. You're an exemplary cadet after all. What kind of friendship can there be between you two? Your road probably leads you to glory as a future Hero of the Soviet Union, but where will his run?"

"We've all got the same road to walk."

"Stop that nonsense. Let him crawl. There's no need to take the rap for sad sacks."

"I don't understand what Dukhnovich has done wrong?" Stepura cut in calmly. "Wearing a service cap two or three fingers above the ear — that's the main thing now, isn't it?"

"The main thing's not here at all," Lagutin rejoined sullenly.

"Where is it then?" Gladun asked with a mocking squint.

"The main thing is somewhere neither we nor you are now," Lagutin stood his ground.

"After all, we joined up to get to the front line and not for drill exercises here," Drobakha added.

"You'll still have plenty of time to get there," Gladun said with a smirk. "That place needs a hell of a lot of characters like you!"

"So send us off!"

Gladun shook his head with a jeer:

"Oh you, intellectuals. They've been teaching you for years, but your heads are full of mush."

When he left to have a closer look at Dukhnovich, Drobakha spat out at his back with what sounded almost like hatred:

"You blockhead of a martinet."

"I guess he's decided to sit out the whole war in camp," Lagutin said, wiping the sweat from his sun-burned face with a handkerchief. "He's ready to leap out of his skin just to keep his lousy hide in this place."

"I'm afraid he might succeed," Moroz said regretfully. "Now he's after us, but soon he'll be torturing others."

"People like him can make a Kos-Aral out of any place," Stepura remarked.

Kolosovsky, whom the Sergeant-Major had left in charge of the group, rejoined it to continue their study of the ARs. The place Gladun had left them was open to the unbearable heat, and nothing would sink into Kolosovsky's head, for the sun seemed to have melted his brains. Not far away was a shady place under the green trees.

And so it happened that when Gladun returned with Dukhnovich who was barely dragging his stumps behind him, he did not find his platoon in its former place. The restless unit had wilfully moved into the shade.

"Who gave you permission?" Gladun's eyes bulged as he approached the group.

Kolosovsky snapped to attention.

"I did, Comrade Sergeant-Major."

He expected Gladun to reprimand him, but for some reason the Sergeant-Major checked himself and didn't.

After that incident the platoon fell into even greater disgrace with Gladun. The other commanders led their men away for chow, and the dust had already settled in their wake, but Gladun kept his platoon on the drill field where the heat had soared and not a gulp of water was to be had. They were the last to leave as he, filled with fury, his bulging eyes glinting with vengeance under his steep forehead, led them off the drill field. Though all of them were worn to a frazzle by then, he had something else in store for them:

"Strike up a song!"

They kept silent.

"Strike up a song!"

Silence.

"Strike up a song!!!"

They stomped on as if they were deaf and dumb.

Gladun knew such tricks only too well. They surely mistook him for someone else. He'd make them sing and batter down their resistance.

"Double time, march!"

This order they carried out immediately. Lifting their feet, heavy with fatigue, they stomped on.

Gladun wanted to put them through a good grind so they be all hot and blinded with salty sweat, after which they'd chirp for sure.

He didn't take his eyes off them.

"Faster!"

They quickened their pace with every round, running with clenched teeth, their lean bellies drawn in, while the only sound coming from the platoon was panting and the heavy, uniform thump of yuft boots running across the drill field.

What made it worse was that the Sergeant-Major had to run along with them, not lagging behind, and the more the sweat dripped from him and the more he swallowed the dust stirred up by their boots, the more hellish was his fury. He was bent on running them until they dropped, but he himself was getting winded, so whether he liked it or not he had to let them stop.

"Halt!"

But they did not halt. Hadn't they heard him, or what? The distance between the platoon and its herdsman was growing. Summoning every last reserve of strength they had, all of that reckless recalcitrance which he hadn't killed in them yet, they ran on haphazardly, just like a herd of unbroken horses that would sooner stampede to their deaths than respond to the bellowed command. Running after them across the huge, empty drill field, Gladun regretted giving them the order. What if they really burst out onto the parade ground between the tents for the officers to see?!

"Halt! Halt!" he yelled, gasping for breath.

But nothing could stop them. It looked as if they would dash past the mess hall and their evening meal and the

sentries, bolting out of camp into the field, and Gladun would have to go and catch them somewhere out there among their free academies.

Cutting across the parade ground in a spurt, Gladun managed to head them off just between the first tents pitched in the shade of branchy trees.

They stood rooted to the ground, winded, flushed, in sweat-drenched service shirts, their appearance all submissiveness and obedience, and only in the eyes of each and by the way they were biting their lips could Gladun read their disguised grins and all-around satisfaction for having taught him, their martinet, a lesson.

"Why didn't you halt? Why didn't you comply with my order?"

"What order?" Drobakha asked with a shrug. "We couldn't hear anything for the thumping boots."

The others, too, replied as meekly as sheep:

"Did you really call out?"

"You ordered 'double time, march,' so we ran, but no one heard 'halt.'"

They ate the lavishly buttered soldier's gruel with ravenous appetite that day, and Gladun ate with them as if nothing had happened.

After their meal when they were the last to leave the mess for retreat, they burst out into a gusty song without the Sergeant-Major's order:

On to the West he got the order...

The song lasted them all the way to their tents.

.12

The Brest Fortress was still holding out. There were still dozens, hundreds of such large and small Brest fortresses, active pockets of resistance scattered along the entire blazing border, which, bleeding and cut off, encircled by marshes, fields and woods, fought to the last man, while through the breaches in the border defenses, the lightning war, the *Blitzkrieg*, was already hurtling and growling in all its brute forces toward the East. Its engines roared, the steel teeth of its panzer armadas gnashed, and its motorcycles sputtered around

the Podolian cherry orchards, yelling out in what sounded like its militant Aryan motto across Ukraine:

*"Mleko! Jajka! *"*

In the daytime, it was hot from the blazing sun, and at night, from the conflagrations and the glowing ruins of bombed railroad stations. And all the while, they, the conquerors of the world, pushed on and on, bursting out of the dust clouds on the roads, scaring the women from their villages, filling the farmyards with their outlandish cackle, greedily scattering through the orchards and gardens, and even overhead, through the branches of the red, seemingly bloodshot cherry trees, showed their straddling feet and gray-green uniforms the color of caterpillars. They really were caterpillars — caterpillars the size of human beings.

The student battalion was far away from all this, and the front line did not yet hurl its hot breath into their faces. Prone and from the knee they kept on shooting at the riddled targets of imaginary nazis in helmets on the shooting range and bayonetting the very same dummies which had been stabbed countless numbers of times by cadets of the infantry schools and all manner of reservist contingents who trained at the camp in summer.

Perhaps the only difference from peacetime training was that now it was a drill against time, with discipline stricter than usual, and the bugles sounding the alarm over the camp again and again.

Unused to the routine, the students found it hard to endure. The whole day through there were lectures, drill, dust and heat, and with nightfall, guard duty, fatigue, alarms. But even at the hardest moments when everyone was dead tired, Kolosovsky did not slacken his alacrity. Every time, he spurred himself on with the unrelenting thought that it wasn't any easier for those at the front.

He felt ashamed that he still wasn't out there in the university of the trenches where peers he did not know yet were being hardened in battle. After all, it was there he had volunteered to go, but instead he was still in a camp a long way from the front line. To get the feeling of shame off his conscience, he put all of his heart into the strict camp regulations, bayonet drill, shooting and

* Polish for Milk! Eggs!

tactical training, at times surpassing his instructors — the regular sergeants who were the true gods of camp training. There was something infectious in this routine; it inflamed his ambition, and although he felt embarrassed before his comrades, he nonetheless caught himself being pleased when he had to take the regulation three steps forward to hear his superiors' commendation in front of everyone. He derived special pleasure when, standing in front of the battalion at evening parade, he caught Spartak's envious look: how come it's you and not me being commended?

During political classes, however, it was Spartak who always read the latest summaries of frontline operations. To tell the truth, this was a thankless task, yet Spartak, his brow creased with furrows, read on, being the first to down the inevitable cup of bitterness: "After dogged fighting our troops surrendered... After heavy battles our troops retreated..." The country's outlying regions, which but yesterday had seemed beyond the reach of the enemy, were the scenes of today's battles.

Right after their first week in camp, the students received a visit from the girls. No sooner had political classes ended than the sentry called out:

"Cadet Kolosovsky, on parade! Cadet Lagutin, on parade! Everyone who's in love, on parade — your girls are waiting outside the camp!"

Not only those who were called out, but everyone who was off duty rushed joyously to the gate, because this was an occasion for everyone — the university itself, their recently relaxed and carefree students' life seemed to have sent the girls for a rendezvous.

Outside the gate under the trees stood the girls, speckled with petals of sunrays shining through the leaves.

Bohdan noticed Tania among them from afar — his tiny, delicate Tania. She ran toward him with a smile, pressing a bunch of field flowers to her breast. At first he saw her radiating peerless smile, and only then did he notice that she had stopped in front of him barefooted, shoes in hand. Her feet were coated with dust, a powdery grit clinging to her taut suntanned calves scratched by roadside thistles.

"Did you come on foot?"

"Oh no, we got a lift part of the way. Here, this is for you," she said, extending the bouquet to him, among which stood out wild red poppies and blue cornflowers, the field flowers Bohdan had loved since childhood. There were even sprigs of gray wormseed. He immersed his face in the bouquet and greedily inhaled the strong scent of the steppe.

"Where did you pick them?"

"Back there by the road."

"Are you tired?"

"A bit. It was a long way out here."

"You're already a fine foot soldier, I see!"

He heard his voice break with the tenderness that filled his heart at that moment.

Tania had never been so dear to him as she was now. It was only here in the camp that he had realized how meaningless his life would be without her, without her smile and that open, wholehearted devotion of hers with which she seemed to challenge all the vanity and trivialities of this world. This feeling, pure in its maidenly way and all-embracing, was what had made her come here. A plain-looking girl, perhaps even uncomely to others, she ranked above everyone he had ever known or would know, and by now she had become to him the dearest person on earth, irreplaceable for her remarkably gentle eyes, distinct voice, petite nose, the dimples on her cheeks, and the intoxicating charm of her breasts that were destined for his kisses. For some reason he felt wretchedly sorry for her should he cause her unhappiness, because his death would ravage her life and probably ruin it forever.

"Why didn't you go home?"

"Home?"

Her lips twitched guiltily. Indeed, she had intended to go. She wasn't even bold enough to tell him she had stayed behind for his sake to be closer to him. And hadn't she been rewarded for that? Here he was standing before her, sunburned, hair clipped, making him seem taller and leaner in his new army garb and service cap with a red star. The uniform suited him well; he had a military streak which must have been passed on to him from his father. Thin and tall as he was, she reached only his shoulder even in high heels, while now bare-

footed, she was much smaller at his side. How much she had thought about him these past days after their parting, and he had grown in stature in her eyes! Her affection for Bohdan had overwhelmed her so much she seemed blinded by it. At times, she had the feeling she was being cruel and callous to everyone around her but him; and here she hadn't joined her parents at such an hour. A fine daughter for you—the feeling of guilt tormented her. She caught herself recalling her dear brother less than Bohdan these days, although her brother was a pilot who had written her kindhearted letters full of concern for her future and was probably somewhere in the blaze of war now, if not already among the dead.

"On Monday the whole university is leaving to dig antitank ditches at Krasnograd."

"Where did you say?"

"At Krasnograd."

Antitank ditches at Krasnograd? On this side of the Dnieper? Bohdan thought grievously, but then he chased away all gloomy thoughts and took Tania by the hand.

No sooner had he taken her hand and squeezed her little palm than Tania instantly forgot about everything. The war seemed to have disappeared, and the world became wonderful!

"I like it here," Tania said.

Swinging their interlocked hands, they walked between the trees into the depths of the forest filled with freshness, cool, grass, and leavy, luxuriant fern.

"That fern blooms only once on the darkest of nights," Tania said with a smile. "To those who see it flower, all mysteries will be revealed."

"Do you really believe in that?"

"Sure."

"Just imagine how many people have passed through this place," Bohdan said, looking around the forest. "There were camps here even before the Revolution. Those oak trees were planted by Repin's * forebears. Repin was a native of the Chuhuiv military settlements; we visited the place where he was born."

* Repin, Ilya (1844-1930) — outstanding representative of Russian democratic realism in painting — Tr.

"So you've been doing a bit of exploring around here, too," Tania laughed.

"The thing I love to explore most is this," Bohdan said, taking her into his arms and kissing her neck and lips.

"I'm not ashamed a bit," Tania laughed. "Let them look; I'm yours after all..."

Bohdan turned round. Seeing a number of cadets in the distance, and behind them the Greek girl Olga standing by the camp gate among the girls, he asked:

"Who has Olga come to see?"

"Olga?" Tania started, apparently remembering about her girl friend only now. "She asked me not to tell anybody. But I'll tell you. Because you and I are one, isn't that so? She came to see Stepura. Olga's been in love with him for ages, but he doesn't seem to be anywhere around."

"He's on sentry duty," Bohdan explained. "He'll be relieved soon. I didn't know Olga felt that way about him. But after Mariana he's hardly capable of having eyes for anyone else."

"How's he getting on with Lagutin?"

"They're still at swords' points. It simply can't be helped. Since they're both tall, they march up front side by side in formation, frowning down at each other, which gives the rest of us a kick. Dukhnovich's already offered to be their second if worst comes to worst."

"What about Dukhnovich? Has he mastered the regulations at last?"

"On the shooting range, the poor bugger is always missing the targets, and that gets him into a lot of trouble. The assistant platoon commander is on him mercilessly. It's simply awful to see what happens to Homo sapiens on a drill field."

Through the greenery of the underbush in front of them, a streak of water showed in the reeds below.

"We won't go any farther," Bohdan said, stopping before a steep drop.

"Because a river's there?"

"That's not the only reason."

"So what's the other?"

"I have to be able to hear the alarm in case it's

sounded in camp. Don't forget you've got a soldier before you."

The reflection of the sun mirrored in his dark-brown eyes. These dear eyes were now smiling at her; she looked into their sad depths with pain and foreboding, as if she would lose them any minute for a long time or perhaps for ever.

"Will you be staying here for long?"

"Hardly. They say they're turning the steam on, they must be pressed for time. Besides, all the boys are bursting to go."

"It's a good thing we still found you around. We'll come next week, if you don't mind?"

"Of course I don't."

"Let's sit down."

They settled in the shade of an oak tree and he wrapped her in his arms, while she caught every glint in his eyes, trying to remember every minute feature of her Bohdan. Indeed, she was blinded by him and happy for that blindness and boundless devotion to him. If he told her to, she would cast herself into the water from the steep drop without thinking twice. She was prepared to give herself to him without a thought of the future. His hands were big and suntanned — real soldier's hands — but how gently he had embraced her now. At times, she didn't seem to understand why he had fallen in love with her and not such a beauty as Mariana or Maia Savenko from the geography department... The most marvelous beauty would hardly be a match for him for that matter! One girl from the teachers college simply could not take her eyes off him at the library, and always tried to sit opposite him to attract his attention. But what could that girl have known about him really? It was only Tania who knew that behind his veneer of restraint, even severity, there was so much love, ardent passion, and so much keen intellect in those bulging hemispheres of his swarthy youthful head. And all of that could be extinguished, disappear, deprived of life in a single second by a tiny sliver of lethal metal!

He seemed to have guessed her thoughts.

"That's what our summer together looks like. That's our Olbia for you, Tania!"

"The linden trees smell so wonderful here. I hate to think there's a war on somewhere."

"But still there is."

"It rages like a hurricane. For some reason, that's just how I picture it — a black, death-dealing hurricane. I read somewhere about a pilot who couldn't land on an airfield because it was being lashed by a hurricane. So he had nothing left but climb higher and higher and try to fly above the hurricane."

"He was a pilot," Bohdan said, and Tania caught his sad smile directed at her. "But we are infantrymen and have no choice but to fight through those hurricanes" — his eyes instantly took on a gloomy look — "through all their horrors."

"What if it peters out like the Finnish war?"

"Hardly. The news from the front line is getting worse every day."

"Don't think about it."

"I can't help it, what with the turmoil that reaches even us here. Last night we got an alert that paratroopers were supposed to have been dropped beyond Chuhuiiv, so we went and mopped up the whole place. Then it proved to be but a groundless alarm. Wait a minute!" Bohdan tensed up suddenly. "The bugle is blowing!"

He scrambled to his feet. Tania also got up, confused and pale.

"Bohdan, my dear..."

He pressed her to his chest, kissing her greedily and hurriedly.

"I have to go!"

"Don't leave me here," Tania said in a stifled voice.

Grabbing Tania by the hand, Bohdan swept her off her feet and pulled her after him so fast she tripped on the run.

Not far away, Mariana and Lagutin, roused by the alarm, burst out of the underbrush. Mariana was blushing red, setting her clothes right and buttoning up her blouse. Tania felt jealous envy for having missed out on such intimacy with Bohdan.

The boys came running to the camp from all sides in response to the bugle call. Shortly afterward Bohdan

and Tania were at the gate beyond which it was off limits for the girls.

"So long!" Bohdan pressed her hand hard.

After running off some paces, he suddenly returned, extending her his student record card:

"Here, keep it."

There was something unusual in his voice and what looked like confusion in his eyes, which made her heart skip a beat: That's the last I'll see of him!

She took the card and held Bohdan's hand in hers for a while, feeling her eyes go blind with tears.

"Bohdan, my dear, if... if something's up... don't forget to write me! Do you hear? Write me mentally at least, if you can't do so otherwise. I can read your thoughts at a distance, you know. From a thousand kilometers away!"

From a thousand kilometers away! Her plea pierced deep into his heart.

The bugle trumpeted with mounting persistence. Spurred on by its call, the students quickly disappeared behind the gate, and all that remained in front of the group of sad girls was the camp sentry, silent and unapproachable, with a rifle by his foot.

13

The signal to assemble was sounded to hand out weapons. Instead of the old rifles with three-edged bayonets the students had been armed with up to that day and which their fathers or grandfathers, perhaps, had fought with, the student battalion was now issued the latest ten-shot semiautomatic rifles with sword bayonets. Later on, when they were already on the battlefields, they would have a hard time with these rifles, which went out of action as soon as they got into sand or mud; they'd be thrown away with fury, and from the dead would be taken the time-tested .375 rifles; but as yet, the new weapons evoked sincere interest in those they were intended for.

The rifles were packed in new factory crates. They were packed so neatly and oiled so lavishly that once the crates were opened, you didn't want to touch them, you

just wanted to close the crates and send the rifles off to eternal storage.

But the sergeants were already taking the ten-shooters deftly out of the crates, issued them according to the muster roll, writing down their numbers and demanding that the recipient remember his number right away so it would be impressed on his memory forever.

"You might even die under this number," Gladun said, handing a rifle to Dukhnovich.

"I'm immortal," Dukhnovich replied. "It's life I take my bearings from!"

It took until late that evening to issue everyone in the battalion a new rifle. They also got heavy green helmets besides.

"Now we're steel heads," Drobakha said, turning his sturdy head which the helmet seemed to have pressed even deeper into his shoulders.

In the evening, with the sun still in the sky, the battalion had its meal and was lined up again: there was to be a training march and combat exercises the whole night through. Each of the students was loaded down with a full pack complete with a water flask, a gas mask, a sufficient supply of ammo, and two-day emergency rations.

Before they left camp, the sergeant-majors took off their boots and showed the students how to wrap their foot cloths properly to keep from getting blisters on the march.

Gladun, too, was sitting before the boys on a stool, wrapping the white flannelette cloth around his huge foot with a deft, practiced movement and proudly showing it off, nearly poking it into their noses.

"See?" he wriggled his foot. "It's all trussed up like a baby doll!"

Before the onset of the march, Gladun took up his station at a zinc water tank and called up each student, making him go through the following procedure: he took a slice of brown bread from a metal plate, put a handful of salt on it, which made it look like some act of wizardry, and the heap of salt, barely clinging to the bread, was given to the student.

"Eat it!"

The student backed away incredulously. To eat salt,

and after supper at that? In such heat when everyone was endlessly swilling water?

"But I'm no camel, Sergeant," the student refused.

"Eat it, and that's an order!"

Well, an order was an order, so the student choked down the sodium chloride, and after that, Gladun pointed to the water.

"Drink!"

The student dipped into the water with a mug perhaps no smaller in size than the legendary Zaporozhian Cossack scoops, and drank till he groaned, while the assistant platoon commander urged him on:

"Drink, drink, till your belly bursts. I won't let you have a drop on the march."

A group of senior officers stood nearby, taking in the scene with mirthful faces. Among them was the officer who had been at the District Party Committee when the applications of the volunteers were being considered. They knew who he was by now: Battalion Commissar Leshchenko. For a long time he had been a career political officer in the Air Force, but because of his health he had been transferred into the Army. He had joined the student battalion the day before in the capacity of commissar. He recognized Kolosovsky right away. As Bohdan was choking down his helping of salt, standing at attention in front of the platoon sergeant, the commissar went up to him.

"Well then, Comrade Kolosovsky," he asked smiling, as he glanced at the salt, "is a soldier's life sweet?"

His jaws cramped from the briny mess in his mouth, Bohdan shook his head.

"No, Comrade Commissar, it's bitter."

The commissar smiled again, or maybe it was simply the deeply etched wrinkles on his face that lent it a kind-natured, smiling appearance. Bohdan was glad to have met again this man whose word had weighed so much in deciding his future back at the District Party Committee. At heart he felt that those dark, penetrating eyes wished him well; something dear, almost fatherly breathed on Bohdan from the man's brave elongated face. There was already a sheen of gray at his temples, but he was well-proportioned, spry, and had a swarthy face which set off the gray hair. His life must not have

been an easy one if he could grasp Bohdan's feelings toward his father at first glance and guessed better than anyone else what Bohdan had brought in his heart to the District Party Committee. That's just what the soul of a communist should be like!

"Well, and how are you faring with the regulars here? Are you on friendly terms with them?" the commissar asked, shifting his eyes to Dukhnovich who was just then receiving a lavish share of salt from Gladun. Dukhnovich stood before him hunched over and seemingly more loaded down than the rest, yoked by his greatcoat roll and wearing a helmet that seemed to have pressed him down with its weight, as he waited for Gladun's handout of salt with a look of martyrdom and fatality on his face.

"I'm having a hard time with them, Comrade Battalion Commissar," Gladun hastened to reply. "Some of them are still pretty slack. They keep forgetting that this isn't a university!"

"Demand only their duty of them, Comrade Sergeant-Major, and demand it with all sternness," the commissar said. "But while demanding, don't forget you're dealing with recent students, all of them YCL members and volunteers who gave up their privileges and went to defend their country of their own free will. Such people deserve the proper respect, don't you think?"

"Yes, Comrade Battalion Commissar!"

"And don't forget," the commissar went on in a jovial tone, "today they're just cadets, but tomorrow they'll get their officers tabs. What would you do then, Comrade Sergeant-Major, if you had to be the subordinate of one of them? He'd make you pay for everything, wouldn't he?"

"Why, I'd make him pay to the hilt and crawl all the way to Kharkiv," Dukhnovich promised to the roaring laughter of his friends, as he gulped down the salt and returned to the column.

"Now a reprimand for you, too, comrade cadets," the commissar switched over to a serious tone. "Let there be less play when it comes to combat training. More sweat in training, less blood in battle — that's not just a platitude as you'll soon see for yourselves."

He fell silent, watching the cadets as if to see whether his message had sunk in deep enough.

"All right, let me have some salt, too," Commissar Leshchenko said to Gladun. "It's a tried and true method," he added, tossing off the salt and washing it down with a mugful of water. "Drink your fill here so you won't go reaching for your water flasks on the march."

Dawn hadn't yet broken when all the men in camp, including the student battalion, pushed off in full marching order.

The night, as sultry as in the tropics, smelled of human sweat and dust. Stretching out into the dark, they plodded in a forced march across fields, through villages, gullies and ravines, stirring up the dust with hundreds of feet and choking on it the whole night through. On their backs were machine guns and zinc crates with ammo issued in a greater quantity than ever before. The battalion was awash in sweat. The yokes of rolled greatcoats, cartridge pouches, knapsacks, and the helmets on their heads — all this bore down on them increasingly with every kilometer.

Kolosovsky recalled Gladun kindly more than once during that long night. Not many would have endured the taxing march if their gear hadn't been properly adjusted and their feet swaddled like baby dolls in the foot cloths. Even Dukhnovich held out, obviously bolstered by Gladun's salt and drill. Like everyone else, he had a canvas-covered water flask hanging from his belt, but he did not allow himself to take a single gulp from it, not so much for fear of violating the sergeant's order as for pangs of conscience: the others endured the march after all, knowing that once they started drinking during breathers, they'd lose their will and turn into a pack of slugs instead of infantrymen. Oh, how they were all dying for a gulp of water! Especially when a draw well with a sweep and wooden bucket rose somewhere out of the darkness from behind a white-washed country cottage.

The halts were brief, and after each breather it was more difficult to get up; their bones ached; sleep glazed their eyes. Plodding on, they fell asleep walking, reeled

forward, and pecked the backs of those in front of them with their noses.

The morning sun found them in a marsh. They attacked, withdrew, forced water obstacles.

"Where do you live, snipe?" came Drobakha's voice, after which he himself replied:

"In a marsh."

"But it's nasty in there!"

"Oh, I'm used to it."

"In these marshes," Dukhnovich said, looking around, "our prehistoric ancestors must have drunk water and dinosaurs and mammoths bred here, and now we've come to replace them..."

No sooner was one water obstacle crossed than another one came.

"Kick off your boots!"

They took off their boots, raised their rifles and machine guns above their heads, and sloshed on behind their commander, scaring off the water fowl and treading carefully across the bottom lest they step on the sharp ends of broken reeds.

The battalion returned to camp by lunch time. They couldn't eat for fatigue — the only thing they wanted was sleep and more sleep. Their meal consumed somehow, they dragged themselves to their tents, reeling from exhaustion, and dropped on their cots like logs. Only minutes later the whole camp was sleeping heavily, except for the sentries.

About half an hour later, the dead-tired battalion was again roused by the bugle. It was simply unbelievable that it wasn't a dream but a real bugle cruelly awakening them after a sleepless, ruthlessly exhausting night. But the bugle insistently called them to assemble, auguring some new trials. They scrambled to their feet, fastened their belts on the run, and with sleep still in their eyes, bolted half-blind to the arms racks for their rifles.

This time the order was unusual: to take along everything, unstitch the mattresses and pillows, shake out their filling, and hand them in at the depot.

Nothing of that kind had happened before.

The faces of the commanders betrayed something new, which spoke of the singularity of the moment, and

the bugle blared the alarm somewhat peculiarly and with what seemed like an emotional tremor.

Even those who were on fatigue or guard duty were called back to the battalion to join the ranks.

Company after company marched out of the camp. Without talking. Without asking questions. The rifles, light and heavy machine guns, as well as all the weapons assigned to the battalion were on the students' backs, and along with the weapons, they were carrying from the camp some heaviness in their hearts, and a new, as yet unexperienced anxiety.

"This is just the time I'd want the girls to be here," Lagutin said quietly to Bohdan.

There were no girls, though. Instead there were only the green trees they had stood under the day before, and the dusty road they had walked down from here.

Some distance away from the camp, the boys noticed that Dukhnovich was limping for some reason.

"Rubbed a blister on your foot?" Hushchin, his neighbor to the left, asked.

"No. I stuck it on a reed this morning."

"It could have been a rusty nail," Moroz remarked.

"Ivanov pulled up a board with rusty nails right by my feet."

"No, it wasn't a nail but a reed," Dukhnovich said.

Hushchin and Moroz offered to take part of his pack, but he refused.

"No, I'll manage it myself. Everyone's get his share to bear."

Ahead of them in an open field, languishing under the blazing sun, they glimpsed the oasis of a railroad station with a long freight train of red cars rolled onto a siding running right into the steppe. Their doubts were swept away now. The cars were intended for them. Truth is, the train was without a locomotive, but still the cars were there, ready and waiting. The battalion was ordered to line up by the train and wait for further instructions. Probably until the locomotive arrived.

Where were they being taken? To what part of the front? This was what interested them most now. The only thing they had dreamed of back in camp was to get to the front line as fast as possible, but once it was happening, they seemed to regret having parted with

camp and their accustomed way of life which would be replaced by something unknown, full of dread and danger.

Breaking up by platoons, they settled in groups along the train opposite their assigned cars and conversed languidly.

"There must have been a breakthrough somewhere if we were roused so unexpectedly."

"It had to happen sooner or later."

"Better sooner."

A sizable group of students from the history department had gathered around Dukhnovich whose foot was being bandaged by Stepura just then. Dukhnovich had an abscess on the sole of his foot which had reddened and swollen noticeably. He even seemed embarrassed for having an injury at such a time.

"Pardon me for upsetting your orderly ranks a bit," he said wincing, as he pulled his boot on. "I'll try not to limp if I can."

"Never mind, Byron limped, too," Drobakha remarked, lounging on the grass. "To tell the truth, though, Byron didn't have a sergeant breathing down his neck."

"I wouldn't joke with that injury," Kolosovsky said gloomily, watching Dukhnovich clenching his teeth for pain as he slowly pulled the boot on his foot. "What about calling a medic?"

"It'll heal before we get to the front line," Dukhnovich waved the suggestion off after struggling into the boot at long last. "Look, what's the white thing over there?" he asked to change the topic, looking in the direction of the field.

"Did you just notice it now?" Stepura responded eagerly. "That's buckwheat blooming. It'll keep blooming till late summer. Everything else will bloom out by then," he continued, a ring of sadness in his voice.

The sky high above the buckwheat was blue, without a single cloud in it. In the clear distance glistened the buildings of Chuhuiv on a hill overlooking the Donets. The trees in the camp showed in a scarcely discernible dark-blue streak on the horizon. The trees, the white sprawling buckwheat, and the soft, warm, gentle knotgrass they were lying on — all this seemed so dear now it was sad to be leaving.

Everyone seemed to have become kinder either because of the sight of the buckwheat or the field and the sky, or because of the common fate that lay ahead of them.

Even Gladun, who hadn't tolerated any familiarity whatsoever back in camp and could make anyone knuckle under the sinister harshness of army regulations, came up to the boys with a kinder, humbled look, as if he were seeking protection from something and support at their side. He settled down and asked good-naturedly:

"Well, so it's farewell to camp?"

"Farewell it is..."

Kolosovsky looked at the solitary road whipped up by little whirlwinds of dust here and there between the languishing buckwheat field, and it seemed to him that someone he expected would appear from behind the haze and the white buckwheat any moment now.

Some of the boys started to drift off into slumber, warmed by the sun on the gentle bed of knotgrass, while Drobakha got to his feet and looked into the freight cars.

"They've got bunks and are clean inside!" he called out. "The only nuisance will be the clacking wheels!"

14

The wheels of the freight cars clacked down the rails.

What had been a world of peace was being left behind. Ahead there were unknown trials and unknown fates — a separate one for each of them: for some, a lightning death in the first attack, for others, laurels of combat glory, and for still others, the grim odyssey of concentration camps and crematoria in the nazi death factories. But all this was yet to be. So far they didn't know anything of it, harboring only a readiness in their hearts to go through the inferno of war and check the advance of the hordes of the new Genghis Khan which, instead of bows and arrows, pressed forward into their land with the clatter of steel on the ground and in the skies.

Where were they being taken? This they wouldn't be told. Where were they to engage the enemy? This they could only guess.

Their iron horse of a locomotive on red wheels carried them irrepressibly forward.

On the way they were registered in a frontline manner. They received hastily prepared certificates confirming they were being sent to the front line as cadets-cum-political combatants, along with a black acorn-shaped locket of plastic, which they would eventually call the "medallion of death." Each had to insert a little slip of paper into it, with the briefest particulars they had ever written in their lives: the name and address of the holder's relations who should be notified in case of their death on the battlefield.

After closing the lockets tightly, they silently hid them in special little pockets in their breeches at the front by the belt.

When the students were being issued the certificates and lockets, it proved unexpectedly that a lot of them were still carrying their students' cards, examination cards, and even passports.

"What a rich lot you are," Commissar Leshchenko said, apparently surprised.

He ordered all the passports and other civilian documents collected and brought to his car.

Shortly afterward there was a heap of documents lying on the floor of the car in front of the commissar.

The cadets of First Company, who shared the car with the commissar, stood around him, looking perplexed: what would he do with all those documents?

"Has everyone handed them in?"

"Yes, Comrade Commissar."

The commissar remained sitting silently over the heap for some time. Then he took at random a passport lying on the top, opened it, and read the date of birth: 1917. The second read 1918. He started looking through the others: 1918, 1919, 1920...

"In the years you were born," he said reflectively, "we were taking up arms and joining the Red Guard units. At that time we were young, your age or even younger."

It was growing dark outside; darkness had already crept into the corners of the car.

The commissar struck a match, held it in front of

him till the flame caught the wood properly, and then slowly brought it up to the edge of someone's brand-new passport.

The students held their breaths: what was he doing? They simply couldn't comprehend the idea that their passports could be burned.

After setting one passport on fire, he put it under another one, and then stirred up the documents over it like a campfire.

"Let them burn. You won't need anything of that where we're going. And we could never allow the enemy to use your names, if anything should happen... no, we couldn't allow that."

The whole heap caught fire, lighting up the interior of the car. Commissar Leshchenko sat on the crate apart from the fire, and the cadets stood in a huddled circle around him and looked tongue-tied at the bright flames consuming their passports and examination cards. There, names curled up in flames, along with the years of birth, tiny photographs, and round seals stamped by various unknown clerks... Their civil rights, their irretrievable students' youth were curling up in the flames. No passports were needed where they were going. From now on their identities would be sealed in those black plastic lockets in which the medics and burial teams would learn their names.

The train clacked on; the heavy doors of the car were pushed wide open, and beyond them a dark, unpredictable world stretched into infinity. The warm July night flitted past in the shape of orchards, dense shelterbelts, and strawstacks in the fields. They would perhaps seek refuge in those strawstacks, and secure their line in those shelterbelts later on.

"What about a song, boys?"

"Why not..."

*Far beyond the Danube wide
On his steed the Cossack hied,
To the girl he left behind him
"Fare thee well!" he cried.*

*"Wait, my dashing Cossack, wait,
See — in tears you leave your maid!"*

*Have you thought what she will suffer,
What will be her fate?"*

*"Don't let tears your eyes bedew,
Do not grieve, my sweetheart true,
Wait and from the war with glory
I'll come back to you."*

The rattle of antiaircraft guns roused them at night when everyone, except the guards, were fast asleep in the freight cars. Half-awake, they scrambled out of the cars and bolted off into a world of nightmares and ghastly visions. The whole world seemed made up of a primordial darkness and an alarmingly enormous conflagration. Flashes snatched the ground out of the darkness, the whole sky was nothing but moving searchlights and explosions, and there was the threatening drone of invisible warplanes in the sky. The antiaircraft guns spoke with fiercer intensity. Thunder crashed onto the earth. Somewhere behind the cars and trains, a flame leapt upward like molten lava from a volcano crater. Yet another detonation — and then another flame.

They were told to scuttle away from the train. Glancing round, they saw behind their backs a modern, fire-spouting Pompeii in the image of the bombed railroad station, numerous track lines illuminated by fires, and the blazing cars, tanks and storehouses. Everywhere there was a pandemonium of explosions and crashing, and the cars, perhaps the ones they had come in, were catching fire. An unceasing roar hovered in the sky.

The battalion was ordered to take cover in the orchards and gardens for the duration of the air raid. Coming to their senses a bit, they tried to grasp what was going on in this maelstrom of horror and chaos.

Antiaircraft guns started up again. Beams of searchlights swept across the high thin clouds. Like the arms of war, they flung upward, enveloped the whole sky, crisscrossed, stabbed a cloud in a blazing fist for a moment, then shrunk and disappeared, sowing alarm. Then, elsewhere, the cutting beam reappeared, searching, crawling across the sky, hurrying in one place or slowly probing a cloud in another. A moment later, a whole forest of beams stabbed the sky. One of them suddenly

caught something blindly white on its tip. From that moment on everything else disappeared from the infinite chaos of darkness except this glittering speck — the presence of man high in the night sky, man, duralumin, and bombs.

15

When the girls visited the camp for the second time, Dukhnovich's mother came, too.

This happened on the day after the battalion had been dispatched to the front line. The girls waited under the trees by the entrance, watching the crowds of weeping, grief-stricken women with children and the bundles of their men's clothes that had been passed on from inside the camp.

"Mama, Mama, daddy's passed his comb on to me! And his belt..."

A little, snub-nosed boy, wearing his father's cap that had slipped down almost to his eyes, scurried past Tania; in one hand, he clutched the comb, and in the other, the belt. A girl of about ten carried to her mother what daddy had left for them — a padded jacket, work trousers, and boots bound with a raw-leather thong — which she barely managed to clasp her arms around.

There were more men in the camp than there had been the Sunday before. From outside, the women could see the men's hair being cut and how uniforms, mess gear, helmets, and new gray greatcoats were being issued to them. But where was the student battalion? They must have gotten lost in this human whirlpool or... The girls asked the sentry to inquire about the cadets, and waited.

"They aren't here any more!" they were told at long last.

The student battalion was already on the far bank of the Dnieper by that time.

Their journey had ended at the railroad station where they had been surprised by an air raid, and from there, they continued on foot to the front line. They walked for the rest of the night without halting, not knowing where they were heading or where their commanders

were taking them. Only by the alarming glow of the skyline ahead and the surge of troops on the road could it be judged that the front line was somewhere nearby.

At dawn one of the students recognized the locality. They were passing through Shevchenko country or its environs; the weeping willows over the ponds must have been those described in the stories by Nechui-Levitsky. Morning burst forth in dew and the green luxuriance of meadows. The whole landscape was lit by sunflowers that raised their mighty crowns to the sunshine. The waist-high potatoes were blooming with their delicate white flowers. In the gullies stood dense hemp. Everything grew riotously and overflowed with the vital juices of life at this blessed time in early summer. It seemed the land was striving irrepressibly to bring forth from its bounty and mighty fertility the best it could offer to gladden man. Potatoes bloomed, spangled with poppies in between. Sunflowers shot upward to the height of cottage thatches, and morning glory crept up *their stems*. *The meadows were attractive for their cool swards*; mirror-like surfaces of the ponds glistened, willows, sycamores, maple trees, and cranberry bushes sprawled across half a gully.

In the orchards stood whitewashed cottages of amazing beauty. Each house was a work of art bearing the stamp of individuality of the folk craftsmen who had embellished them. One cottage had a wall band of red, another of blue; one was thatched, its neighbor had a roof of reeds with neat tassels on the corners and a tightly packed ridge on the top; one had blue lintels, while on another, the lintels were blue with red designs. They seemed to compete with one another in beauty. All of them were dazzlingly white, festive looking, clean without having been tarnished by rains. Not for war had they been whitewashed, but obviously for a happy summertime.

When the sun was well over the horizon, they made a halt at long last. The boys sat on a rise at the roadside, admiring the village down in the valley.

"She must have been a genius, the Ukrainian woman who was the first to whitewash a house like that," Stepura said. "Look how neatly that one peeps out of the orchard on the other side of the road. Had it been

simply left the color of the red adobe it is made of, you wouldn't want to look at it, but whitewashed, you simply can't take your eyes off it. How wonderfully that white goes with the green of the willows, the red hollyhocks, and the blue sky. And how beautiful such a white cottage looks at night under a full moon when the shadows of the branches fall on it. What a kind, generous soul man had to have to make himself such a cheerful home, what a naturally refined sense of esthetics he had to have to feel all that..."

Even Drobakha, who usually wasn't given to poetic emotions, had to concur with Stepura's observations.

"Really, whatever house you take, it's got a personality all its own," he said, chewing away at a meat pie he had managed to come by somewhere in the village. "The fact that they're not standing in order of size is also significant. One's here, another's there as if they were all part of the landscape. Were I told to pick a house for myself, I would've chosen that one over there on the edge, with the blue rye reaching right up to the windows. It's really like a villa in a field. I wonder who lives there. Must be some fine young housewife if she's made it look so neat. See, she added a bit of heavenly blue to the white!"

The boys were in Kiev Region. Artillery shells hadn't yet reached it, nor were its white cottage piles of rubble. The collective farms hadn't yet been razed by fire, but war already seemed to hover invisibly over this bounteous land they were passing through. There were bomb craters by the roadside. A fresh mound of earth was heaped over a grave. Then they saw an entire herd of collective farm cattle strafed dead near a watering place: the bloated carcasses reeked with decay and stench.

Somewhere from near the front line, a group of collective farmers dressed in winter clothes were driving cattle to the rear. The cows moored plaintively, tripping down the road, rubbing their sore, swollen udders that needed milking, dripping the precious milk on to the cobble stones of the bomb-reft road.

In one place by the roadside, an unexploded bomb with black stabilizers was sticking out of the ground. It looked like some extraterrestrial object or a fragment

of a meteorite that had dropped out of the cosmic void. The sight of the bomb provoked an argument about its weight: was it two hundred kilograms? half a ton? would it go off if an attempt were made to pull it out of the ground?

"It's strange how all types of savagery have much in common," Lagutin said to Kolosovsky, stepping away from the bomb. "Do you remember the arrows from the Scythian barrows? Or the arrows of Batu's hordes? They had similar vanes for stabilizers. Such associations make you sad."

An ever-intensifying rumble spoke of the nearness of the front line. Time and again German strafers swooped down, scattering the student battalion into the grain fields and ditches. They pressed themselves to the ground and listened to the sirens that made their hearts turn inside out wailing overhead and to the metal killers plummeting right down on them with a shrill ear-shattering whistle. The sickening, degrading feeling of their own helplessness was oppressing as they lay there and waited to see whether they were fated to die or not, while the exasperating wail of the strafers sliced through the air.

Then they stumbled out of the grain field and looked into one another's eyes in confusion after being humiliated and made to crawl, hide, and flinch in the ditches on their own land.

"It's simply disgusting. You feel like a hounded rabbit," Moroz declared, shaking the dirt off his gear. "You root the ground with your nose, crawl on all fours, and that's supposed to be you — a man of the twentieth century!"

Chemeris from the department of philology said with a nervous laugh: "Kaliuzhny and I were arguing about who was more outstanding: Stendhal or Flaubert? I said Stendhal, he Flaubert; I stuck to my opinion, and he to his. But when they started plastering us, he flopped to the ground and his arms went windmilling to tell me he fully agreed: Stendhal! Stendhal!"

It was a funny incident, yet the air attack had blunted the edge of it.

The student battalion was marching between grain

fields with tautly filled ears rustling metallicly in the wind; the rye rolled in gray waves; the reddish wheat, twisted by storms, had taken on a darker hue.

The farther they marched, the more disquiet and ominous alarm there was about everything. The wounded were driven past, evacuees trudged along, and trucks with ammunition rumbled by. Thousands of human faces passed them, but none of them looked happy. There weren't any happy faces in the land any more.

During a halt, the cadets gathered around Dukhnovich. It was simply unbelievable how he had marched along all this time, for the wound on his foot had come to a head and was so swollen he barely managed to pull the boot off.

"Why did you keep your mouth shut?"

But even now Dukhnovich did not utter a word of complaint, and only by his sweaty freckled face could it be guessed what a torment that incredibly swollen foot gone blue had been for him.

He had been racked with pain back in the train when everyone else was sleeping soundly at night. He never thought that a wound coming to a head could cause so much pain. It seemed to him that had his foot been chopped off, he would have borne it much more easily. But he could not allow himself to complain to anyone, nor did he want to make his trouble known to anyone. He simply couldn't admit that he was already unfit halfway to the front line! Also, how would the assistant platoon commander take it? Wow, that's some volunteer for you, he'd say! He hasn't even gotten to the front line yet, and here's he already found a reason to lag behind. Yet the main thing was his friends — how would he look in their eyes. Certainly, he wouldn't be thought of as the Roman Mucius Scaevola, but as a weakling or even a malingerer.

He lay helplessly by the roadside with his horribly swollen foot and didn't believe the empathy his friends expressed as they crowded around him: he was sure that they could feel but one thing toward him, and that was contempt. What worried him most now was how he would march on, because it looked like the foot wouldn't go back into the boot.

"A fine booboo you've got there," Gladun said, coming up to the group. Bending over, he touched the swollen foot with what looked almost like envy, as if regretting that fate had sent such a gift not him but this duffer Dukhnovich who was incapable of using it to his best advantage. "A classy booboo indeed. Well, so we have our first wounded man before the action has even started."

Commissar Leshchenko, accompanied by the company commander, a young lieutenant just out of military school, came up and reviewed the situation. It was clear that Dukhnovich could not go on in such a state. So where should he be transferred? Who should take charge of him?

Dukhnovich was frightened by this talk.

"I'll go on. I can go, really," he said, grabbing his boot. "Please, don't send me anywhere. It'll be fine in a jiffy. Bohdan, give me a hand."

He got to his feet with Kolosovsky and Stepura's help, and leaning on them, moved on in one boot.

His rifle and rolled greatcoat were picked up by others, while he, hanging on to the shoulders of his comrades, trailed behind the column like someone crucified, his head bend sideways by the heavy helmet. Every step caused him unbearable pain. Dukhnovich limped down the road as if he were walking barefoot over live coals, because come what may, he had to keep on moving along the bomb-pitted cobble; though unarmed, he simply had to go forward to meet the war and everything that rumbled and groaned on the horizon. Nothing was more horrible to him now than being abandoned and left alone without friends in the vast chaos of the frontline maelstrom where no one would need him. It was really dreadful to be left out of everything, to admit your weakness, your inferiority, not to be in the place you had mentally been preparing yourself to be ever since the visit to the District Party Committee.

The sharp pain shot through his foot again and again; the world had turned into a yellow blur before his eyes, and the hot wet shoulders of his friends were his only support against disgrace and helplessness.

The commissar stopped the first empty truck coming

their way at a clip. After exchanging a few words with a dust-grimed lieutenant sitting beside the driver in the cab, the commissar waited until Dukhnovich was led up to the truck by his friends.

"Get him up on the truck!"

Tears of despair poured from Dukhnovich's eyes.

Again he pleaded not to be sent away.

But nonetheless he was helped into the truck and positioned between the tarps and empty shell crates; his boot, rifle, rolled greatcoat, knapsack with the sun-warmed messkit were also thrown into the truck.

"Farewell, old buddy..."

Dukhnovich had the look of a person who was mortally offended, destroyed, discarded into nothingness.

When the truck roared off, Gladun looked round and said not without a tinge of envy:

"That one's war is over before it started..."

16

Mortar shells crumped in the grain fields, spouting up black smoke. Men scurried around frenziedly, one dropping dead on the run, another, covered with blood, wailing:

"Finish me off!!!"

Parching heat and blood. Detonations and smoke. The whole world seemed to reek with the hot, nauseating stench of exploding mortar shells; the fresh craters still smoked, and the burned, gouged earth smelled of death. The air snapped like a spring, and again — crash! crash! — the shells plunked here and there into the grain fields.

The student battalion had run into a squall of enemy fire right from the march. As they were approaching the place, they saw a little farmstead — cottage, cowshed, orchard — before them on a rise amid the rippling grain fields. They had learned by then that it was division headquarters they were being taken to. The rye and wheat stood shoulder-high. It was quiet all around; the cadets even heard the call of a quail in the rye and saw a stork standing on the house around which bloomed

hollyhocks as beautiful as a bevy of girls. All of a sudden, explosions rent the silence as the mortar shells crumped closer and closer in the grain fields, from the direction of which soldiers covered with blood and dirt came running and yelling something incomprehensible. At the time of the squall, the entire student battalion was standing in formation by the orchard as they had been ordered for inspection until a stocky man with a general's stars on his tabs came rushing at them from between the trees.

"Why are you standing around like that?!" he growled at their commander, almost bringing his fists into play. "Get your men into defensive positions, you lazy good-for-nothing! Take up defensive positions right here!"

The cadets scattered out in the orchard skirted by the grain fields on all sides and flopped headlong onto the ground; they were now lying side by side with the submachine gunners of the quartermaster's company and didn't see anyone or anything except for the grain fields and the clods of earth that were flung violently toward the sun. As the mortar shells ripped through the air and crashed with dull thuds, the cadets huddled in their furrows and started with every detonation — they wanted to live!

Almost stepping on Kolosovsky, a man in a helmet and rust-colored boots ran past them. His horribly smashed face was covered with blood. The wounded man clutched his face as if he were holding his own chopped-off head in his hands, and screaming frantically:

"Finish me off! Finish me off!"

So that's what war is really like, thought Kolosovsky as he pushed himself deeper into the furrow and the whole world disappeared behind that blood-weltered face. You, too, could be smashed into a bloody pulp along with your courage and valor which you will never have the chance to display!

Someone else was hugging the ground in the same furrow nearby. He recognized Stepura's shoulders.

"Are you still alive?"

"Yes."

The mortar shells kept exploding, and no one knew who would be the next to be hit by the lethal metal

that flew shrilly through the air and detonated with a dull thud somewhere close by. The grain stalks rustled and cracked; someone ran up and flung himself down full tilt at their side — who could it be? He, too, was covered with blood; only blood and a helmet remained of him. Kolosovsky barely recognized Yaroshenko from the geography department.

"A mortar shell!" he wheezed. "It landed right by my side I could've touched it with my hand. Hit me in the shoulder and face. Did it burn my eyes out? Can I see? Have I gone blind?"

Kolosovsky tore open his first aid kit, bandaged Yaroshenko's smashed jaw somehow, and directed him on to the corpsmen.

"They're in the orchard! Run!"

Yaroshenko ran off, leaving behind blotches of blood on the dry clods of earth and the white bindweed that crept up round the stalks of grain.

The scattering splinters of mortar shells had gouged into the grain fields and dug up the ground like a herd of wild boars. The fresh shell holes gave off a nauseating stench that made Kolosovsky grimace with disgust: war meant stench.

The firing gained in intensity, making the air vibrate and contract from the shrill metallic buzzing. This time it wasn't mortar but heavy artillery shells flying almost right overhead, it seemed, with a deafening scream. One shell crashed into a window, smashed a wall, and went off in the middle of the cottage. Another shell hit under the thatch, sending up a cloud of straw debris; the whole roof collapsed in a whirlpool of smoke and fire, obliterating the clipped tassles on the corners and the stork's nest with the nestlings near the funnel; only the female stork wheeled in the air.

Headquarters were blown to hits. After that, the firing stopped.

"The worst thing is to get bumped off just like that without anyone benefiting from your death," Kolosovsky heard Stepura say. Andriy was sitting on his haunches, inspecting a jagged, still-warm shell splinter in his hand. "We haven't seen the living enemy yet, and here we've already gotten into such a mess..."

"This is only the beginning. Our baptism by fire..."

Indeed, like a black hurricane uprooting the trees, leveling houses and wrecking everything in its path, the squall of fire had swept through this place, flogged and churned the ground, and poisoned the field air with the smell of burning, gunpowder and blood.

Once the bombardment ended, a melodious silence settled over the land again.

Kolosovsky was still lying on his stomach, his head weighted down by the steel helmet.

"Look, an ant," he said to Stepura, and then the two helmets were bent close to the ground.

The little ant crawled slowly between the stalks and grass blades. In this thicket, it must have felt as if it were in a jungle. Yet it took its bearings unerringly. Some mysterious force of nature helped it head in a definite direction it alone knew, zigzagging patiently, negotiating obstacles, plants and clods of earth, at times hesitating in indecision and then coming out onto its invisible path again to push on to its destination somewhere. And all of this was done with studied calm. It was the calmest creature on the whole battlefield! It wasn't afraid of anything! It wasn't afraid of disappearing and was absolutely unconcerned about what took place in the horrible, abnormal and Satanic macro-world of human beings. This ant could not be blamed, fortunately, for failing to grasp that it had found itself at the scene of rampant death and horror, where metal gashed and tore the ground to pieces, where intellects were reduced to splashes of scattered brains, and where flashes of explosions brighter than the sun had raged just a while ago. A tiny, mysterious creature, it picked its way across the battlefield patiently and unhurriedly. For the ant, no wordly rumbles existed; our passions and sufferings were beyond its comprehension. It lived outside our inflamed world and hadn't an inkling whose eyes were now keenly peering at it from under the overhanging spheres of the helmets.

"Maybe we, too, look like ants to somebody else," Kolosovsky said, glancing at the worn-out Stepura. He looked up into the sky and got to his feet.

Kolosovsky looked around. Smoke was drifting over the grain fields and the orchard. Heat blew their way from the blazing cottage which nobody even attempted



to put out. There were other things to be taken care of. Amid the hot, smoke-filled silence, wounded men moaned here and there. In one place along the border strip separating the huge field of rye from the wheat field, a large group of cadets had gathered, looking down at something on the ground. Making their way through the dense rye, Kolosovsky and Stepura went there, too.

What they saw was beyond belief.

The blasted ground in this place looked as if it had been struck by lightning during a summer rainstorm, and on the mangled field, amid the mash of stalks and earth, there lay Drobakha — feet spread apart, head awkwardly twisted under the shoulders, his teeth bared, and his whole face burned to a blotch of black. His right arm, yellow and partly covered with earth, lay separately from his body. It was dreadful to see Drobakha's severed, bloodless hand, which could have easily knocked the enemy off his feet, and which in its lifetime had held books, a miner's pick, and caressed the firm breasts of many a girl. Drobakha was no more. He had died with all the feats of valor he was prepared to perform as yet undone.

The cadets hung down their heads. Much as screams of vengeance filled their chests seeking an outlet, they stood there silently.

Right on the edge of the field by the orchard they dug Drobakha's first and last trench — his last resting place of black walls.

The first student grave was dug with little trenching shovels. Wordlessly they piled up the earth in a high mound that dominated the steppe far and wide like Savur-Mohila *. But this was only how they saw it in their minds. Actually, it was a small mound barely visible amid the dense rye.

17

The stalks stood like people.

One rose high and erect like a sentry. The other was smaller and bowed its tip in reflection. Their ears

* Savur-Mohila in Donetsk Region. *Mohila* — lit. barrow — is a Ukrainian folk name for natural humps of round or oval form consisting of crystalline or sedimentary rocks.

entwined, they leaned against one another in countless numbers in silent pre-harvest meditation. The stalk of another one was broken and had dropped into the thicket, yet it seemed it wanted to rise up for all that. Could it have been broken by windstorm, rain, or a shell splinter?

Those that looked pensive were the greatest in number: the whole field was absorbed in thoughtfulness. When the breeze rippled through them, they made a rough, metallic sound.

The smoke dispersed, the acrid stench drifted away, and the field was again breathing with the hot scent of summer. A world of quails and grasshoppers invested the fresh student grave. Nearby, a bindweed wound up the stalks, topping them with drooping white cups, and the red flower of a steppe vetchling stood out like a drop of blood.

The day waned. The alarming Martian red sun hung over the grain fields; the once lovingly whitewashed cottage on the rise had smouldered down into a black pile of ruins. Only the tall hollyhocks of slender maiden beauty remained standing, illuminated by the sun, making them the more vivid and glowing at this hour preceding the close of day.

18

Dukhnovich was driven around until evening in the very same truck that had picked him up on the road. He was jolted about in the back among the crates of ammunition, feeling he was useless ballast inopportunistly shoved on these tight-lipped men. All of them knew their place, were cut out for their jobs, and were completely absorbed in their work. They'd drive into a forest, load the shells, and without saying a word or tarrying, tear down the bumpy road to the fire position where the battery, which had blown off its ammo by then, was expecting fresh supplies in the orchards on the edge of the village.

"What takes you so long every time? Are you driving oxen, or what?" the artillerymen fumed, and in a twinkling of an eye, they'd haul down the crates, and the truck would be empty again.

When they first saw Dukhnovich on the truck, they were curious:

"What kind of passenger have you got?"

Later on, they didn't pay any attention to him, yet every time they unloaded the crates, they unintentionally gave him to understand that he was in their way. It was unbearable to feel that you were a millstone around the necks of people who knew no rest at their guns and behaved as if they were the one and only covering force around on which containing the enemy and not letting him through depended.

On the road, the truck ran into enemy air raids several times. Huddled in the back, Dukhnovich saw streams of fire pouring forth from the planes — they must have been using flame throwers or some special rapid-firing cannon. He saw human corpses along the road for the first time, and might become a corpse himself any minute.

Then the artillerymen dumped him in a forest by a heap of shells and told him to wait there.

"One more run and then we'll take you to the medical battalion."

They made one more run, then another, then a third, while he sat by that heap of shells, bearing no grievance against anyone, because he saw only too well that he was the last thing on their minds now.

A very young Red Army private was standing guard by the shells, holding his rifle so warily it seemed an enemy soldier was lurking right behind the shrubs. He didn't talk with Dukhnovich at all; he minded his own business. His look seemed to say: once you've been put here, stay put; I've got my own worries, because I'm on duty.

Rain started to fall during the night. After the heat of the day, a breeze swept through the forest, stirring it to rustling life; the sky, shattered by bomb blasts of thunder, flashed brilliantly like burning magnesium — a real nocturnal summer rainstorm had broken out. The whole sky seemed to shudder, flickering with unearthly blue flashes of light. They snatched the outlines of swollen rainclouds banked across the sky out of the night. The wind-swept trees were lifted out of the darkness as the sky lit up and shuddered in dazzling flashes

through the glittering leaves of their crowns. The thunder rumbled in varying pitches in the depths of the clouds, shaking and splitting different parts of the sky asunder with supernatural power, first nearby, then farther away, higher, then lower down. The crashes hadn't died down yet in one place, when they burst out in another in angrily rolling waves, and the whole earth seemed to be awaiting something unavoidable and catastrophic.

The sky shuddered thus for an hour perhaps while the rainstorm raged, after which the thunder and lightning spent their force, leaving behind only darkness and continued rain. The sky disappeared, as did the stars; there was only darkness, chaos, and the splash of water carrying throughout the whole forest. The sky seemed to have burst asunder. Black night rain gushed from it without interruption, just like the Great Deluge in the days of Noah.

When the rain started, the sentry carefully covered the shells with tarps, but Dukhnovich had no hope of even such miserable shelter. What can you do? he thought. Shells are more needed now than you, a human being, or — to be more precise — a cripple with a swollen foot.

The rain did not abate. Finally, the sentry offered to let Dukhnovich sit under the tarps, but he decided to put up with his fate and stayed where he was. He crouched there with only his service shirt on and got more soaked than the stump he was sitting on under a bush. He had his rolled greatcoat with him but didn't have the sense to *unroll it*. *Ever since he had rolled it up with Gladun's help and following his instructions, he had kept it round his neck.* Now it had turned into a sodden yoke. The water ran in streamlets from the branches down his collar, he got soaked to the skin, yet he didn't try to hide anywhere, even finding certain joy in nature mocking him while he sat frozen and crouched helplessly on the stump the artillerymen had put him down on. He stuck his pain-racked foot out into the rain, and bent over it, thinking. Indeed, what was a little rain and darkness compared with the murk the whole planet had sunk into. The night of fascism had enshrouded Europe; the wave of vandalism was rolling

ever closer; corpses lay on the roadsides of Kiev Region, warplanes pumped fire out of the sky onto the people. Everything was going to wrack and ruin, and it seemed nothing could be undone. There had been dreams and prospects, but the war had gotten in the way of everything, yawning like a black bottomless abyss at the feet of mankind.

Was this supposed to be progress? he sarcastically addressed his imaginary opponent. A mere one hundred thousand years ago, gloomy looking Neanderthal men armed with primitive flint tools had emerged from their caves dressed in animal hides. Not so much time had passed since then, and man had acquired wings, taken off into the sky, and crossed the oceans. He had become Homer, Shakespeare, Darwin, Tsiolkovsky — the equal of God. And now, at the height of the twentieth century, there was again this stinking, black outburst of savagery. A highly civilized nation had suddenly generated an army of bandits and murderers. The planet was plunged into darkness. One city after another had fallen. So, how could anyone be an optimist under such circumstances? How could anyone go on believing what was in the textbooks and what had been conjured up in the minds of the students in the university lecture halls?

The first thing that stuck in Dukhnovich's memory of his childhood was his father's study lined with bookshelves from floor to ceiling; later on the Korolenko Library would be his second home. He grew up amidst books as naturally as other children did amidst the steppes and wheat fields. He believed in them with heart-enrooted faith, because for him, Tolstoy, Gorky, Rolland, and Barbusse were not simply names or the inscriptions on the book spines, but living people just like his father, a well-known surgeon in town, and the university professor Mikola Yuvenaliovich. But today he was in such utter despair he found it difficult to come to an understanding with them, his dearest teachers. Torn away from friends as he was and left a semi-cripple in this forest amidst the apocalyptic thunder of a summer night's rainstorm, he wasn't capable of being carried away or inspired by anyone or anything anymore. In his despair, he only saw how

everything around was subjected to destruction and all the powers of man as well as all human reason were being put to the service of destruction; in his own heart, something he cherished most was made away with, and all the beautiful things that had been conjured up in his mind by the books in Father's study and at the Korolenko Library were crumbling under the harsh blows of reality. Could this really be progress or the advancement of mankind? He wanted to call into question all his textbooks and enter into cynical and angry polemics with the professors, overwhelming them with the power of facts from the lectern of shells life had put him on that night.

The entire forest rustled with rain and turned a sinister black, filled with uncertainty. The guns alternately opened and ceased fire. The trucks shuttled back and forth between the ammo dump and gun sites with what looked like greater frequency than before, and the supply parties, those robots of war, threw the ammo crates into the trucks with mightier rage. The unfortunate individual Dukhnovich didn't exist for them any more, and they forgot about the medical battalion altogether. For all that, he couldn't accuse them of cruelty, because bother that he might have been to them, they really did not notice him because of the furious pace of their work. He was simply out of place in this huge, ceaselessly ticking mechanism of war. He hadn't made a soldier. Nor had he made a defender of all the Rollands, Barbusses and Gorkys! What a burning impulse had persisted in him to fend off the war! Not only his alma mater and city with its highrise State Industry Building but also the Acropolis in Athens and the Louvre in Paris and the St. Sophia in Kiev and German Gothic architecture — all this and everything else he had been prepared to defend, covering them with his bare body if necessary — what had come of it in the end? Without ever being in action, without even getting a taste of battle, he was a cripple sitting in this forest under the rain by a heap of lethal shells. If, at the decisive hour, he had proved unfit for a great cause, what did he have to live for then? Why get in the way of those who could act and knew their places in the arena of war?

Being caught by a bullet during a Messerschmitts air raid would probably have been the best way out of this blind alley for him. Or should he himself perhaps put a bullet through his head with the rifle which hadn't yet fired a single shot? What if this were really the way out? He'd be done with his foot and his frustrations once and for all and wouldn't be a burden to anyone! His friends would understand and not censure him for having shot his first and last bullet not at the enemy but at himself.

The truck arrived for shells again. It drove away, snapping the branches off the trees, as it disappeared into the thicket as into a cave.

"You wounded?"

Dukhnovich started violently in surprise. Someone encased in a waterproof cape was standing behind his back under the bush. Evidently, it must have been the new sentry who had just relieved the previous one. Absorbed in his thoughts that he was, Dukhnovich had missed the change of guard.

The voice of the sentry betrayed humane undertones, kind and sympathetic. He probably took Dukhnovich for a wounded man. But he was *not* wounded! He hadn't the slightest idea what the fighting at the front line was really like! He was simply a half-baked student who had gotten into his head the false idea of being a soldier and had so ignominiously put himself out of action by stabbing his foot on the first reed he came across! That reed had broken him down, rendering him helpless and unfit for anything!

That's just what Dukhnovich told him, briefly, in a broken, highstrung voice.

But the sentry, it proved, had his own opinion of such things:

"If it hurts, it doesn't make any difference what it hurts from: a bullet, shell splinter, or a boil. I know what it feels like to have a boil. Once when I was a kid, a cow stepped on my foot. The nail on my big toe got sliced off and it began to fester so bad I couldn't sleep for nights..."

Quietly rounding the bush, he appeared before Dukhnovich, who saw a rifle in his hand and heard the

rain splashing on the cape pulled over his eyes. He turned on a flashlight and bent down.

"All right, let's see what you've got there."

Dukhnovich unwound the sodden foot cloth.

"Wow, is that swollen," the sentry said and shook his head. "You know what, buddy, let me pierce it for you: it's come to a head already."

Dukhnovich's mind momentarily pictured his father's lancets and glittering, thoroughly disinfected, sterile surgical instruments.

"What will you pierce it with?"

"I'll find something. Maybe this bayonet will do."

Instantly the bayonet flashed before Dukhnovich's eyes.

"Hold the light," he said and gave Dukhnovich the flashlight.

Out of the darkness, the beam of the flashlight snatched a wet stubble-covered face, rough hands which were taking the bayonet off the muzzle just then, and the tail of a camouflage cape of foreign origin.

"Is that German?"

"It's theirs all right. Captured it last week."

Sitting on his haunches, he deftly squeezed Dukhnovich's foot between his knees like a smith about to clean a horse's hoof, and before Dukhnovich knew what was happening the boil had been pierced and the pus started oozing out of it, while the amateur surgeon, still holding the foot in his viselike grip, carefully but firmly squeezed the wound with his strong fingers; the pain seemed to trickle out of Dukhnovich's body along with the pus. He felt a great sense of relief right away! Dukhnovich seemed to have been born anew. He wanted to weep for gratitude and kiss those rough soldier's hands which had helped him so much.

The sentry, who was already on his feet and wiping his fingers on the wet leaves, said casually to Dukhnovich:

"You'll feel much better now. It'd be good to put some plantain leaves on the wound, but it's impossible to find anything in this darkness. We'll look for some in the morning."

"My father's a surgeon with years of experience, but I doubt he could have done a better job."

"A soldier's got to be able to do everything. Once a boot in my unit hitched a pair of bays to a wagon, but they wouldn't move. They just kept stomping around in one place. 'You must've harnessed them in the wrong place,' I told him. So he switched them, and off they trotted."

"I guess they've developed a certain coordination of movement."

"Sure. Listen, why don't you unroll your greatcoat and put it on? You're so cold your teeth are chattering. Unroll it and put it on."

"I'm afraid to."

"Why?"

"I might not be able to roll it up afterward," Dukhnovich replied half in jest. "My friends helped me do it back in the camp, and I'm not sure I remember how."

"We'll roll it up together if you haven't learned how to do it yet. Want some bread?"

He produced half a loaf of bread from somewhere between the crates, broke it in two, and gave Dukhnovich his share. The bread was soggy and stuck to the fingers.

"Sticky, isn't it?" the sentry asked merrily. "But that's all right. The softer the grub the less your teeth rub, I'd say."

Settled on the shells under the tarps, they chewed the rainsodden bread, and the artilleryman — quietly and stately — told his story to Dukhnovich.

19

"I'm a regular, a regular serviceman. Reshetniak's the name. If not for the war I'd be back home this autumn."

He kept silent for a while, listening to the splashing rain in the dark forest.

"For each of us the war started differently," he went on. "It overtook one at sea or in a wheat field, another on the road; with you it was over a book, but I met it right at the border on the Bug River. Do you know what a border's like? It's a strip of land plowed up, laced and interlaced with barbed wire. The first row of wire is

high, the second lower, and the third still lower; next come coils of wire that look like matted creepers on a melon patch; the reason the earth is plowed up and smoothed over is to keep saboteurs out. That's the place we were tempered at. Shortly before the war, we had gunnery practice about eighty kilometers away from our winter quarters. It was a desolate place of marshes, sands and scrubs of prickly pine. There was a narrow-gauge railroad along which plywood tanks were pulled by steel ropes, and we had to hit them. When you struck one of those tanks, it exploded. We fought those plywood tanks for a couple of days, and by Saturday were back at winter quarters. Our barracks was being repaired just then, so we were ordered to pitch our tents. Without bragging, I must say that I'm a disciplined man, and whenever someone's got to be sent anywhere, I'm the first choice. This time, too: 'Reshetniak, run over to those pines and chop off four pegs,' the platoon commander ordered. I took an axe, ran off, cut out three pegs but couldn't find a decent enough pine for a fourth peg, because it was already getting dark and the trees around me were all crooked and small. 'Come on, chop off any you see,' I suddenly heard a voice overhead, and when I raised my eyes I saw our battery commander. 'Those trees probably won't stand for long.' Why not? I wondered. So I concluded we'd soon move into the barracks again. I cut out a peg from the first tree I came across. The tents were pitched fast, and we didn't even bother to stuff the mattresses with straw, since we were dog tired after the march. We dropped on the empty sacks just like that and fell fast asleep. You know what sleep is like after a march. Well, early or late in the night, I suddenly heard something swishing through the air in my sleep: could it be a shell? At first I thought I was dreaming of being at gunnery practice still, when — crash! crash! — I heard the detonations. I forced my eyes open and what do I see — the roof of my tent that had been whole the day before was riddled like a sieve. Must have been shrapnel or splinters of antiair shells; although they didn't harm anyone, they ruined the tents. Well, I was turning all that over in my mind later on, but at that moment I quickly started to wake my buddy. Winding the foot cloths and pulling a boot

on with one hand, I tugged at my neighbor with the other hand: 'Sivkov, do you hear me? It's blasted off!' But he, a huge fellow who got two rations of chow on our chiefs' orders, simply wouldn't believe me and stuck his head into the pillow again.

"Alert was sounded just then. Everyone scrambled outside in what he had on, but I couldn't find my garrison cap, so I rushed out without it. When I came to the hitchrack, I saw one of my horses in a funk by his name plate, while the other had already broken loose and was skipping and jumping right by the barracks. All around, there was a bustle, hubbub, well, what do you expect — it was war, after all. I grabbed someone's horse, hitched it to mine, threw the halters on, and off it was to the depot with my gun! In the limber were only dummy shells, and none of us had a single live cartridge — only blank ones in our pouches. For practice fire, you see! To scare off sparrows! The ammo depots were nearby, and whooping depots they were. We all knew there was a hell of a lot of ammo stored there. When you stood on sentry duty by them you got the creeps just from knowing what was inside. What if they went off? you'd think. They'd blast you to the high heavens! So we rushed to those depots now, but the guard wouldn't let us near them. He saw damn well who we were and was quite aware of all the strange things going on as the shells came screaming from beyond the Bug River, but still — regulations, you know! Without the guard commander he wouldn't let us get near — and that was that. No sooner did we draw closer than he went off firing live rounds into the air: 'Keep away!' The guard commander was already done for by then, and nobody else could make that guard budge. Only after the battalion commander came running up were the depots opened. We grabbed the ammo and opened up with fire on this side of the Bug! I will never forget that day as long as I live. A lot of our men got killed, but so did quite a few of theirs: the ground was black with their bodies. They were hanging on the wire and lying entangled in it. The whole border line, believe me, was littered with those first nazis. From then on we've been retreating as we fought with battles all the way to here. We saw how their tanks — not plywood

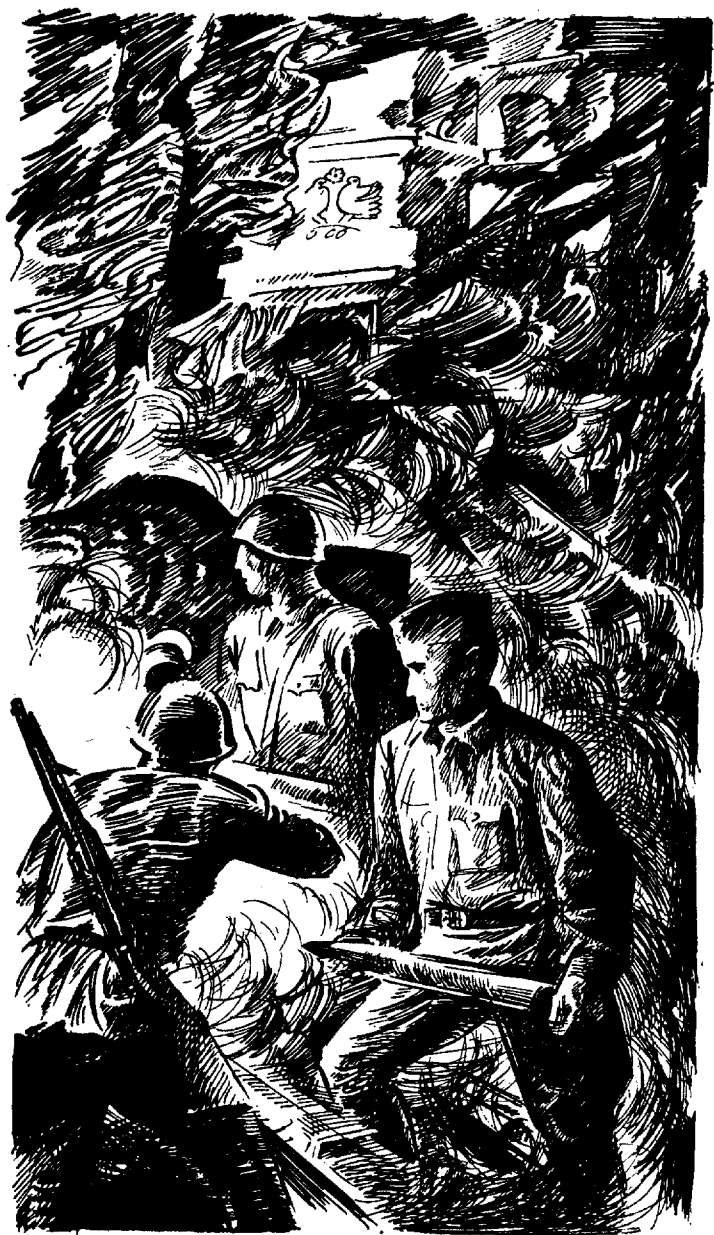
dummies, mind you — but real nazi tanks, went up in flames from our hits. In one place, they fooled us by committing tanks with red stars into action. We thought they were coming to help us! But when they raked us with machine gun fire, we saw through the trick right away. So we paid them back in kind. Nobody can say that we artillerymen haven't kept our oath of allegiance. We are holding on to this land so persistently that every inch that's snatched away from us costs the enemy buckets of blood."

The artilleryman sighed and lapsed into silence, listening intently to the distant rumble of the cannonade and the patter of rain in the forest.

"Do you feel a bit stronger?" he asked after Dukhnovich had finished chewing the soggy bread. "That bread's all right; now back in thirty-three, I ate nothing but weeds the whole spring through. I'd chop up some pigweed, throw it into a kettle, fill it with water, and cook that mess."

"And you... don't you have a mother?"

"I'm the only one in the family who survived the famine. My body was swollen; I had dropsy on my feet, but somehow I pulled through. It was a hard spring, really hard. Wherever you went there was havoc: broken windows, stench in the houses. Nobody seemed to care about me then. I locked myself up in the house with every single latch there was. I was simply scared! What of, I don't know. I was just a kid. When the grain fields started to ripen, I'd take a pillow case and scissors and go into a field. The rye stood high then and the crop promised to be no worse than this summer's. I'd get into the thickest part of the field so I wouldn't be seen by a mounted watchman and cut a pillow caseful of stalks on the sly. A lot of people did the same thing; the watchmen nabbed them and called them '*kurkul* barbers' but they weren't *kurkuls* at all — they were simply hungry people. Back home, I lit the stove, raked the ashes right onto the floor — cleanliness just didn't matter then! — put the ears on the hearthstone, dried them, ground them into meal and baked myself scones. The ears were still green, so the scones came out green too and were bitter to the taste, but once you ate your fill, it kept you going."



"Goodness, to have lived through all that," Dukhnovich said. "But it doesn't seem to keep you from being a good soldier."

"I see it this way, buddy: our country is dear not only to the ones who eat cake all their lives."

Which means I've been eating cake all this time, Dukhnovich concluded. And what am I repaying the debt with? This man here is fighting the enemy hand to hand, but what about me? What am I compared with someone who's endured so much and will endure still more?

"Tell me," he asked Reshetniak, "do you ever have moments... well, moments of despair which make you wish you weren't alive?"

"Sure. It's hardly an easy thing to watch us surrendering line after line while the enemy plunders our land. When you see the sky blazing with fire at night it makes you seethe inside. I'm not cruel by nature, but now there isn't any mercy left in me. I want to shoot so that every single bullet hits its mark and every shell smashes a nazi skull. Look what a crazy day we've had today. The Germans wanted to make a hasty penetration. If not for our artillery fire, they would've succeeded, and we'd have been listening to them jabbering in this forest."

He went into detail about the day's battle, the battery's losses and the number of shells fired, while Dukhnovich, feeling snug by the damp warmth of Reshetniak's rough shoulder as he leaned on it, barely heard him through the sweet drowsiness that came over him after two sleepless nights. Then Reshetniak's voice disappeared altogether, and Dukhnovich saw the riotously blooming orchards around the village in his dream and dug-in guns with men black from the smoldering sun and soot bustling around them, carrying ammo crates on the double, ramming the shells home; among them he saw the familiar figure of Barbusse with a rolled greatcoat across his shoulder, and busying himself at his side by a gun was also his new friend — Reshetniak the artilleryman.

What had been a regular regiment which held the Order of the Red Banner and had only recently paraded for inspection in full strength was now no more than a handful of brave, battle-hardened men seething with hatred of the enemy. The regiment hadn't just been thinned out in battle — it had been almost completely destroyed, but nonetheless it held lines it would have taken several regiments to hold under better conditions; and not only did the men hold them, but they counter-attacked time and again. The fewer regular servicemen in the regiment remained the more the combatant value of the living grew. One regular seemed to be worth three replacements — that's how a man was assessed now: by his ability to hold arms and his battle-tested tenacity and endurance. Had the enemy known the real strength of the troops opposing him from the trenches in the blooming orchards and high-staked potato plots overlooking the Ross River, he simply wouldn't have believed that these were the same men who had sustained so many losses and had so many empty trenches in their defenses.

The losses were really tremendous, especially from mortar fire, against which they had no other protection but their own dear land to dig into. The mortars hammered away at their positions from sunup till sunset, crashing on the cobble highway that ran right up to the bridge spanning the river; shells screamed through the branches of the trees overhead, at times landing in the trenches — the foul, stifling stench stood over the defenses the whole day through. Only with the advent of darkness when the force of the fire had diminished, was it possible to have a body count.

They were separated from the enemy by the Ross, a picturesque little river placidly flowing between the riotous greenery of the banks and willows on either side, the branches of which almost crossed in some narrow places. In peacetime, its banks resounded with the song of nightingales every spring, but now the whistle of bullets stood over them the whole day through, and much human blood had already flowed from the Ross

down to the Dnieper. Along the banks under the osiers lay the dead counterattackers, and when the waves lapped them at night, it seemed as if they were moving and still alive, although they had been there for several days already. The smell of rotting corpses carried from the banks. On the wooden bridge linking the two parts of the highway, the dead were lying sprawled in heaps: those were the men who had tried to drive home the counterattack and failed to reach the far bank. Every time the attackers ran to the middle of the bridge, they were mowed down by the cross fire of enemy machine guns concealed in the willows on the other side. During the night, the Soviet troops had tried several times to recover the dead from the bridge, but this effort cost new victims, and the picket of dead on the bridge only increased in number.

It was to this regiment and bridge that fate had brought the student battalion in the dead of night.

"The students have come!"

"A cadet battalion!"

"Hey, but they weren't cowed either by thunder or lightning!"

The remarks the regiment met them with betrayed a sincere gratitude for the arrival of reinforcements who had brought their lives and their support.

The student battalion occupied the empty foxholes in the gardens under the torrential downpour and glaring lightning of the summer rainstorm, and those who couldn't find empty space squeezed in by twos with the regulars for the time being until they could figure out the lay of the land and dig new foxholes for themselves. After the mortar blitz they had run into by division headquarters where they sustained their first losses, the cadets felt much more secure in the wet foxholes, although the enemy kept firing somewhere close by, and in the evening, as the regiment veterans told them, German harmonicas could be heard on the far bank of the Ross.

The rain had ceased by early sunup, and the sky was clearing. Over the student foxholes hung branches of apple trees laden with green fruit and a heavy dew. When the enemy started his day by opening up machine

gun fire at the orchards, the dew showered like rain, and the green apples dropped right in the foxholes, confirming once again Newton's old truism.

The sour green apples were about the only food the regiment had had for the past several days now. Truth to tell, they had also had sugar, a lot of which they obtained like sand in a quarry from the cellar of a roadside house not far from the trenches. Previously it had been a grocery store, and down in the cellar was a storeroom which didn't belong to or interest anyone now except the men from the regiment, because the township was deserted. From all over the defenses, the soldiers crawled with mess tins to the cellar, and after scooping up as much as possible of the sugar, returned to their foxholes. Each foxhole had, apart from cartridges and grenades, messtins filled with sugar to which the soldiers added the sour apples to make all that more palatable.

In the morning, Kolosovsky was treated to such a meal by his foxhole neighbor, a jolly sergeant who was a regular with the regiment. Thick-lipped, with an aquiline nose, insolently merry eyes, and a deep voice, he was one of those people who are remembered at first sight and, for some reason, evoke trust and sympathy at first sight as well.

"You do some fighting around this place, while I fix breakfast," he said, and getting a messtin half full of sugar out of a niche, poured water into it from a hip-flask, cut up sour apples into the mixture, and after stirring all that carefully, told Bohdan: "Get out your spoon and go to it!"

The breastwork concealed by the potatoes guarded them from enemy fire. The glistening black earth was wet, and the red poppy petals that had been knocked off by the rain during the night stood out distinctly against the black of the walls they had stuck to all around. They placed the messtins on the edge of the foxhole and ate their breakfast.

Slurping loudly, the sergeant told Bohdan about himself by way of closer acquaintance:

"My name's Tsaberiaby. Odd name, isn't it? To some it might sound funny, but I know some names even funnier than that: Pishchimukha, Nepiyivo, Obiydi-

khata. We had a sergeant-major, Panibudlaska *, in our regiment. But he is no more. He was, but then he breathed his last. Come on, you eat," he urged Kolosovsky, "because there'll be no breakfast, not to mention lunch. Our field kitchens have been totalled out, so for the third day running we've been on sub chow."

Shortly after, Bohdan learned from him all of the most important things a soldier should know: from which direction the enemy's fire was the heaviest, when he carried on with particular ferociousness, and what ditches to plod through for that sugar or, for example, when you had to report to battalion headquarters.

From the sergeant's story, Kolosovsky got some picture of the hard trek of this regiment marked by bloody battles on various lines from the border to this river, which had proved perhaps the hardest line of them all.

"They want to push us out of this place at any cost to get to the highway," the sergeant explained. "But since they failed to do it without your student battalion, like hell they'll manage to do it now! The only chance they got is to surround us. Wherever they can't make their way head on, the bastards drop paratroops in the rear. Well, we're not some Greece for them — they took that unlucky country with nothing but parachute landing forces. On the whole, you won't regret joining our regiment. The main thing is not to panic. Our Reg CO is an old hand who used to fight under Kotovsky's colors."

Listening to the sergeant's stories about the regiment and its commander, Bohdan could easily imagine it under the command of his father, Dmitro Kolosovsky. In the first years after the Civil War, his father had also served on the western border on the Zbruch River until he was transferred to Zaporizhya. Now he would probably have commanded a similar rifle regiment holding the Order of the Red Banner.

There was a spell of silence. No fire. The soldiers grew bolder: here and there, some peeped over the top. Kolo-

* Lit.—in order of reference, beginning with Tsaberiaby—Giddyupspotty, Squeakfly, Don'tdrinkbeer, Goroundhouse, and Ladyifyouplease

sovsky and the sergeant didn't hide either. Bent over their messtins, they were already scraping up the last of the sugar mishmash, when suddenly — ping! — a bullet whizzed between their heads. They didn't even have time to get scared, and came to their senses only after they had ducked instinctively and then looked stupefied at each other.

"The bastard," the sergeant cursed. "That's one of their snipers. No sooner did we stick our heads up than he reminded of himself right away so we wouldn't be forgetful."

That's it, swift death flying past, Bohdan thought, still looking with feigned cheerfulness at the sergeant who looked back with the same confused smile as if he were glad to see both of them alive.

From then on they would never be able to forget that bullet that had whizzed between their heads, drawing them together with a unique closeness and uniting them with some particular mystery — the mystery of life itself. Now we're real blood brothers, Bohdan thought.

"That's what I'd call a close shave," the sergeant said, relieved. "A centimeter this way or that — and one of us wouldn't be needing the spoon anymore."

After that they put on their helmets. Tsaberiaby produced an unopened pack of *makhorka* shag from his pocket, sniffed it first, and then ripped it open.

"Come on, take some and roll yourself a cigarette as thick as a finger if you want, because we've got plenty of weed. Bread they don't have, so instead they lugged a sackful of shag right to our trenches last night. Come on, roll it, what's the matter?"

"I don't smoke."

"You didn't when you were a student, but now, brother, go to it. In the trenches it's a lot more cheerful with a smoke. Really, just try it."

Yielding to his persuasion, Bohdan started clumsily rolling a cigarette from a piece of newspaper; the edges wouldn't stick together, but in the end he managed to roll it, lit it, and took a drag. His head started swimming and he felt giddy; after the first few drags, he had to throw the cigarette away. Tsaberiaby, though, went on puffing, and the smoke belched out of the foxhole like from a locomotive.

"Won't they notice our smoke?" Bohdan asked.

The sergeant put his mind at ease:

"They'll think the earth is steaming after the rain. The heat's building up, and it makes you drowsy. I'll probably roll in for a couple of hours. I'd advise you do the same, because here the only time you can get some shut-eye is during the day; they won't give you a chance at night."

"No, I won't sleep," Kolosovsky refused and peeked over the top again. "Where is that sniper shooting from, I wonder?"

"Want to pinpoint him? That's impossible. He's somewhere in the willows to the left of the bridge. Well, I'm turning in. With me it's a law: once the situation is unclear, hit the sack."

The sergeant huddled up on the bottom of the damp foxhole, almost bending his sinewy body in two, and really fell asleep quickly.

Positioning himself in the opposite corner of the L-shaped foxhole, Bohdan fixed his eyes on the willows on the opposite bank. He watched to catch a twig moving or a shot flashing out of the green thicket. You may be a sniper, but I didn't miss any targets either on the firing range, he thought, peeling his eyes.

The willows seemed to be dozing. There wasn't a single movement in the shadow-filled branches or a single shot coming from that direction; only a machine gun was tat-tat-tatting somewhere on the left flank.

Not far away beyond the potato bushes, Stepura was managing things in his foxhole — there, his heavy jaw showed from under the helmet.

"Keeping watch?" he called to Bohdan.

"I want to see where he's shooting from."

"Summon up your patience then."

Patience was one thing Bohdan had plenty of. The whole time the sergeant was sleeping, he kept his rifle cocked, peering intently at the willows on the opposite bank. Once he thought he saw a shadow flitting past in the depths of the willows and expected a shot, but none followed.

After the sergeant had had his nap, he stretched out in the trench, and said with a yawn:

"Well, how are things over there? Has our nazi nightingale turned up?" He got to his feet and stretched himself, his joints cracking. "Looks like my Korchma is at it again," Tsaberiaby nodded his head toward the right. "When he gets bored, he picks up his shovel and digs and digs, 'cause he thinks his hole isn't deep enough. That's a master worker for you!"

"Who's this Korchma?"

"A regular just like me. We come from the same village and are even distant relatives of sorts, but our natures are as far apart as heaven and earth. I have a greater fancy for songs, and he for boots. With him it's one and the same thing over and over again: 'Oh, if I could only get myself a pair of officer's boots.' I, for one, feel just as good in puttees. For me the main thing is to sing. It's a pity you can't sing here, because the Krauts will hear you right away and lay it on. Hey, Korchma, you'll strike water digging away like that!" he shouted in the direction from which the earth was flying out of the foxhole, and then turned to Bohdan again. "He's got a whole depot in that foxhole: one niche with cartridges, another with grenades, and a third with face powder, vaseline, and all sorts of creams."

"What does he need them for?"

"He collected all that up at the store where we get our sugar, and rubs his feet and boots with it to make them softer. What he needs the powder for I don't know — maybe it's for Fanaska. She was a girl we had eyes for, but she married someone else and left for Vinnitsya..." The sergeant's voice became noticeably sorrowful and he lapsed into silence for a while. "Those German vagrants must be ruling in our village by now. For the life of me, I simply can't believe they're already there. Those Aryan louts with rolled up sleeves, jumping off their motorcycles and demanding milk and eggs. You'll get your eggs, just you wait! We've been ticking them off from the border on, and we'll rub out even more of them. To destroy them one by one, by the dozens, by the hundreds like rats — that's what I want to do."

"Hush, I think, something moved over there," Bohdan said, putting his cheek to his rifle.

The sergeant pressed to the breastwork and also stared at the willows. The sun had shifted in the sky

and had reached deeper into the trees, yet nothing moved under their crowns.

"What if we try to lure him out?" the sergeant suggested. "A Kraut isn't any smarter than we are, what do you think?"

Putting a helmet on his bayonet, he pushed it aside into a potato bush, and ducking his head, started to move the helmet back and forth. In the meantime, Bohdan watched the willows alertly for any suspicious movement.

A long time passed before Tsaberiaby succeeded in provoking the German to shoot. The enemy bullet pinged against the helmet, and that same instant Kolosovsky returned fire. The twigs in the depth of the tree swayed.

"He's falling, falling!" the sergeant shouted. Then they saw clearly how the paralyzed body broke through the twigs and plummeted to the ground; they even seemed to have heard how it thudded on impact.

"He's fallen; he's been hit!" came the shouts from the foxholes. "Dropped like a pear! And they say pears don't grow on willows!"

"Who picked him off?" came the question from the commander's dugout by the road.

Tsaberiaby shouted back boastfully:

"My student did it!"

21

The enemy didn't bother them for almost the rest of the day. He seemed either to have forgotten about them or didn't want to take any notice of his adversaries. The guns droned on far to the left, and somewhere from the right came a dull rumble resembling tanks ramming a steel sky. But here on the quiet Ross amid the languid willow trees, the war seemed to have dozed off just like the soldiers who, warmed by the sun and the steaming heat, huddled in their foxholes.

Toward evening there was a brief, passing rain, and the cadets saw how the sheets of rain, in what looked like a quick getaway from the sun, retreated beyond the Ross and the willow trees where the sniper had been picked off, and then, illuminated by the sun, reappeared in tall gray strips over distant green meadows. As

soon as the rain ceased and the sun peeped out, the students saw a rainbow drawing water somewhere in the meadows beyond the Ross.

Stepura clearly saw the rainbow from his foxhole. It curved under the black clouds, rising above the war and carnage rending the earth and standing there in its eternal colored beauty inaccessible to enemy shells.

Then a cloud hid almost all of the rainbow, leaving but a patch as round as an apple on the horizon. I stand speechless before you, Nature! Stepura wanted to shout. The human soul is strange indeed: he looked at the rainbow, but in his mind's eye he saw Mariana. Though she was married to another now, and he had to put her out of his mind, she was visiting him in his foxhole with her ardent love that was beyond his reach. Mightn't she have fallen in love with him if it hadn't been for Lagutin? Stepura thought. After all, there must be something about me a girl could take a fancy to. When the Greek girl Olga came with her friends to camp, who else but me did she come to see? The plain, quiet, kind-hearted Olga whom he didn't seem to have noticed at all for three years was bold enough to confide her feelings to the other girls only then and brought to camp her subdued maidenly pride and long-suffering love. If she could have done it, so could Mariana if another hadn't charmed and snatched her from his grasp.

Lagutin's foxhole was dug under the split trunk of an apple tree obliquely from Stepura's, if viewed from the bridge. It was not far away, and Stepura saw Lagutin, or rather the back of his head. Pressed to the breastwork, Lagutin gazed at the river. He was without a helmet, in a greatcoat with an upturned collar—evidently he hadn't taken it off after his nap to let it dry on his frame just as Stepura had done now. Stepura's rifle was fixed on the breastwork and ranged on the bridge, ready to open fire the moment the enemy showed up. Running down the line of sight, Stepura's eye saw the osier bush growing right behind the bridge (for some reason it seemed the enemy would appear from behind precisely that bush); shifted a little bit sideways, his eyes again caught the back of Lagutin's neck sticking over the top and protected only by the upturned collar.

Turning away from Lagutin for annoyance, Stepura saw Kolosovsky still keeping a close watch on the enemy-held bank, and his neighbor Sergeant Tsaberiaby, an outstanding personality whom everyone knew already for his deep voice and merry, companionable disposition. Tsaberiaby — an odd name indeed. Thousands of people might be passing by before you, and all of a sudden there was one called Tsaberiaby. Why such a name and not something else? Once a landowner must have entered his forebears under this name in the registers of serfs just for the fun of it to make a human being the equal of an ox, and so it had been passed on from generation to generation through great-grandfathers, grandfathers, fathers and sons. In the village Stepura came from there were a lot of people with odd names given them by landowners long ago as if for the sake of mockery and insult; yet during the Revolution, even such names became catchy, resounding formidably and with glory; already some of them were linked with outstanding people, holders of orders, and entrants in the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition. Stepura recalled not without pride his father, a leader of a horticultural team, who had also participated in the exhibition.

Andriy Stepura was of peasant extraction. When he enrolled in the university, he wasn't too lazy to get up early at dawn just like a peasant and hurry to reap the harvest of knowledge, sitting like someone demented amid heaps of books in the library until closing time and even on days off. He knew that the place he would go to work after university wouldn't have such wonderful book depositories. As the son of a hard-working peasant, he took up with the farmer's trade in childhood; in his teens he could drive a tractor or stand at the steering wheel of a combine harvester, which skill he picked up from his elder brother, and every summer holiday his fellow villagers from the collective farm saw him either on the harvester or among the broad-shouldered boys carting grain to the railroad station. From his earliest years he had been taught an unbounded respect for bread as something sacred, and when the war had hurled their student battalion right into those collective farm grain fields and Stepura saw that bread grain meant nothing here, since it was trampled and crushed under-

foot and he himself was forced to do the same as he plodded with his rifle through the yellow, full-grained stands of fine Ukrainka brand wheat, it was the most painful day of his life and his most horrid experience of everything war had brought with it. The sheaves of golden stalks which stood out in all their beauty at folk holidays and on Harvest Day and were incorporated into his country's coat of arms were now mangled and sullied with the black eruptions of shell holes. The picture still stood before his eyes just like the image of Drobakha's mutilated body they had buried in the wheat field. Drobakha's days of mirth and gallivanting were over. Who would be next? The stupidity and horror of war — that's what Stepura would never get used to. If this madness could be stopped with a single blow, he'd want nothing else in his lifetime!

With the onset of dusk, the order to draw their rusks was given. The supply was meager, so Korchma, squatting in the potato field, began to divide the rations, carefully putting the broken rusks in equal little heaps on a waterproof cape spread out on the ground.

"Now mind you don't cheat yourself of your fair share," Tsaberiaby said, making fun of Korchma.

After spreading out the rusks, he made everyone turn about face and shouted:

"Who wants it?"

This meant that whoever responded would get the heap Korchma had covered with the palm of his hand just at that moment. It was exactly like a children's game in which a piece of candy is clasped in a hand held behind the back, and the one who guessed which hand it was in would get the candy.

This procedure, however, was not to the students' liking.

"Let's drop those tricks," Lagutin muttered.

"We'll manage without them all right," Kolosovsky supported him. "Come on, let each take his share. I agree to be the last in line."

Korchma was obviously offended that his just method of division did not meet with the students' approval and that they simply laughed off his enthusiastic "Who wants it?"

"So you're not that hungry if you turn up your

snouts," he said reproachfully. "Now when you tighten your belts to the last hole, then you'll start hollering 'Who wants it?' yourself."

"Hurry up with your chow, buddy," Tsaberiaby said merrily to Korchma after he had picked up his share, "because you might get killed and struck off the mess."

They hadn't finished crunching the rusks when the figures of the officers appeared out of the dusk and the cheerful young voice of Political Officer Paniushkin carried over the foxholes:

"All right you, fledgling eagles, who wants to stretch his wings a bit? I have a mission for one of you."

Beside the tall, tightly girdled Paniushkin, Stepura recognized his Company Lieutenant Osadchy, a smallish man whose chest was thrust forward assertively. He bent over Stepura's foxhole, trying to make out who was in it:

"Who's in there?"

"Cadet Stepura."

"Well, Stepura, would you like to go? Or do you have cold feet?"

Stepura wanted to find out where he would have to go and what the mission was all about first, but before he had time to answer he heard from Lagutin's foxhole "I'll go, Comrade Paniushkin" spoken with readiness and what sounded almost like a challenge. That was Lagutin responding to Paniushkin with consent, so Stepura also hastened to reply: "I'll go, of course."

It annoyed him that Lagutin had outstripped him this time as well.

Kolosovsky and Sergeant Tsaberiaby also wanted to go, but Paniushkin, who had been around earlier to commend them on the enemy sniper they had picked off, refused their request.

"Is that you, you sharpshooters? I'll have a separate talk with you later."

Shortly afterward, a number of men picked from various detachments was standing in the dark yard behind the brick house in the cellar of which was battalion headquarters.

Major Krasnopolsky, a frail, sickly looking man who was in charge of a military training department at a Kharkiv College right up to the war and was then

assigned to command the student battalion, explained the gist of the mission.

"The township is deserted," Krasnopolsky said in a gruff, cracked voice. "The residents have been evacuated. But as I have been informed, something suspiciously bright was spotted recently in the window of a house in the battalion's rear. Your mission is to search the house and find out what's the matter. Find out what that light is, and who's turning it on?"

The major didn't air his assumption that it might be German submachine gunners, but everyone realized pretty well that he had just this in mind.

"It gives a flash, then goes out right away," came the excited voice of Gladun, who up till then had stood almost unseen by the dark wall. As they learned, he had been the first to notice the suspicious light when returning from the regiment's rear — Gladun was now performing the duties of Battalion Sergeant-Major. "There are no residents in the township or any of our men, so who else could be putting on the light? The possibility that submachine gunners have gotten in there can't be ruled out."

"Well, don't lose any time," Krasnopolsky said. "You'll be led by Comrade Gladun. Here are your men, Comrade Gladun, and good luck to you."

Gladun hadn't expected the whole thing would take such a turn. He thought it would be enough to report his suspicions, and someone else would be sent, but here it was he himself who was made to take over the mission. Everyone heard how he choked while responding to Krasnopolsky's order with the invariable regulation, "Yes, Comrade Major!"

They moved off tight-lipped with extreme concentration, oblivious to how the mission might end. Most of the men were from the student battalion. Stepura recognized the familiar figure of Lagutin by the upturned collar of his greatcoat, and heard nearby Rebrik and Butenko from the philology department, occasionally exchanging abrupt phrases on the way. This was the first combat mission for each of the students, their first test of nerves, endurance and courage. Here you could meet the enemy face to face, and he'd do you in or you him. On such missions, bayonets and butts were brought

into play, and you might feel the throttling grip of the enemy on your throat.

Close to Stepura, Gladun was walking with a glum look, depressed by the thought of having committed an incredible blunder that could cost him his life. Why hadn't he held his tongue instead of blurting out to the battalion commander his suspicions about that devilish light? He could have kept mum and not gotten himself into this messy night mission which he might not get out of alive.

"A neat little mission we got," he said to Stepura confidently. "Couldn't be worse..."

Ever since he had been on the front line with them, Gladun had changed beyond recognition: he wasn't his old self anymore. He had grown lean, become limp and flabby, and lost interest in everything. The smug smartness he had displayed back at camp had vanished without a trace. He simply led the men in a bunch between the dark buildings without closing them up. Nor did he care that one had his collar turned up against regulations, another had a torn belt dangling, many didn't have gas masks and hipflasks.

None of this was on Gladun's mind now. Forced by chance to lead the group, he was taking it through the thickets of orchards, stopping every time and starting abruptly as he listened warily to any sounds he imagined to be coming from the buildings and orchards. The weeds underfoot and the spreading branches of trees were enveloped in total darkness. The hostile murk enfolding them evidently possessed him completely, alarming and scaring him; he stepped into the darkness like a horse which scented a wolf behind every bush. Gladun pressed a finger to his lips:

"Hush."

Everyone froze. There was a big dark building that looked guardedly alert. Its windows were smashed; the weeds reached above the foundation walls.

"Here we are."

Their hands involuntarily clutched their rifles, a shiver of imminent danger rippled through their bodies, as they waited for the command. It was passed on in whispers:

"Surround the house."

Moving warily, they encircled the house with everything that might have been in it. They froze crouched in the weeds or flowerbeds perhaps under the windows. They wished they could stop breathing and become invisible, because someone might have had his eyes and gun sights already fixed on them from the windows and the loft. Any moment the guns might go off in flashes and thunder. Most of the party huddled under a lilac bush opposite a window in the side wall. Squatting amidst them and pointing at the yawning gap of the window, Gladun mumbled in a strangled voice that didn't seem to be his:

"Who'll be the first?"

This meant who would be the first to crawl through the smashed window perhaps to meet a burst of automatic fire and his own death.

"Well?"

They kept silent, darting glances at the house as if it were a fortress. The advantages of the man sitting in the house were matchless. Maybe he was lurking behind the wall waiting for someone to come crawling through the window and could hear his every movement while the doomed man would slither into that hole as into the dark gullet of a crocodile.

"Well, who, who?" Gladun repeated impatiently, rage building up in his voice.

Suddenly a figure detached itself wordlessly from the dew-drenched group crouching in the weeds.

Stepura felt a wave of fire go through him: Lagutin! Again he was the first to offer himself and take on the hardest part of the mission. Once he got to his feet, he seemed instantly to have risen above everyone else and become the best, as if Mariana had been watching him at that moment when he had quelled his fear and was the first to meet danger head-on only to save his friends from trouble and danger.

An instant later, Stepura was standing under the second window. Almost simultaneously, they took hold of the windowsills, pulled themselves up, and — one lightly, the other heavily and clumsily — jumped inside and disappeared.

Gladun crouched still lower in the weeds, frozen in increased tension. It seemed to him that any moment

now, the building would erupt in a pandemonium of flashing guns, screams, death rattle, and hand-to-hand fighting, but nothing of the sort happened. On the contrary, the empty building echoed with the unhurried steps of the men walking around different parts of it, banging against things and turning them over, then finally thumping like some goblins up in the loft.

After some minutes, their helmeted heads appeared in the window openings.

"There's nothing here," Lagutin said, and the sergeant-major recognized a tinge of ridicule in the word. "Looks like no one's been here at all. The light must be a figment of someone's imagination."

"It can't be. Have you looked in the cellar?"

"The whole place is empty," Stepura responded. "You can come in and see for yourself. I'll open the door now."

Shortly after the front door was opened wide, all the men entered the house and made a thorough search of it. There were wardrobes lying overturned and heaps of feathers and scraps of newspapers. They thought the newspapers would be in German at least, but they were Soviet.

Outside, they reviewed the situation. If anybody had been here signalling, where could they have disappeared to so quickly then?

"Maybe this isn't the right house," Stepura voiced his doubts to Gladun. "Could you have made a mistake?"

"No, it's the right house," Gladun argued firmly. "I was walking along those bushes over there, then I turned here," he said and suddenly crouched as if he had noticed somebody. "What if they hopped into the neighboring building?"

"We would have noticed that."

"What if they moved before we showed up?"

"All right, then let's have a good look over there."

They broke up, and talking loudly now, looked into the windows of the neighboring houses, pulled at the door handles, and exchanged remarks on their findings.

"Hey, come here!" Butenko suddenly called from the middle of the yard. By the sound of his voice he must have discovered something.

When they had gathered around him at a clip, he pointed at the building they had made such a thorough search of just a while ago.

"Now, look at it from here, from this angle. There's something shimmering. Do you see?"

Indeed, a light shimmered in one of the windows. It must have had a number of unbroken panes, and from far beyond the Ross, something was burning and its reflection mirrored back.

"That's just the reflection you saw, Comrade Sergeant-Major," Lagutin said. "Congratulations."

"So that's what your submachine gunners really are! Candles in your eyes, and no more!" Butenko appended his remark, and all the tension of their nerves instantly found an outlet in roaring laughter.

For all the humor of the situation he found himself in, Gladun seemed pleased that the affair had ended without bloodshed.

"Oh, I don't care," he said, and overflowing with kindness, he permitted the boys to have a smoke break.

Getting into some dark barn where it was cozy and dry, they started rolling cigarettes.

Stepura was already smoking huddled in a corner, when someone's hand touched him.

"Give me a light, buddy."

He recognized Lagutin's voice. Stepura extended the cigarette, and Lagutin lit up, greedily inhaling. Hardly did Lagutin suspect from whose cigarette he was lighting up in the darkness. The light flared up and illuminated his thin, emaciated face covered with dirt and the first chin fluff that hadn't been there before. Mariana's frontline soldier, Stepura thought, and for some reason he felt bitterly sorry for both Lagutin and Mariana.

22

What was beyond the Ross? What was beyond those dark clusters of willows where the sky glowed from conflagrations the whole night through?

Uncertainty, glowing skies, and darkness. The enemy already held sway on the other side. That's easier said

than imagined, because the very air there seemed deadly for man, and the trees there were different from the ones here — as different as earth and water. It seemed that if even a bird flew over there, it would drop dead on the wing. It was an impenetrable place. Yet it could be penetrated for all that, and was — by reconnaissance men.

Around midnight, Bohdan Kolosovsky was summoned to *battalion headquarters*.

"You'll be going on reconnaissance," Kolosovsky was ordered by Commissar Leshchenko whom he barely recognized in the semidarkness of the cellar and through the thick cigarette smoke.

"Political Officer Paniushkin will lead your group."

It was only now that Kolosovsky saw among the occupants of the headquarters the faintly smiling Paniushkin and a group of soldiers he didn't know standing behind him in the depth of the cellar. Some of them were taking off their gas masks and greatcoats and piling them carelessly in a corner with glum looks.

"You'll be going into the enemy's rear," the commissar said, stopping in front of Kolosovsky and sternly looking him over. "You'll take nothing but your weapons along. Any documents you have on you will be handed over to the battalion clerk here. To be preserved for the time being," he added as an afterthought.

Right away the unfriendly, eager face of Spartak Pavlushchenko appeared from the corner. Lately he had been acting as a clerk and almost never left headquarters.

Stepping up to the table, Kolosovsky reluctantly put his cadet card on it, and before giving up his YCL card, involuntarily paused and looked at the commissar.

"The YCL card, too?"

"Everything, everything," the commissar confirmed nervously.

The YCL card was the last piece of personal identity he had. After laying it on the table, he suddenly recalled the black lockets they had all been issued on the train.

"The locket, too?"

"No," the commissar said. "Leave it on you."

After that Bohdan Kolosovsky joined the reconnaissance party.

"Don't you worry, they'll give us all that back," came the reassuring voice of Paniushkin, who seemed to be the only one who hadn't lost the gift of smiling among these stern looking men. His broad protruding teeth seemed to be too big for his lips to cover, and so they flashed in a friendly smile now and again. "Leave your greatcoat behind as well. Put it here," he said, disdainfully nodding toward the heap of greatcoats and gas masks in the corner. "We have to be fit out lightly."

Paniushkin seemed to be a model of lightness: slender, nimble, without a greatcoat and knapsack, and instead of a helmet he had a jauntily set garrison cap from under which showed a shock of blond hair. His overall appearance with the ruby-starred garrison cap and the black trophy machine pistol that looked like a toy hanging across his broad chest seemed to say: "That's how I live. I like it when there's nothing extra on me, except for a machine pistol across my chest and grenades sticking out of my pockets." Bohdan wished impulsively to be just like him.

In Paniushkin's group, Bohdan saw Sergeant Tsa-beriaby who gave him an encouraging nod; the rest Bohdan did not know. In front stood a stocky corporal with an Asiatic face. In his mind, Bohdan called him just Mongol; behind him a snub-nosed fellow stuffing cartridges into his pouch he called Snubnose; and the one wearing the cap of a border guard became simply Border Guard. For them, he, too, was almost a nobody so far, simply a new replacement from the student battalion, and they had probably named him just Student. Brought together into a group, most of the members of which weren't even acquainted, and held together only by Paniushkin's smile, they had to follow him into the darkness of the night into the zone of death beyond the Ross.

In those days, only a few returned from reconnaissance missions alive. So when Bohdan was leaving battalion headquarters with his new friends, Spartak Pavlushchenko looked at him as if he were a doomed man. The mission must have been of particular importance, because in the yard the group was joined by a number of sappers with crates — heavy crates with explosives they would have to carry by turn later on. Moving

farther away from the bridge, they crossed the Ross unspotted. Border Guard, a native of these parts, led them across a ford to the other bank right into the osiers and slushy sand so noiselessly that not a single flare hissed into the sky or a single bullet pinged to head them off.

Beyond the sand and osiers, they plodged through a tract of marshes and lakes. The going had to be noiseless, without any splashing, squelching or plopping, and each had to keep an eye on the others so as not to stray. The zinc boxes with cartridges made their hands stiff, and the clumsy crates with explosives kept slipping from their shoulders, making it a torture for the bearers.

The reconnaissance party went in a roundabout way to evade the enemy, who was entrenched along the highway. The feeling of imminent, potential danger did not leave them for a moment. They stepped on the marsh hummocks as if they were mines, and any strange sounds made them wary, because the darkness lurking behind every bush could erupt in a swishing flare of gun fire. The world they were penetrating was really a zone of death where the slightest carelessness could spell disaster.

For all his youthful love of life, Bohdan Kolosovsky was not so afraid of death — which he simply couldn't imagine with regard to himself — as of something else: to be wounded and abandoned only to fall into the enemy's hands. That was the most probable and horrible possibility now. If you got wounded in open battle, your friends saved you by carrying you off from under the fire into the rear which existed under such circumstances. Should you die even there, everyone would see how it happened, and your death would be as clear as life. Yet if you didn't return from a reconnaissance mission, you disappeared without leaving a trace into the land of uncertainty beyond the front line, and for some you remained honest, while for others a dishonest man forever. How would those dearest to you learn the truth about your last steps in battle? In his locket he had two addresses: Tania's at the university, and the other of his mother in the Kuban where she lived with his elder brother, a mechanic at a state farm. These were two of the dearest addresses he had. But who would find him?

Who would send the message when the time came? When he had set out for the front line, Bohdan hadn't written Mother a letter after all, and now he felt guilty about it.

The farther on they pushed, the harder the going was. They tripped on roots and got entangled in the dense twigs of osiers. The water disappeared at one point and then splashed black and heavy like petroleum under their feet again. They were in a slimy mess of river weeds, and no sooner were the weeds pushed aside by a foot than the foot stepped on a bottom full of slippery roots that made the men trip, sink into the water, or take headlong spills. Every step exacted greater tension and effort. Their boots turned heavy as stones as the water filled them.

Paniushkin, who walked in the front, was pressing them madly, for it would soon be dawn. He had told them their destination. They were ordered to seize and destroy a railroad bridge our troops failed to blow up in the tumult of retreat, and now it remained intact in the enemy's rear. They had to approach the bridge before the first blush of morning when they could still steal up to it unspotted. That was why Paniushkin, though winded and awash in sweat like everybody else, didn't let up on them but hurried them frantically:

"One more burst, boys, just one!"

Their greatest handicap was those whose turn it was to carry the crates with the explosives. Exhausted by their burdens, they lagged behind the others, catching their breath, tripping in the bushes and falling. In the end it became obvious that they wouldn't reach the bridge before sunup at such a pace. So Paniushkin arrived at a swift decision to divide the group in half: the sappers with Sergeant Tsaberiaby in the lead would carry the crates and follow in the tracks of the main group under Paniushkin.

Paniushkin made his group almost break into a run. Nobody complained, although they were buckling from sheer exhaustion and bathed in sweat. Everyone realized that it would soon be dawn, and the darkness concealing them would be dispelled.

Knowing what kind of target they had to deal with, they were nonetheless taken by bewildered surprise when

the gray arc of the bridge suddenly showed ahead through the predawn mist like a huge negative. Hiding in the bushes, they studied the cold, haze-enshrouded arc they had to seize. There it was, the bridge. Visibly intact and sound! It looked as if it had only just been built. Someone had failed to do away with it, so now they had to risk their lives because of this failure. Bending low, they pushed on warily through the bushes. The metal girders were growing more and more distinct against the brightening sky, and through the girders they saw the motionless figure of a sentry in a camouflage cape on this side of the bank, while at the other end of the bridge loomed the trackman's hut which, undoubtedly, also had a sentry post.

The sentry had to be picked off on the sly immediately. They waited to see who of them would be sent for the job by Paniushkin. But he did not send anybody.

"Kolosovsky takes command if anything is wrong!"

Pressing close to the ground, Paniushkin crawled up to the embankment himself. Kolosovsky and Mongol, who were lying the closest to him, followed suit. The three of them had already reached the embankment when the sentry suddenly crashed out a broken stream of tracer bullets from the bridge. The bullets passed high over their head; the sentry was shooting at random so far. Yet it was a bad beginning: the alarm had been raised. There was no time to lose now. The figure of the sentry stood out clearly on the bridge. Paniushkin raised his machine pistol and fired. One burst — and the sentry had been dealt with. They saw how he fell backward as if his spine had been broken.

"Forward!"

Paniushkin got to his feet and waved toward the bridge with his gun, which seemed to look particularly light in his big hand that had turned white from tension. No sooner had they started scrambling up the embankment than a machine gun opened up from the trackman's hut at the other end of the bridge. Paniushkin ordered Mongol to get the rest of the men who had remained below and seize the hut.

After reaching the far bank across a bog under the bridge, the men were soon clambering up the embankment toward the hut. They were in a hurry, keeping up

a blistering fire. Paniushkin and Kolosovsky supported them from their end of the bridge, but the sentries must have rounded the hut and run to the adjacent wheat field, because when the men burst into the hut, it was empty.

The air of the enemy's den still smelled of canned food; piles of hot powder-blackened cartridge cases lay around on the floor along with spare link belts for machine guns and magazines for machine pistols. In the grain field spreading far away into the distance, they saw the bent figure of a man flit by — probably one of the sentries who had gotten away. They opened up on him, but the distance was too great for them to fire accurately. The wheat stood high and dense, and farther on followed forest shelterbelts and the orchards of some village barely showing through the mist.

"Just how did we let him slip away?" Border Guard deplored, scanning the wheat field. "Just you wait! He'll bring a whole band back with him."

The main thing, though, was that the bridge was in their hands now. Excited and flushed from the raid, they gathered by the doubled-up sentry Paniushkin had neutralized at the first moment of the attack. Red-haired and with a sunburned, peeling nose, the German didn't look frightening at all as he lay there in a puddle of blood on his camouflage cape.

In an instant, the soldiers cleaned out his pockets and took his documents and cigarettes. Kolosovsky was awkwardly embarrassed to watch them turning the German's pockets inside out and pulling off his boots. Only after that was the corpse pushed off the bridge; and it tumbled headlong down the embankment, heavily plopping into the steep-banked bog overgrown with sedge.

They were the masters of the bridge now. It was simply unbelievable that a single thrust and a few minutes of fighting had made it possible to seize the target: it was now theirs — that silvery metal structure rising mightily in the dawn amidst their country's expanses! Everything about it was in perfect condition, the girders hummed in the breeze, the rails had not yet been corroded by rust, but gave off a steely glitter and could just as easily carry trains right away!



Kolosovsky was swept by a feeling he had never experienced before. It was the first feeling of combat pride that bordered on intoxication. In a place where the Nazi troops considered themselves unquestionable masters of the situation and everything seemed to perish in the face of their arrogant power, a handful of Soviet soldiers had attacked and was holding the high silvery girders that rose above the land like a steel standard of intrepidity and unsubmissiveness!

But where were the sappers? Would they manage to arrive before the fugitive sentries would show up at the bridge with reinforcements? The sappers had to get there as quickly as possible! Yet expecting them to arrive on the double with such a heavy burden of explosives was but wishful thinking.

The men spread out along the embankment and waited impatiently.

Paniushkin also lay down and started to inspect the documents of the dead soldier. Not relying on his knowledge of German, he called Kolosovsky who translated the entries in the soldier's record book as best he could.

Behind the terse entries by some German headquarters clerk, Kolosovsky would have liked to discern the life's story of the man who was now lying in the mud under the bridge. What kind of a person was he, and how had he gotten all the way to the Ross. Had he joined up of his own free will or was he forced? The designation of the unit, date of birth, and the high-sounding name of the book's holder — Ernst — did not say much. How had he lived, who was expecting him back home? Who would the clerks notify that this man was no more or was missing in action? Stupefied by Nazi propaganda, he could really have imagined himself an *Übermensch* who was sure he'd reach the Urals and become the master of the world; but now, dismissed from this world, he was lying in the mud under the bridge, and the sun would never rise for him on this fine summer morning.

"Well, this one won't be shooting anymore," Paniushkin said, hiding the documents in his pocket. "Just look how the sun is rising!"

The glorious red sun broke through the morning mist beyond the distant orchards and dazzled the wheat

fields, bridge girders, and the lying men. Yet it did not bring them any joy. In its light they felt naked on this bridge which dominated the surrounding scenery like a huge target.

"All right, but where are our sappers?"

Paniushkin looked impatiently at the streak of osiers bordering the marsh from the direction the sappers would appear. Bohdan looked, too: no one was anywhere in sight.

At that moment, bullets started to ping against the girders overhead.

"Helmets in the wheat field!" Border Guard shouted, crouching behind a girder.

Shortly thereafter, they all saw a number of German helmets glistening in the field after the nazis emerged from the shadows of the shelterbelt.

Spread in a broken file across the field, they slowly neared the bridge, blasting away from the hips without aiming. The hail of bullets pinged against the metal girders with increasing frequency. The reconnaissance party did not yet return fire.

After a while, the chatter of motorcycles was heard from the dirt road that ran along the shelterbelt. They plowed into the wheat field, approaching the bridge rapidly, and soon the machine gunners in their sidecars could be clearly seen.

Now came the most difficult trial for the reconnaissance party. Everyone understood this quite well. Seizing the bridge had not proved that difficult, but the main thing was to hold it until the arrival of the sappers. The bullets hammered against the rails now and ripped the ground in front of the defenders' faces.

"Nobody retreats without orders," Paniushkin warned, readying his machine pistol for fire. "Hold your ground at any cost. Carry out aimed fire only!"

The rattle of automatics intensified.

The helmets in the wheat field drew nearer with every step. The men on the bridge could now see the bared teeth and black gaps of the Germans' shouting mouths.

Like everyone else, Paniushkin lay ready to fire prone from behind the rail serving him for support, but at the last minute he rose up and took aim kneeling.

No sooner had he fired a burst than his arm jerked unnaturally, the gun flew out of his hand and slipped down the embankment. Paniushkin sagged to the ground.

Kolosovsky rushed to his side, pulled him lower down the embankment for cover, propped him up to a sitting position, and shook his shoulder.

"Comrade Commander! Comrade Commander!" He shook him again and again in a frenzy as if he wanted to revive him.

But there wasn't a flicker of life in the limp body that was still warm: he had been hit by several bullets, one of which had entered at the temple and shattered his head — splashes of blood and brain were already clotting on his shock of blond hair.

Bohdan put him down on the grass, picked up his gun and scrambled up the embankment. Everyone had opened fire now. Kolosovsky dropped on the run behind the same rail where Paniushkin had been before his death and opened fire. Aimed fire! Aimed fire! To the last cartridge! the thought shot persistently through his head again and again.

The helmets of the nazis were so near they couldn't be missed now. Kolosovsky fired. A helmet flew off a German's head and he dropped to the ground. Yet another went down, and he again took aim at those hateful helmets. The sight of them falling inflamed him even more, and he wanted to smash every single helmet and crush every skull hiding under it with his own hands.

He didn't care about himself. The bullets rang out against the girders with mounting fury, bounced off the rails ever closer, and got stuck in the ties, but he didn't want to notice them, he disregarded them defiantly, and grasped for the first time now what his father had once meant by "infinite contempt for death."

The bridge must have been of particular importance as a strategic object, or someone must have felt really guilty for having left it intact to the enemy, because an endless stream of telegraphs from regimental head-

quarters came flowing in to battalion headquarters inquiring how the reconnaissance party of the night before had fared and whether it had returned.

"It isn't back, not yet," Commissar Leshchenko replied, getting increasingly worried as the hours passed.

After a sleepless night, Bn CO Krasnopolsky had dozed off on a greatcoat spread out in a corner of the cellar; near him sat Spartak Pavlushchenko who unerringly discerned alarm and worry on the commissar's face. He understood his mood pretty well, for the commissar really had something to worry about — the reconnaissance party was completely on his conscience. He himself had selected the men and advised Paniushkin to take Kolosovsky from the student battalion. Pavlushchenko deemed it his duty to warn Paniushkin about Kolosovsky's background, but Paniushkin dismissed the warning.

"We won't get far with such an approach to things," he smiled, after hearing Spartak out.

That was not the right attitude to take, Pavlushchenko thought. This was a reconnaissance party, after all. The slightest crack in character in any of the men could push them all into an abyss.

The commissar would be to blame of course. Pavlushchenko could not understand the heightened attention Leshchenko had accorded Kolosovsky ever since they had met at the District Party Committee. However you looked at it, Kolosovsky was a man with a stained background and, undoubtedly, dissatisfied at heart in many respects. At moments, Pavlushchenko even suspected the commissar of having been friends with Bohdan's father once or even having gone through the same sort of problems, censure, and repression as he. How else could his patronage of Kolosovsky at every step be explained? Was it because he was a good marksman? Why, he wasn't the only good shot around! Or could the decision to send him on a reconnaissance mission have been dictated by other considerations, perhaps even not by the commissar's will alone? In any case, going on such a mission at this time was almost tantamount to death. There must have been some classified directive to send on such missions those whose loss would be the least regretted, while, on the contrary,

the most reliable men would be saved for future occasions. If so, how was it to be explained that the commissar had also sent Paniushkin, a regular officer, communist, and a favorite of the soldiers? All this was unclear and doubtful.

It's a good thing their documents had been taken away, Pavlushchenko thought. Otherwise the enemy could have used their YCL cards.

The commissar, settled in a corner for a nap between the telephone operators, was called to the phone again. It must have been Devyaty calling. Talking with him was anything but pleasant. Hot-tempered and given to abusive language, he was evidently upbraiding Leshchenko now, because the latter turned red in the face, and barely checking himself, replied with marked politeness. The caller on the other end of the line was probably also inquiring what kind of men had been sent and whether they were reliable enough, because Leshchenko assured him that this was so.

"I still don't think all of them are as dedicated as you say." Pavlushchenko ventured a remark after the commissar had finished talking and put down the receiver, staring fixedly at the telephone.

"What did you say?" Leshchenko asked, still not himself after the conversation.

Pavlushchenko repeated his remark; the commissar did not hurry to comment on it.

"Are you saying so from motives of overcautiousness?"

"No, I really mean it."

Leshchenko moved over closer to him and looked intently into his eyes.

"Who do you have in mind?"

"You know who. I warned you back at the Party committee."

The commissar got to his feet, paced the cellar up and down a number of times, and then sat down on a box opposite Pavlushchenko.

"What kind of family were you brought up in?"

"A reliable family. My father's a personnel department manager at a defense plant, and my mother's a lawyer."

The commissar gazed at Pavlushchenko.

"Doesn't it seem to you, Comrade Pavlushchenko, that

at times, your sense of suspicion with regard to other people is all too highly developed? If such a trait is inherent in the nature of, say, an investigating judge who, in the course of his duties, has to deal mostly with lawbreakers, that is understandable, but you are a humanities student, and therefore, your eyes must be open to all the best things in people, so the role you've taken on... What do you need it for? Beginning with the District Party Committee, and probably much earlier than that, you've been persecuting one of your fellow students persistently..."

"I'm not persecuting him. I simply don't trust him much."

"Do you have any reasons not to trust Kolosovsky?"

"I think, Comrade Battalion Commissar, that the logic in this case must be as follows: a person whose father was sentenced by a Soviet court by Soviet law would hardly have volunteered so eagerly to die for these laws and this social system. In any case, sending such a man into the enemy's rear..."

"Would mean what?"

"I didn't say anything. I'm only convinced that among such people, it doesn't pay to look for honest, fully committed patriots."

"You've got a distorted understanding of patriotism," Leshchenko said in a chilly tone. "You must think that patriotism, sacred feeling that it is, can be found only among the elect who have enjoyed the sunny and most generous side of our way of life all the time. To be a patriot when the only thing life does to you is pat you on the head — that doesn't come hard, you know. But just try to switch places with this very same Kolosovsky when your heart is bleeding, and with that bleeding heart, try to have enough guts to put yourself above all injustices and insults! That, in my opinion, is precisely what real love of one's country is."

"The way you put it makes it seem that my sense of patriotism is insufficient."

"No, Comrade Pavlushchenko. I know that in case of need, you won't spare yourself to defend our social system which has given you so much in life. You joined up to take part in the Finnish war, and now you're a volunteer, and I haven't the slightest shadow of doubt

as to your patriotism. But you must also understand me, a man who has seen a little bit more of life than you. I've known people who stood by their convictions even behind prison bars and did not cease to be Leninists. Kolosovsky seems to be just such a man."

Pavlushchenko sat deep in thought. It was the first time he had ever heard such unusual considerations about people and about the treatment of those who surrounded him. He felt that these were not mere phrases nor scholastics, and that the commissar believed in humankind, in its high moral qualities, firmness and convictions not in word but in deed. How had he put it? A humanities student. What if Pavlushchenko really had been unjust in his mistrust and prejudice with respect to Kolosovsky? What if his stand really were wrong and he were now given the chance to live differently and abide by different standards than he had before in his relationships with people?

The telephone operators, through with their nap by now, lit up their cigarettes and also discussed the fate of the reconnaissance party. One of them asked the commissar:

"If they fulfil the mission, Comrade Commissar, will you put them up for a decoration?"

"They're probably winning decorations with their blood right now," Leshchenko answered gruffly, and pacing over to the narrow cellar window, looked at the far bank of the Ross, as if he were trying to spot the group through the thicket of the willows and see the path they were walking along as well as the sun-warmed bridge they had gone to capture and blow up.

It was broad daylight outdoors, but they were still not back, which fact could arouse all sorts of assumptions and speculations.

There was no shooting, when suddenly an explosion muffled by the long distance rent the midday silence. The commissar exchanged glances with the telephone operators and cocked an eye at Pavlushchenko:

"Did you hear that?"

"Yes."

"That's our men's work! No doubt about it! The bridge is just in that direction."

It was evident that a load had been taken off the

commissar's chest. He started pacing up and down the cellar excitedly, and his expression brightened.

At long last, they had sent their message from behind enemy lines. The bridge had been blown up. The bridge no longer existed. Now there was another worry: would they get out of there alive? The explosion could mean two things — either they were alive or not.

24

"Tenshun!" Gladun bellowed somewhere by the entrance outdoors, and everyone who was at headquarters just then jumped to his feet and snapped to attention, turning his eyes toward the door. Major Krasnopolsky, his cheek wrinkled from sleep, was the last to get up.

Devyaty came down the stone stairs into the cellar. He was a huge broad-shouldered man, with a strong-jawed face blotched with red, as if from frostbite. Hot though it was that day, he wore an unbuttoned leather jacket from under which showed an Order of the Red Banner firmly screwed onto his service shirt; everyone knew that he had won the decoration in the Finnish war. He was much younger than Battalion Commander Krasnopolsky, an old veteran of the Civil War. But the difference in years obviously did not exist for Devyaty in this case. Fixing his eyes on the stiffened Krasnopolsky, whose gray hair was disheveled, with a welt from a greatcoat running down his cheek, Devyaty went after him without any ceremony:

"Sleeping, eh? Others are fighting while you're drifting into dreamland!"

It could have been argued that the Bn CO had had only an hour's nap after a sleepless night and with yet another sleepless night to go, but telling Devyaty this might have provoked an even greater outburst of rage and abusive language, so no one dared to utter so much as a word.

Devyaty strode over to the window facing the river, looked out, and asked whether the reconnaissance party was back.

"Not yet," Commissar Leshchenko answered. "But we think the mission's been fulfilled."

"You think. On what grounds?"

"We just heard a tremendous explosion going off over there."

"Oh, there are a hell of a lot of explosions now," Devyaty dismissed the commissar's explanation with a wave of his hand, stepping away from the window, and with this rudely abrupt gesture he seemed to have swept the reconnaissance party into the past and reduced them to a category of people who were not worthy of mention any more.

Attack! Lay on an attack! — that's what he started talking about pacing up and down the cellar with long strides, and this idea was obviously dominating all of his thoughts, and all of his impetuous energy was centered on it.

He ordered all company commanders and political officers summoned to headquarters right away to explain the mission to them himself and raise their morale. He paced from corner to corner like a lion in a stone cage and kept impressing upon Krasnopolsky that the devil was never as black as he was painted, for there were only a handful of Germans on the far bank. When the commanders and political officers arrived crowding into the cellar one after another, Devyaty's loud voice boomed out louder still, while the gray slits of his deep-set eyes flashed with excitement as if they were already seeing the melee of battle and the vanquished foe. Yes! He was going to lay on an attack at this section of the front line right away. He ordered preparations to begin immediately. According to his information, the enemy was withdrawing his troops and there were probably none at all across the river by this time, while here we had dug into the ground like gophers and were only listening to the rumble from the other sectors of the front line. He was already waving a map he had jerked out of his case and jabbed a finger at some points on it: we'll seize this objective, recapture that one, and by evening we'll have that damned railroad bridge, the loss of which the higher-ups can't forgive us to this day. Trying to inspire others, he was firing himself up as well, and it was obvious that in his heart, he sincerely desired action and battle.

Pavlushchenko watched him with rapture. More men

like him — that's what we needed! He forgave him his brutality, hotheadedness, and even the occasional cases when Devyaty, so Pavlushchenko had heard, was given to bringing his fists into play; he forgave him all that for his iron will and his impetuous desire to get at the enemy — to crush and overpower him.

"Who have you got there by the ford?" Devyaty turned to Krasnopolsky.

"Third Cadet Company."

"So get them on their feet for starters."

Krasnopolsky tried to argue that now was hardly a suitable time for an attack without artillery preparation and in broad daylight at that; it would probably be better to try a night attack to minimize casualties, but no arguments could swerve Devyaty from his goal.

"What do you think?" he snapped at the major. "That we can fight a war and have no casualties? Take a look at what's left of my men, and here you are trembling for your students all the time."

From the day Major Krasnopolsky had arrived, he, as well as his friend Commissar Leshchenko, had felt an inexplicable enmity with respect to the battalion and themselves on the part of this man who now wielded power over their lives.

"Are you any better than us, or what?" was the first thing they heard from Devyaty when he learned that a battalion of student volunteers had come under his command. For some reason, Devyaty had assumed that the commanders of the student battalion were claiming some special, exceptionally careful treatment of their charges, since they had been students just a couple of days ago and now had exchanged the quiet of lecture halls for frontline trenches of their own free will. Besides, all of them had received military training at the university and were just short of being commissioned political officers and commissars. Although in actual fact, they didn't seek any privileges, Devyaty nonetheless, having ascribed such claims to them, considered it his duty to stamp out any spirit of exceptional status in them as rapidly as possible by subjecting them to the hardships and trials his regulars had already gone through.

During the hard and bloody battles along the paths of retreat, Devyaty had lost over half the men under his command. Suffering from the blows of the enemy's motorized units from the first days of the war and clinging to every line of defense, Devyaty did not spare his men, nor did he spare himself or his immediate assistants, so why should he take pity on these reinforcements, he reasoned?

"Who'll lead the attack?"

Major Krasnopolsky and Commissar Leshchenko agreed to do so right away, but Devyaty didn't seem to have heard them and turned his back on them; nor did he take any notice of the company commander, an elderly narrow-chested lieutenant from the Chuhuiv camp; but then his eyes fell on Pavlushchenko who stood at attention in the corner, watching Devyaty with rapt admiration.

"Who are you?"

"The Komsomol organizer, Comrade Lieutenant Colonel."

"So you'll lead the attack."

"Yes, Comrade Lieutenant Colonel!" Pavlushchenko replied, his face growing pale.

Gladun, who stood quietly by the entrance, was praying to all gods that this bitter cup pass him by. But it did not.

"And you, Sergeant-Major? Where's your rifle?" Devyaty hollered furiously at him. "There seem to be too many of you hanging around this place doing nothing! You'll also join the attack!"

Some minutes later, Devyaty, revolver in hand, was already standing under the blistering sun by the wall of a shell-pocked house near the highway that ran the short distance to the timber decking of the bridge. The Commissar and the Battalion Commander were also there, watching the men of Third Company crawl out of their foxholes in the potato plots and orchards and gather for the attack in the ditches of either side of the highway. Their helmets glimmered in a dense green like ripening watermelons.

Just before the attack, Devyaty was informed of the arrival of reinforcements.

"Where are they?" Devyaty hollered at the oldish, pale lieutenant making the report.

"In the orchards over there. They haven't managed to dig in yet."

The newcomers were sitting under the trees in the orchards. A field kitchen had arrived with them, and some of the men had chunks of recently boiled meat in their hands.

"They've just arrived and are working their jaws already? Bring them over here."

The lieutenant faltered for a moment.

"You see, most of them are draftees, collective farmers from Kiev Region straight from the induction centers... Many of them don't even have rifles yet."

"They'll capture their rifles in battle, is that clear? Bring them over!"

When the lieutenant jogged off to carry out the order, Devyaty turned to Leshchenko and Krasnopsky and flung at them reproachfully:

"See, how many reserves we got? They're inexhaustible; you've just got to stir them to action!"

Shortly after the draftees, trusting and obedient, joined the student battalion crouching in the ditches, turning their heads to all sides in bewilderment. One had a rifle, another a grenade, and still another nothing at all but the chunk of hot meat he had just received from the field kitchen and was gnawing at the bone as he walked.

"Forward! To the attack!" Devyaty shouted when the ditches were overflowing with troops.

The men straightened up unhurriedly one after another and moved along the ditches toward the bridge. The company commander and Pavlushchenko walked up front with a firm tread.

The silence of a hot summer day had enveloped the willow trees across the Ross. Not a single shot rang out from the enemy side. It seemed there really wasn't anybody on that green bank and war was nothing but a mirage or someone's fanciful invention, the probability of which was brought home only by the heavy, nauseating stench of the corpses rotting on the bridge under the blasting sun.

As they approached the bridge, the men up front bent low at first, expecting the enemy to open fire any minute, but everything was quiet as before. The first ranks grew bolder, straightened up to full height, and rushed in a pack onto the timber decking of the shell-reft bridge that was still strong. The men in the fox-holes watched the attackers with bated breath. When the first ranks neared the heaps of corpses on the bridge, a machine gun suddenly went off on the opposite bank, ripping off drums of bullets.

The machine guns must have been ranged on the bridge pretty well, because they kept raking it with cross fire from their nests on the right and left of the willows; then the first mortar shells crumped on the cobble of the highway.

From his observation point at the house, Devyaty could see that the attack was getting bogged down as the men collapsed on the bridge, while those who had managed to get across rolled under it and jumped into the water to save themselves from the fire. While the machine guns rattled away, there were screams and the blood of the wounded. Devyaty, though, seemed not to see any of this, for his eyes were trained on those who hadn't yet been on the bridge and crouched in the ditches, waiting for his orders. They probably expected him to break off the attack and recall the men, but instead he was frenziedly demented, and seemed to have forgotten any other words but "Forward!"

"Forward! Forward!" waving his revolver, he hurled the word at the attackers again and again like an incantation.

What was the purpose of it? Who needed such a senseless attack? Commissar Leshchenko thought, barely checking himself at Devyaty's side. His heart was bleeding at what was happening on the bridge. To send the men into such an attack was wanton murder. Even from afar, they could hear the cries of the wounded and see the men jumping into the water to save themselves from the bullets and shell splinters and then, bleeding, crawl back onto the friendly bank through the undergrowth here and there.

"Forward! Forward!" Devyaty carried on, as if he had set himself the goal of having every single man go

through that hellish baptism of fire on the bridge.

"What are you doing?!" Leshchenko yelled, unable to hold himself in check any longer. "Stop that massacre!"

Devyaty glanced round, giving him an unseeing dim look. He dropped his head. Then he turned to Krasnopolsky:

"Well, shall we break it off?"

Krasnopolsky didn't say anything, but Leshchenko replied sharply:

"It should never have been staged in the first place."

"Call it off," Devyaty said in a sinking voice, and shoving his revolver back in its holster, trudged off into the depth of the orchard, oblivious to the bullets whining through the leaves and the mortar shells dropping ferociously onto the highway.

25

It was quiet again.

The pile of motionless bodies on the bridge had grown in size, and there were traces of blood everywhere — in the potato field, on the highway, and especially all over the grass in the yard around the cellar that housed headquarters where a dressing station had been hastily set up. The wounded did not stay long here. As soon as the fire had ceased, they were moved through the orchard to the rear on the outskirts of the township from where they were picked up by trucks.

Extended columns of reinforcements kept marching from the rear to the front line, the officers keeping the men in strict formation. But there was only one man trudging separately by the roadside: it was Dukhnovich.

He never reached the medical battalion in the end. After he had recovered a bit at the ammo dump, Dukhnovich thought is simply treasonous to seek refuge in some medical battalion. He decided to find his unit by all means, and pursued his purpose with such stubbornness it surprised even him.

At long last, he seemed to have come across the trail of his dear student battalion.

Making his way through the ditches in the township, Dukhnovich met Gladun. The sight of the sergeant-

major overwhelmed Dukhnovich. Gladun, his eyes blind with terror, came running by, bent low although there was no fire anymore, and in front of him he held out unnaturally his wounded arm thickly bound with blood-soaked rags. Gladun's appearance shocked Dukhnovich, yet at the same time he was sincerely glad to have seen him. If the platoon sergeant was here, it meant that the student battalion was somewhere around! Much as he had suffered from Gladun back in camp, he forgave his torturer everything now and was prepared to embrace him like a brother.

"Comrade Sergeant-Major!"

Gladun stopped in front of him winded and with a somewhat tortured look, his lips pale and trembling. It was even hard to tell whether he had recognized Dukhnovich or not, because his wild eyes expressed nothing but stark fear.

"Did you see the trucks? The trucks with the wounded, did you? I've been wounded by a shell splinter, too!" he yammered away, extending the blood-soaked rags on his arm for Dukhnovich to see. "Oh, what a mess we were in today!" he went on, glancing round frightenedly, and then switched over to a confiding tone: "Devyaty chased us out against their machine guns in broad daylight! You might as well consider half of Third Company rubbed out. Another two or three attacks like this, and it's curtains for everyone of us. Only the wounded will get away alive! So did you see the trucks, or not?"

"No, I didn't."

Dukhnovich could not take his eyes off Gladun's rag-bound arm from which blood kept dripping to his feet.

"Do you think they'll come?" Gladun lowered his voice to a whisper. "They say we're surrounded. The Germans have seized Uman and Bila Tserkva, and that's not far from here."

Dukhnovich simply could not recognize his platoon sergeant anymore. Was this really the terror of the student battalion now standing before him so utterly horror-stricken? So that's what war was doing to people around here!

To Gladun, Dukhnovich didn't seem to exist at all. He did not notice that in front of him was his cadet with all gear complete according to regulations, just

like back at camp: gas mask in a bag the others had already lost by now, hipflask the others had crushed to pieces — all this equipment seemed to have been specially preserved to please Gladun who had issued it to Dukhnovich not so long ago and registered it in his supply list. Yet now Gladun was blind to it all. His whole world was centered only on his wounded arm and the yellow crooked fingernails sticking out numbly out of the carelessly wrapped, blood-drenched rags which he held in front of him as the greatest treasure of his life.

"For me it's quits," he whispered. "Whatever happens here, all the attacks are yours now..."

That beastly fear for his life would have made him repulsive to Dukhnovich if it hadn't been for the drops of blood, fresh drops of human blood dripping steadily and slowly into the weeds...

Somewhere far away, a machine gun went off in a rattle, which made Gladun start with a jerk.

"Well, I'm off!"

But Dukhnovich stopped him:

"Wait a minute. Where are our boys? Where's our student battalion?"

"Walk straight ahead and you won't miss it," he pattered and was about to leave when his eyes lingered on Dukhnovich for a moment as if it was only now he had realized who he was seeing in front of him. "We thought you were somewhere beyond the Dnieper now, lolling on white cushions in a hospital. So it didn't work out that way, eh?"

Then, pulling in his head and doubling up, he bolted off into the orchard.

Dukhnovich remained standing for a while looking down at the blood-spattered weeds. Then he adjusted his rolled greatcoat, pulled up the sling of his rifle, and limped on.

The cadets from the student battalion were the first to catch sight of him. It happened in the evening quiet when they had stuck their heads out of the foxholes and saw someone bearing a startling resemblance to their Dukhnovich moving down the road through the orchard. Without any doubt, it was their department philosopher limping along! It was simply incredible to see Dukh-

novich here at the front line when everyone had thought he had been struck off the list as someone who didn't exist anymore. Still, it was him — their red-headed, freckled, hunched Dukhnovich returning to continue fighting the war.

"Hey, Cadet Dukhnovich!"

Dukhnovich looked round apprehensively, unable to make out right away which direction the voice was coming from.

"Come here!" Stepura shouted from his foxhole, and Dukhnovich, without so much as bending his head, trudged erect through the potato field toward Stepura's foxhole as if there weren't any war going on at all.

"Bend over! Bend over, you dope!" voices he did not recognize shouted at him. "This isn't the rear. They'll tick you off right away in this place!"

Spurred by the shouts and warnings, he hurried to Stepura's foxhole.

"Where did you come from? What sky did you drop out of?" Stepura asked, joyously taking in his friend's face flushed from the trek. "How's your foot?"

"I flew the coop and caught up with you. Folk medicine did the trick."

"Was it some village quack who got you back on your feet?"

"No, an artilleryman pierced it with a bayonet. He operated on my foot under real field conditions, so to speak. Then he put some herbs on the wound."

All the university volunteers came crawling from the neighboring foxholes. Their stubbly faces were grimy with a layer of dirt from which only their eyes gleamed. All of them had become noticeably thinner, and Moroz's jowls stuck out more prominently than before. Lying around the foxhole, they looked at Dukhnovich and his gear which was in such exemplary order.

"Gladun would surely have praised you."

"I met him just a minute ago running away wounded."

"Wounded? So he also took part in the attack?" Stepura shot a surprised glance at Moroz and Pidmohilny lying by the foxhole.

"I don't know," Moroz said. "In any case, I didn't see him among the first attackers."

"But Pavlushchenko behaved heroically today," Pid-

mohilny said. "He led the attack and proved with his blood that he's good as his word."

"You should've seen what was going on today! It's a good thing you weren't around," Stepura excitedly started to tell Dukhnovich about the events of the day. "Do you see that heap of bodies on the bridge? If Commissar Leshchenko hadn't interfered we would've been among the corpses out there, too."

"We're under the command of a certain Devyaty here who's simply a petty tyrant," Moroz said, and Lagutin, who had just crawled up, remarked loudly:

"You can consider that Devyaty's star has set."

The boys looked at Lagutin in surprise.

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said. I've just returned from the dressing station where I took Yalansky from the geography department who couldn't make it all the way there by himself, and I saw the corps commissar going after Devyaty. My, did he chew him out for that stupid attack. Looks like Devyaty's through with his stint of commanding."

"But that won't help them any," Stepura said, looking in the direction of the bridge.

"Graduate student Chorny's been killed, and Skuba from the literature department has been hideously maimed," Pidmohilny told Dukhnovich in a dull voice.

"We lost Drobakha the same day you were left behind," Moroz said. "We came under fire in a rye field. That's where we dug Drobakha's grave."

Everything he heard was so incredible and shocking, Dukhnovich almost couldn't believe it was real.

"Why don't I see Bohdan anywhere?" he asked, alarmed, and noticed that the boys, who hadn't been that merry anyway, grew even more gloomy.

"Bohdan's over there," Stepura motioned with his head toward the Ross. "He left with a reconnaissance party the night before and hasn't come back yet."

Stepura stood in his foxhole with a downcast look, and the boys, their helmeted heads bent over the foxhole, were also sullen in their silence.

"All right, what's that bull session over there?" came the sharp piercing voice of the company commander from behind the apple trees. "Off to your foxholes!"

A minute later, Stepura and Dukhnovich were alone.

"It's a pity I haven't got anything to treat you to," Stepura said, bustling about the foxhole. "Here, you can have some sugar to chew at least."

He pulled a messtin full of damp yellowish sugar out of a niche and handed it to Dukhnovich who squatted down and started to eat it obediently. In the meantime, Stepura showed him his humble foxhole.

"In this niche are grenades, just so you'll know; here's the food; and in this niche, we've got bottles with flammable liquid."

"I wondered what those heaps of black bottles in the orchards could be."

"We've got plenty of the stuff. We received it only recently."

Stepura took a bottle with the dark-brown liquid out of the niche, shook it, and looked at it against the sun.

"Not much to fight with, I'd say. Probably the only way it'll work is if you nab a nazi and pour it down his gullet."

"Will I be issued some of that stuff, too?" Dukhnovich asked.

"Sure. There's enough for everybody. See, we've got a whole battery, so the only thing left is not to miss your targets."

A machine gun suddenly went off with a loud chatter across the river, which made Dukhnovich start with surprise.

"My God, but they're so close by!"

"What did you think? The Ross is the only thing separating us."

They could see the bridge piled with corpses, the luxuriant green of the far bank, and the dense willow trees flooded red with the setting sun. Somewhere over there lurked the enemy's machine guns and mortars ready to blanket them with fire any moment.

"He walked right into the jaws of hell, and it takes a lot of luck to get out of there alive," Stepura said, looking at the river, and Dukhnovich guessed Stepura had Bohdan's party in mind. "It's hard on everyone, but they got the most difficult lot of it."

"Bohdan always gets the toughest job."

"He gets it because he looks for it himself."

There was nothing surprising that their friend was one of the first of the entire student battalion to have joined a reconnaissance party and take on a dangerous mission, because they knew his nature all too well. But how would it end? Was he still alive in that zone of death? Was he still beating off the enemy or were the nazi torturers already trying to squeeze information they would never get out of him? He'd sooner bite off his tongue than betray a military secret to the enemy — this his closest friends were absolutely sure of. For both of them, Bohdan had been an example of courage, a man of duty and honor. For three years he had been the soul of their university friendship, and now when he was so unaccountably absent as they huddled in their foxhole thinking they would probably never see him again, they looked upon him in a still more favorable light and he became dearer to everyone of them. Throughout their three years of studies and friendship with Bohdan, they had gotten to know him well enough to be sure that in everything — be it trifles or important things — he could be relied on to the end. Their dear university was unimaginable without Bohdan, or without his merry, prankish girl friend Tania. How would she live without him? No one would ever be able to replace Bohdan for her. For them, losing such a friend as Bohdan was tantamount to tearing a part of their hearts from their chests. Tight-lipped and gloomy as he was, he didn't make friends with just everybody, but those who enjoyed his fellowship and trust knew quite well what a pure and profound heart he had.

"The only thing I regret is that it wasn't my lot to go with him," Stepura said in a surly way. "It's a great thing to have a true friend at your side when you're in hot water."

"Maybe he'll come back after all," Dukhnovich said hopefully. "If he does, you know what, Andriy... Let's stick together then always. Of course, I won't be much use to you, because more often than not, you took clumsy Dukhnovich on for a burden..."

"Not at all," Shepura interrupted him.

"But I'm not so hopeless," Dukhnovich pressed home his point. "While I was looking for you, I thought about

a lot of things. Then I learned a lot more from an artilleryman. Oh, what fine people there are in this world, Andriy! You meet one such man and everything in your heart turns around..."

26

War, with all its attendant dangers, is even more tangible at night when it appears in showers of flares and crimson red conflagrations glowing along the horizon. The fires burned not only beyond the Ross but on the flanks as well and even encircled the defenders in an ominous ring somewhere behind their backs. The flares hissed up into the sky all around and were fired ever closer, which made the creeping rumors about the danger of being cut off from the Dnieper crossings seem convincing now.

On the horizon, fires lit by unknown men were raging, while here in the orchards above the Ross, it was dark as a pit, except for the flares that exploded in a deathly light over the willows now and then and the strip of water glittering by the foxholes closest to the bank. As on the night before, a detail had been sent to recover the dead from the bridge and riverbank. The nazis would not let the men near the bridge, immediately heading them off with machine gun fire and lighting up the bridge with flares that turned night into day. Some distance from the bridge, the detail managed to reach the water. Among the men who crawled without a rustle through the waterside thickets were Stepura and Dukhnovich. Under cover of darkness they pulled out of the water an unknown man whose arms were inertly numb.

They dragged the corpse into a potato patch, hurriedly buried him in an empty, half-ruined foxhole, and after getting leave from their commander, returned to their positions.

The recovery of the corpse, the slimy arms of the dead man, and the stench of rotting flesh — all this made Dukhnovich sick in the end. He was seized with a hideous nausea which made him retch, and his hands "reeked with death," as he put it, much as he tried to rub the sensation off with earth and leaves.

"Your nerves are just strained; you'll get over it," Stepura comforted him when Dukhnovich writhed convulsively in a fit of nausea, after which he dropped on his back from exhaustion by the foxhole.

"No, I'll never get over it, never," Dukhnovich said when he had come to a little. "That arm and forehead I touched accidentally... Remember how we buried him... and what do we know about the man? Who was he?"

"Somebody's father or son, I guess," Stepura responded dully from the foxhole. "He could have been a soldier or an officer for that matter."

"No, that's not all there is to it, not all!" Dukhnovich argued nervously. "Something much more has been destroyed and killed. A man, one of the lords of this planet, has left it; man—the greatest creation of Nature, the wisest creature in the universe has been consigned to oblivion..."

"Right... Maybe he was his mother's only son."

Presently they heard someone crawling up to their foxhole.

"Hey, buddies, do you have a rifle to spare?" a voice asked overhead.

"Do you think we've got an ammo dump here, or what?" Stepura snapped back angrily, with no apparent reason for his outburst.

"I just thought you'd have one. You see, we're from reinforcements, so we could strike up a deal — rifle for an incendiary bottle."

"We've got enough bottles as it is," Stepura growled out angrily, and they heard how the stranger crawled away to the other foxholes where he made the same offer.

The night was dark; the stars had spangled the sky looking down on the orchards and the front line in a broad Milky Way. Stepura and Dukhnovich had taken off their helmets to let their heads rest and were sitting pressed knee to knee in their foxhole, looking at the sky. Viewed from down the foxhole, it was unusually starry, studded with bright constellations and shimmering with the dust of unknown galaxies.

"A starry sky just like this one looked down on both Goethe and Copernicus, as well as on the philosophers and poets of ancient Greece. People changed, generations

succeeded one another, but it has remained the same, looking down on them all in myriad of tiny points of light like eternity."

"The skies were starry all right," Dukhnovich remarked, "and they've seen a lot, but I doubt whether they've seen so many conflagrations on earth and so many untimely human deaths..."

Beyond the Ross, a flare went up into the sky and lit their foxhole.

Stepura got to his feet, as alarm for Bohdan seized him again.

Every flare that darted into the sky beyond the Ross seemed to snatch Bohdan out of the darkness and pursue him somewhere over there; every machine gun that suddenly ripped the silence of the night seemed to be belching fire at the reconnaissance party. Stepura felt increasingly depressed. Flares over the Ross. The drumming of the machine guns in the meadows. That's where the war had pushed on from the west. The steel claws of nazi tanks were ripping at the breast of the Ukrainian land.

Some time around midnight, the familiar voice of Sergeant Tsaberiaby suddenly boomed over the foxholes:

"Where's my Korchma?" The sergeant looked into every foxhole on his way. "Are all of my kith and kin still alive and kicking?"

Shortly thereafter, Bohdan Kolosovsky was standing in Stepura's foxhole. He had a black machine pistol hanging across his chest and his uniform was so wet it seemed he had been soaking in a swamp all day long.

"So you got out," Stepura said, throwing his arms around Bohdan. "We've been imagining all kinds of horrible things. All right, out with the story!"

Bohdan squatted in the foxhole, and to Dukhnovich's amazement rolled himself a thick cigarette of *makhorka* shag and greedily pulled on it. He kept silent, fumbling for words in his mind. What could he tell them? That out of the seventeen men only five had made it back? That it was only at the cost of their friends' lives and superhuman effort that they had managed to hold the bridge until the sappers set the charges. As they retreated into the marsh, they saw the arc of the bridge

blow up in a billow of smoke and the broken trusses hurtling toward the sun. Then followed the nightmare of retreat.

The nazis, at first stunned by the tremendous force of the explosion, soon recovered their senses and lauched a relentless pursuit. That experience was far more horrible than the battle. The men felt like animals that were being stalked and could be trapped at any moment. They hid in the reeds until evening, ducking into the warm water swarming with frogs. At such moments, the flow of time seemed to have stopped for them; the day was an eternity, but then it was overtaken by the night throughout which they trekked to their point of departure: after a day's absence, they returned to the cellar where headquarters was located. When Commissar Leshchenko returned Bohdan his YCL card, he shook his hand firmly.

The successfully fulfilled mission would have been the more joyous to Bohdan had all the seventeen men returned, including Political Officer Paniushkin whose German machine pistol Bohdan had inherited.

"Buddy, why are you keeping silent?" Dukhnovich shook Bohdan gently by the shoulder. "Speak up."

"Let's make it another time, boys. All right?" Bohdan said, getting to his feet. "I'll be going now, because I want to sleep so badly, I can hardly keep my eyes open."

Smiling guiltily, he trudged off wearily to look for his foxhole.

27

To feel a living being beside you in a foxhole is a real joy. There's probably no other place where you can appreciate a fellow human being or friend as fully as in a foxhole. After his wandering and uncertain situation when he seemed suspended between front and rear, Dukhnovich regarded Stepura's deep foxhole as something truly cozy and safe. It was wonderful and quiet here. Though the sand occasionally trickled down his neck and his legs grew numb from lack of space, it wasn't such a cramped place after all; never had Dukhnovich felt his refuge so roomy as now when he had

unrolled his greatcoat at long last and pulled it over his head, shutting himself off from all the alarming world. The night, free from any cares, was his; he'd have a couple hours of shut-eye, because Stepura had insisted upon taking the first watch. While Stepura stood in the corner of the foxhole alert and wide awake, Dukhnovich had put his helmet under his ear for a pillow, and wrapping himself in the cocoon of his greatcoat, freely gave himself up to his most intimate recollections or to tranquil sleep. Though his body rested as if in a Procrustean bed, his spirit enjoyed ample space, freedom, and a remarkable carefree sensation. How everything relative in this world is! A cramped frontline foxhole could become a palace for a man! But was he destined to revel for long in it? How many days would it be an abode and fortress to him?

With these thoughts Dukhnovich drifted off into slumber.

As drowsiness was coming upon him, everything was more or less quiet, with only occasional shots popping here and there over the Ross, and a breeze slightly swaying the crowns of the trees somewhere up there closer to the motionless stars. But when Stepura roused him rudely by the shoulder with an urgent "Get up!" and Dukhnovich snapped fully awake, he saw something absolutely horrible: a meteoric shower of fire raged furiously all around. The night, the noise of people, the dazzling brightness of the flares, and this shower of fire were incredible and bewildering to Dukhnovich whose eyes were still heavy with sleep until he realized that these were tracer bullets being pumped into the orchards.

A strange uninterrupted rumble rolled through the night from the opposite riverbank.

"Tanks across the river!" somebody yelled clamorously.

"Tanks! Tanks! They're moving to the bridge!"

"Don't panic, comrades!" the cadets recognized the tensely calm voice of Commissar Leshchenko. "Has everyone got grenades and incendiary bottles?"

"Yes! Yes!"

"Take them along and move to the bridge!"

There followed a bustle in the orchards, terse shouts

of the officers assembling their men in the dark, while from across the river came a throbbing rumble.

Stepura grabbed the grenades and incendiary bottles out of the niche and shoved one of the latter into Dukhnovich's hand.

"Take it, and let's run!"

Bending low under the slanting shower of tracer bullets, they raced across the foxholes and potato field in the general rush to the bridge.

The rumble from across the Ross was gaining in pitch. The sky over the willow trees had paled perceptibly with the first blush of morning.

The ditches by the bridge were full of men by now.

"Drop to the ground! Down!" the officers shouted to the onrushing men, and Dukhnovich and Stepura also dropped into the ditch like the others, their heads turned to the highway.

They lay there pressed closely together, the men of the student battalion, regulars and reservists, their faces gray from the daybreak under the helmets. Some of the men had their chins propped on the cold cobble as they looked intently at the opposite side of the river. Dukhnovich also peeped out and saw that the ditches on either side of the road were packed full with men whose helmets loomed through the dusk right up to the bridge; there were even some human figures spurting along the opposite bank — probably some daredevils who had managed to swim across.

The willows on the far bank were still filled with darkness and mystery through which a heavy, menacing rumble approached.

Dukhnovich felt a shiver run through his body. What had made him tremble? Was it the chill the wind carried from the river and the night-cooled cobble or was it the ominous rumble relentlessly drawing nearer, making the ground of the opposite bank quake?

But I am not afraid! he kept convincing himself. I am not afraid of anything now! This is perhaps precisely the moment when even the most ordinary man of the least military mettle acquires the ability to take some decisive measure! He felt himself to be part of this rigidly tense group of soldiers and was amazed to have realized that he, too, was no coward and would not back

down, loose his self-control or buckle under that dark power advancing on them. It was fascism, treachery, sheer brutality and savagery eating up the ground. The rumble conjured up in Dukhnovich's mind the Leipzig Trial, blood-stained Spain, raped Czechoslovakia, and from beyond the weeping willows there emerged the image of concentration camps, terror and death — all the things he could not accept. Contempt of death — there must be such a state of mind, for that was exactly what he felt at that moment.

His eyes fell on the gleaming, seemingly oily bottle Stepura was clutching in his hand, and he grasped his own bottle just as firmly as if he felt the murderous fire it held.

"Look, there it comes crawling out!"

An ash-gray monster came rattling from beyond the river where the highway disappeared into the dense dusk of the willows.

The front line was quiet, there was no fire, and the only noise came from the steel that rumbled menacingly and inexorably in its onward thrust across the cobble.

"Stand by!" Dukhnovich heard the voice of the platoon commander nearby, and a moment later, there followed the high ringing voice of Battalion Commander Krasnopolsky from somewhere right by the bridge: "Follow me! To the attack! Forward!"

Everyone scrambled to their feet and rushed in packs toward the bridge.

The firing that instantly thundered over the banks ripped the air to pieces, the tracks of the foremost tank broke up the cobble of the highway; the men rushed madly ahead, blocking the bridge with their bodies, and Dukhnovich also ran in their midst, tripping on the dead and fallen wounded, shouting something without feeling fear, because everything around seemed unreal like a nightmare in which the flashes of fire, whining bullets, clamoring voices, and gritting steel had merged into a single pandemonium.

One of the men running at Dukhnovich's side suddenly burst into flame fed by the raised incendiary bottle a bullet had hit, and he, all ablaze, kept running on until someone pushed him off the bridge into the water. The din they had swept into resembled a volcano.

The front rank had already engaged the tank, hurling the bottles at the turrets and sides, but the burning monster continued pushing onto the bridge, crushing and grinding the men along with their bottles, grenades and helmets that cracked on their heads. The creeping hulk of steel was so near now that Dukhnovich could feel the oily stench of the flames as well as the smell of burning steel and paint, and saw how the flames spread and enveloped the turret while the bottles went flying and exploding on and around the tank. Afraid more than anything that he'd miss his target, Dukhnovich hurled his bottle into the thick of the flames. It broke easily like an ampule on hitting the turret.

I hit it! the joyous thought flashed through his mind, but that moment something hard like a stone struck his thigh and he felt himself falling. The instinct of self-preservation lent his hands tenacity, and soon he was under the bridge climbing down the girders with gasping breath. There were a lot of men there, some clambering through the semidarkness like monkeys, others hurrying somewhere or resting as they held on to metal cramps, rafters and beams. Dukhnovich, too, clung to a beam to catch his breath. He considered himself safe although overhead everything was in turmoil, lumps of flames came hurtling from down there, and the bridge trembled as the tank crossed it. Was it the one that had been set on fire or another one? No sooner had it rumbled across the bridge than it was followed by a similar clatter of tracks and flying lumps of flames. So the tanks were getting through! They hadn't been stopped either by the incendiary bottles, grenades, or the courage of the student battalion! Dukhnovich wanted to scream so great was his frustration at being helpless to stop them.

"We're on fire!" someone shouted between the girders. "The bridge is on fire above us!"

"It should have burned down a long time ago!" Dukhnovich heard the voice of a wounded man nearby, followed by an angry rejoinder: "Maybe we've been saving it for our troops!"

Clambering lower down the girder, Dukhnovich recognized one of the men from the student battalion, Chirva, in the semidarkness. He hung on to a cramp as if he'd been strung up by his hands in some Inquisition

torture chamber and obviously wanted to jump into the water but was afraid of landing on a piling.

"Jump! Jump!" somebody shouted to him from below. He let go of the cramp and jumped, after which Dukhnovich also plunged into the water.

The water reached to their armpits and immediately turned red from the blood of their wounds.

"There flows the blood of the student battalion!" Chirva said and looked at Dukhnovich. "Where were you hit?"

"Above the knee."

"I think I've got a smashed rib. Did you see how Krasnopol'sky was ground to pulp under the tank tracks?"

Plodding through the water, they waded ashore, and when they pushed through the thickets up to their foxholes, they saw the motionless bulk of a burning tank standing to one side of the bridge. Not far away behind the highway, another tank, its turret sticking above a ditch, was belching black smoke. A third, undamaged tank with a cross of black and white on its side, was pushing at their line of defenses, smashing trees and crushing, mashing men with its glistening tracks. Incendiary bottles went flying out of the foxholes and easily broke against the armor, flaring up in yellow flames which set the tank ablaze in the end; the hatch clanged open and out of it appeared the greasy hands of a Nazi raised in surrender.

With the passage of time, German war historians would delve into the events of those days. They would write that sudden rains had hindered their tanks from capturing Uman and Bila Tserkva on time, but we would know that it wasn't the rains but infantrymen with incendiary bottles, a student battalion, the regulars and reservists, and countless other brave men of the year 1941 who stood to the death at their blood-drenched defenses.

The town was in flames, the tanks burned, and the smell of charred steel, paint and gasoline so strange to those parts spread far across the orchards over the Ross.

Soon the nazi tanks were taken on by the artillery; nobody had known they were nearby. The infantry learned of it only when the shells started screaming low over the highway one after another in the direction of the bridge. The gunners were firing over open sights straight at a tank which had rattled out of the willow grove and then stopped jarringly right before the burning half-wrecked bridge. The tank must have been hit, because it remained standing in one place and opened fire from its cannon.

Once the way of the tanks onto the near side of the river had been cut off, the enemy opened up withering mortar fire on the positions of the student battalion. The trees in the orchards crashed to the ground, the air turned black from the detonations spouting up earth, and the whistling of hot splinters did not abate. It seemed even the metal that came screaming their way was crammed with hatred, so savagely did the mortar shells churn the potato field and the already tank-gouged foxholes, bite viciously into the trees, and crump on the cobble of the highway.

Many of those who had survived the tank attack were now fated to lay down their lives in unequal combat with a pelting shower of hot splintered metal howling through the air.

The student battalion was going down in blood. The wounded groaned everywhere. It was not from the sun rising behind the willows but from the students' blood that the Ross turned red that morning.

Those who could still move on their own crawled along the ditches into the rear. The men who had built the road long before the war couldn't have had the faintest idea how many hapless people would find safety in these roadside ditches and how many wounded would crawl through them, dragging their maimed feet, smashed arms, and burned, battered bodies dripping with blood. They were students, regulars and draftees, most of whom were local collective farmers who but

recently must have gone down this road in trucks with fluttering flags and ringing songs, as they hurried to the district center for some country festival.

Dukhnovich was also crawling through a ditch, laboriously pushing himself on with his elbows and dragging his wounded leg; the wound he hadn't had a look at yet was burning ever more painfully. The only thing he saw before his eyes was the blood the men crawling ahead of him had left behind: there was so much blood it ran to the bottom of the ditch and stood out in red pools the earth was unable to absorb fast enough. Somebody in front of Dukhnovich was carrying a badly wounded Lagutin on his back. Blood kept dripping from his wounds all the way and the groans came from deep inside him. Dukhnovich could not make out who was carrying Lagutin, and only after they got out of the zone of murderous fire and stopped for a breather, Dukhnovich crawled closer to the two men and saw Stepura covered with dirt at Lagutin's side. Stepura's service shirt and breeches were covered with blood all over — either his or Lagutin's, it was hard to tell. Lagutin lay at his side pale, his eyes screwed up in unconsciousness.

"His chest and belly's been ripped," Stepura said to Dukhnovich, motioning at Lagutin. "I've been hit in the leg and shoulder, too. Well, were are the corpsmen?" he said, looking with pathetic pity at Lagutin.

"Let's put him on a cape," Sergeant Hritsai from Second Company proposed, crawling up with a waterproof cape.

Lagutin screamed with pain as they put him on the cape. Then they dragged him on along the ditch.

In the meantime, Dukhnovich had decided to pull the boot off his wounded leg, believing this would make his going easier. While he was struggling to get it off, a number of soldiers had stopped by him, probably on their way back to the front line after they had dragged their heavily wounded comrades to a dressing station. One of them, a reservist without a rifle, tried to convince Dukhnovich to give his away.

"What will they think if I show up without a rifle?"

"Since you're wounded, it's all right. Now if you'd left it on the battlefield, you'd be in for real trouble."

Dukhnovich hesitated for a moment and then gave his rifle to the soldier who looked it over with interest.

"It's brand new I see. You probably didn't fire a single shot from it. What about the cartridges?"

Dukhnovich undid a pouch tightly filled with greased cartridge clips from his shoulder belt.

"Here, take all of them."

Another burly grim looking soldier was already inspecting Dukhnovich's boot out of which he had shaken the foot cloth sodden with blood and water.

Presently a mustached orderly appeared, ripped Dukhnovich's bootleg open, and looked at the wound. It was only a flesh wound above the knee; the bullet apparently hadn't grazed the bone. While the orderly quickly bandaged the leg, the burly soldier was examining Dukhnovich's boot meticulously and even tried to turn the bootleg inside out to see what's its lining was like. He himself wore brogans and puttees. The cadet's boots of fine yuft must have fired his greed, because after he had tucked one boot under his armpit he reached out for the second:

"Mind if I have this one, too, buddy?"

"Have you lost all sense of shame?" the orderly said.

"What will he be needing them for? He'll be tramping around in slippers at the hospital," the burly soldier said, and with an offended look on his red broad-jowled face, started to pull and to tug at Dukhnovich's second boot.

Dukhnovich did not object too much, but the other soldiers stood up for him and went after the burly character:

"What are you doing, Korchma?"

"You're stripping a live man like some marauder."

Korchma let go of the boot for a moment, but Dukhnovich held it out to him.

"All right, pull it off and take it."

Indeed, what would he be needing his boots for, when he was prepared to give away his soul to these people who were staying behind. He had spent but one night in a foxhole, hurled one incendiary bottle during an attack, and here he was already being sent to the rear, while these men had probably been here before him and

would stay on, without knowing what trials they would have to brave yet.

Korchma, however, wanted to hold the scales even: in place of the cadet boots he had stripped off Dukhnovich, he gave him his brogans and puttees. He tied them with a puttee and hung them round Dukhnovich's neck.

"They were a bit small for me, but they'll fit you perfectly."

Left barefoot, Dukhnovich crawled on with ease along the highway away from the river and the war. Voices of men carried from the orchards and from between the cottages; in one place, artillerymen were pushing a gun camouflaged with twigs across the highway. Dukhnovich saw his friend Reshetniak among them.

"Comrade Reshetniak!"

The gunner glanced round and recognized his patient of not long ago.

"Oh, you wounded already?"

"Yes."

"Your buddies put on a fine show today. Well, get yourself back into shape again, and so long."

Bending down into the green twigs, Reshetniak put his shoulder against the gun and pushed it on with his crew. Dukhnovich watched for a while as Reshetniak's broad shoulder blades moved under his sweat-drenched service shirt.

On the edge of the orchards, a large crowd of wounded were waiting for the truck. The men lay around like sheaves, blood-stained sheaves. Who hasn't been wounded yet, and who's going to continue the fighting? Dukhnovich thought, shocked. Crawling up to the dressing point, he got dizzy at the sight of the welter of blood. Everywhere he looked, he saw maimed legs and arms, smashed shoulders, and distorted faces swathed in blood-soaked bandages. Some men were just having their wounds dressed, and he glimpsed a soldier's horribly ripped belly between the corpsmen; others who were already bandaged lay exhausted on their blood-stained greatcoats, some without shirts, others without any boots on just like him. Some were groaning, others slumbering, and still others had crawled into groups to talk about the battle they had just gone through.

"Moroz was killed right before my eyes," a voice said

from the group by the sweep well Dukhnovich had limped to on a stick. "He was in the water when a splinter caught up with him and sent our Moroz to the bottom."

"I saw how Pidmohilny was already wounded when he got under a tank."

"And Borisov was squashed in his foxhole."

"Where's Khimochka? And what about Kolosovsky?"

"Kolosovsky was on the other side of the bridge."

"Did he manage to get across?"

"He's alive, your Kolosovsky," Shcherban of the geography department said, crawling through to the water bucket; his face looked as if it had been blackened by smoke. "I just saw him by headquarters. His head is slightly grazed. Doesn't even consider himself a casualty and asked the commissar permission to stay in the line."

So many of them had been hurt in a single battle: they were truly a sorry sight.

"There used to be a student battalion, and now it is no more," said Hrechishin, a tall boy from the philology department who had been wounded in the arm. "There were half a thousand of us, and how many have remained on the Ross? A handful."

The wounded men kept arriving without end. Most of them, like Dukhnovich, came unaided, but the heavily wounded were brought on stretchers by orderlies or, crumpled and drained of blood, were dragged under their arms and laid out in the orchards to wait for the trucks.

There were no trucks yet. Nobody could tell when they would come. Rumors made their rounds that the trucks would hardly arrive before nightfall, because it was next to impossible to get through on the highway in daytime—the day before a column of trucks with wounded had been bombed and strafed by nazi planes, and many who had left on the trucks alive did not reach the Dnieper crossing.

After pushing his way at last to the water bucket on the wet timber curb of the sweep well, Dukhnovich drank his fill of the cold spring water and instantly seemed to have been revived. Leaning on his stick, he limped back through the orchard to look for Stepura among the wounded. He saw him soon afterward with his legs

already bandaged, sitting by a knocked down wattle fence at a short distance from the very same sweep well and chasing away, from time to time, the flies that swarmed over Lagutin. Lagutin was lying on the grass almost naked, his legs, chest and stomach crisscrossed with bandages. Dukhnovich was astounded by the pallor of Lagutin's face. His eyes were shut, he breathed heavily, and blood foamed at the corners of his mouth every time he breathed out.

Dukhnovich settled by Stepura's side and both of them kept silent. From time to time they heard something gurgling in Lagutin's chest and throat.

The sweep of the well creaked ceaselessly as the soldiers hauled up the heavy water bucket. The orchards all around stood in green attire; the cherries were turning red; the sun, standing higher now in the sky, was shining brightly; and patches of light and shade from the foliage streaked Lagutin's naked body bronzed by a suntan. Amid these luxuriant orchards under a radiant July sun the sight of so many crippled men who but the day before had been healthy and hearty was unnatural, as was Lagutin's maimed body, a graceful, youthful body of almost Hellenistic beauty. Would he live? Would this wonderful body be ever filled with strength again and regain the liveness that had enabled him to do the grand circle on the horizontal bar at the university gym so easily and beautifully?

"The main thing is to get him out of here as fast as possible," Stepura said, adjusting a rolled shirt under Lagutin's head to make him more comfortable. "I guess such cases as his are taken care of first, aren't they?"

"He should've been on an operating table a long time ago," Dukhnovich said. "Do you hear how he's breathing..."

"A splinter must have torn his lungs."

"Where did you pick him up?"

"By the bridge. I practically dragged him out from under a tank. He was already unconscious by then. He came to in my arms, mumbled something, and then passed out again."

"Back in Chuhuiv he told me once that he was more afraid of being crippled than killed. The most horrible thing for him would be to get hit in the face and be

deformed to a monstrosity. He's dozed off, hasn't he?"

"If only he could sleep now..."

Without noticing it, they spoke of Lagutin as if he weren't there any more. All the time he was obviously lapsing into a coma. Occasionally his deadened blue-veined eyelids opened heavily and under them, the whites of his unconscious eyes rolled upward.

The skinny Bondar of the student battalion, his arm in a sling, came up to them.

"See that white cottage over there?" he nodded into the depths of the orchard. "A court-martial is in session there now. Dukhnovich, your friend is standing trial in there."

"What friend?" Dukhnovich asked, not comprehending what Bondar had in mind.

"Gladun, the god of our camp, is awaiting his verdict."

"You must be confused. I saw him yesterday running along with a wounded hand."

"Did you really believe what you saw? He wasn't wounded at all but had maimed himself! He got so panicky he shot himself in the hand somewhere behind a bush and thought that none would be the wiser. But at the dressing station, they saw through his trick all right. With such people they don't fuss long now: an article of the criminal code — and the end's near... A disgraceful end..."

Something must really have been going on in the neighboring farmyard, because a group of soldiers in the green caps of border guards was standing by a little barn amid the cherry trees behind a wattle fence. They did not take their gloomy eyes off the cottage door and were obviously waiting for something. There was a menacing tenseness in their waiting. The wounded men who had gathered on the near side of the wattle fence were looking into the farmyard tense and galvanized.

The dazzlingly white cottage was bathed in sunlight that played on the cherries, petunias and marigolds growing along the cottage. In the tiny windows stood flowerpots with blooming red mallows. It was simply unbelievable that in this little neat white cottage that looked anything but a courthouse, a trial was in session;

perhaps at that very moment the words of a horrible sentence were being pronounced, and soon a demoted Gladun would be led out into the farmyard.

For some reason, however, he had not yet appeared.

In the meantime, the trucks had arrived, and the orderlies went about taking away the wounded in a hurry. Lagutin was put in the first truck. Stepura and Dukhnovich also got into it, and when they had settled in the back, they saw their former platoon sergeant for the last time. They hadn't seen where he had been led out from, yet he was standing not by the cottage but by a hen coop at the opposite end of the farmyard. He had no garrison cap nor belt on; his service shirt hung untidily on his frame and had feathers and chicken stuff on the shoulders — he must have been kept in the coop all night. Downcast, his back hunched like an old man's, he stood there waiting by the coop, holding his hand bound in blood-soaked rags in front of him. When the truck was rolling out, Stepura and Dukhnovich saw the soldiers line up hastily opposite the doomed Gladun who, expecting the inevitable, raised his rag-bound hand to cover his face, as if defending himself from the unseen blow.

The trucks with the wounded rushed out of the orchard onto the shell-reft highway and rolled down it at full speed toward the Dnieper. The wounded were mercilessly jolted about the trucks bearing across the ruts, and the groans and moans of the men carried ever louder from the back. On the way they passed a haphazardly armed company of draftees. Although not all of them carried rifles, they all clutched gleaming incendiary bottles in their hands. Everything depended on these men, Dukhnovich thought. They were powerless as Prometheus and just as grand. Extended in open formation, the men trudged along on either side of the highway, darting wary glances at the sky from which enemy planes had strafed them with impunity more than once.

The trucks seemed to be snatching the wounded out of the fire that day. They tore down the highway at breakneck speed not only to get away from the planes that swooped out of the sky now and again, but also because the spectre of encirclement was haunting the area with unabated persistence. The rumble and thunder of war was closing in on all sides. In one village, the trucks had to stop to let through a column of cavalry crossing the highway at a furious gallop to save the day somewhere. The rumors of enemy breakthroughs and Soviet troops being enveloped and cut off were on everyone's lips as was the name of a famous decorated marshal who almost fell into the enemy's hands along with his staff and was snatched out of the encirclement by plane.

In another village, their trucks were again forced to take cover under cherry trees for the duration of an air attack. Women in old-fashioned bodices and black kerchiefs came out to them, bringing jugfuls of milk, fragrant bread, and sieves filled with cherries. One woman even brought pears in the hem of her skirt to the truck Stepura was in.

"Here, help yourselves, lads."

Looking at the pallid young faces of the wounded, the women barely held back their tears.

"You must be students," they said with pity.

"How do you know?"

"Because all the time students are brought from that direction. Is it you who've been fighting the tanks over there?"

"We haven't just been looking at them, that's for sure."

"Oh my, if not for the war you'd be teachers and scholars, but here... What did they have to maim you so for?"

When the air attack ended, the trucks rushed back onto the highway and pounded along, mercilessly jolting the young wounded bodies in the back.

Lagutin screamed agonizedly at Stepura's feet all the way, writhing in pain that shot through his ripped stomach and lungs. Neither his friends nor the medics



could help him now, nor could they ask the driver to slacken the speed, for all of them knew they had to hurry. Getting Lagutin to the operating table as fast as possible was the only thing that could save him.

Don't die! Hold on! Stepura, forgetting all their earlier differences, addressed Lagutin in his mind, seeing how he writhed convulsively and retched blood. It broke Stepura's heart to see him suffering and hear his mortifying groans of pain. At this moment he didn't want to think he had once been jealous of him, hated him as a rival, and had wished him dead. All this had drifted into the background and scattered in the smolder of the battle they had lived through, and now Stepura regarded him as a friend and brother for whom he would not have grudged his own blood and whose most agonizing suffering he would have taken upon himself if only to deaden Lagutin's pain. He wanted to pick him up like a child and hold him in his arms lest he be jolted, and thus carry him beyond the Dnieper to save him from this hell.

Stepura was also racked with pain from his wounds. Leaning against the side of the truck, he clenched his teeth so as not to moan whenever the truck jolted. With every lurch of the truck, he felt the torn muscles of his legs and the splinters that were stuck in his body.

Being much weaker than me and as fragile as a girl, I can just imagine how he feels, Stepura thought. He carefully pulled the arm of someone's blood-stained greatcoat nearer and put it under Lagutin's head as if that could help him any.

"I think he's in his death throes," Stepura whispered to Dukhnovich. "I find it simply incredible sitting over him and realizing that this is our Slava!"

Moans, shrieks, swearing... A truck with shells rushed by.

"And what about those who stayed behind there?" Dukhnovich said after a while. "What about Kolosovsky and Commissar Leshchenko? We're retreating, but they've stayed. What's in store for them?"

"What with the losses, it's a good thing reinforcements have arrived."

"Mind you, that's been only one line."

How many students from the departments of history, geography, and philology had fallen on this line, Stepura thought bitterly. Their student battalion was drowning in blood. Some of them had been blasted to pieces, while others, maimed and wounded, had been taken by trucks jolting to the rumble of cannonades through villages filled with sorrow, alarm and uncertainty. That's how he was seeing his Ukraine now. There were none of the songs that had but recently resounded over the orchards and moonlit meadows of this land; there remained only the great sorrow overwhelming the villages everywhere. It stood in the rustling trees and in the air; it was discernible in the eyes of the mothers who brought jugfuls of milk to the trucks, in the eyes of young women leaning over the wattle fences amid sunflowers, as well as in the eyes of young girls sadly following the wounded soldiers as they passed. The pleas of farewell in those eyes, the mothers' sorrow, the screams of the wounded, and the rumble of cannon — that's what the voice of Ukraine was like now. And it would be never forgotten by those who remained alive.

Evening was already falling when the trucks drove up to the Dnieper. Clouds had overcast the sky. Lagutin's moans had grown fainter during the last few kilometers of the way, and by the time they reached the crossing, he grew silent altogether: when they took him from the truck, he was dead.

He was buried not far from the crossing at the foot of Taras Hill on which loomed the tall graveside monument to Taras Shevchenko. A cracked helmet was put on the little mound of Lagutin's last resting place.

As Stepura stood over the grave and choked with tears, his thoughts formed into grief-stricken verses:

*We shall pass and be no more.
What will there be after we leave?
A battered helmet?
White bones in fields of rye?
Or obelisks reaching for the sky?*

By folk custom a cranberry bush or poplar had to be planted on the grave at Lagutin's head. But where was a cranberry tree or a poplar to be had now? One of these days, Mariana would come here and plant it —

and from it would grow her sorrow, and her love would turn into a living song that would ring over the entire Dnieper.

In the fuss at the crossing, Dukhnovich was ferried to the far bank with the first party of wounded, while Stepura had to wait a long time for his turn. He sat at the foot of the hill and looked at the Dnieper lauded in the verses of the Ukrainian Bard Shevchenko. The clouds hung low over the river; the wind furrowed the water, making it look like a plowed-up field. The osiers bent lithely under the wind; near them, groups of wounded had gathered, awaiting the ferry. The day before, enemy aircraft had bombed the barges with the wounded, so the men were worried that it would happen today as well. True, the sky was overcast and sullen and the low clouds literally brushed against the tall statue of Shevchenko.

Stepura was seeing the Dnieper for the first time. On the way to the front line, he had missed it: he had been sleeping when the train crossed the river at night, so now he was seeing it on his way back. He had hoped to see it bright, sunny, and flooded with blue, but here it appeared before his eyes at deepening steel-colored dusk, swept by gusts of wind, and enshrouded in a sorrowful twilight. It was only midsummer, but the river looked heavy and restless; the osiers rustled fitfully along the banks; higher up the old willows bent under the gusts of wind; and the silver poplars flashed like fish scales as the wind alternately turned their leaves, dull green above and white-woolly beneath. The wind-bent trees, the wave-furrowed Dnieper, the towering Taras Hill, and the evening clouds that drifted right over the Bard's grave — what sadness all this evoked, what sorrow it cast on the soul!

The dusk thickened, and the glow of a distant fire — probably a place hit by bombs during the day — grew ominously brighter across the Dnieper. On this side, the rumble of war drew nearer. Stepura longed for but a glimpse of the days to come. Would the Dnieper be the last line of defense or would the irrepressible fire of war spill across it? What would happen to the men who had remained behind on the Ross? What would happen to the sacred grave of Shevchenko and to the nation? Would

it withstand and overcome? Or would it appear only to give the world its immortal song, and then fade into oblivion again? Only yesterday, Ukraine had been called sunny and flowering, but what about now? How should it be labeled today? Deep-crimson, in flames reaching to the clouds, assailed with the sorrow of its mothers and the burning grief of its sons — that's what the Ukraine of nineteen forty-one was like.

30

Antitank ditches were dug and earthen ramparts were erected throughout Ukraine during those days. Where did those endlessly long antitank ditches begin, and where would they end? They stretched right from the sea on through the vineyards and the sunny steppes of the south deep into the Republic, enveloping the Donets coal fields, skirting Kharkiv, appearing in fresh gouges of earth along the Dnieper's left bank and running farther to the north. Ditches upon ditches. They cut with rectilinear ruthlessness through the stubble of grain fields, melon gardens, honey-rich buckwheat, the fruit-laden orchards of collective farms, and tore through a golden host of blooming sunflowers that would soon wane, turn black, and be covered with dust.

These endless ditches might prove useless in stopping a single enemy tank, but that thought never entered the minds of the thousands of people who built the defense lines with shovels from morning till night, when the white kerchiefs of girls and of the wives and mothers of soldiers hovered like seagulls over the steppes. They believed that their work would not be in vain and the hard-dug ditches three meters deep and seven meters wide would serve their purpose and help the Red Army check the enemy.

That's at least what the co-eds of Kharkiv wanted to believe when they joined thousands of the city's residents in the blistering heat far away from the city.

The high stubble left over after the hastily harvested grain fields and the hard, dry earth stretching from horizon to horizon — that was the line of defense they had to dig. The blood-filled blisters that appeared on

the girls' hands right on the first day had burst by now and hardened into horny skin, yet there seemed to be no end to the work.

Tania Krivoruchko, Mariana, and the Greek girl Olga were assigned to a team consisting mostly of women.

"That's our Olbia for you," Tania said, recalling her student dream, as she bore down on the shovel that wouldn't go into the hard ground. Sweat blinded her eyes, and she felt it rolling down her back and breasts in large drops. Her lips were salty with sweat. After a couple of hours of digging, the shovel dropped out of her hands and her vision blurred for fatigue.

Their dreams had taken a wild turn: instead of archeological digs in Olbia they were digging antitank ditches. Their Professor Mikola Yuvenaliovich was there, too. His sleeves rolled up, he shoveled the earth day after day, his mind probably preoccupied with one and the same question: why did Olbia go to wreck and ruin? After all, it, too, had watch towers and earthen ramparts to ward off the wild steppe nomads.

The blistering heat and the hot winds sweeping across the plains had blackened the girls' faces and hands. But what was heat and fatigue compared with the present juncture when everyone was undergoing the most difficult trial and this digging in the rear seemed to unite them somehow with the men at the front line.

The war was still far away, yet it made its presence felt in the caravans of evacuees from across the Dnieper, in the alarming communiques from the battlefields, and in these ditches that were so hard to dig. The danger of war did not subside but drew nearer, because one day a shrieking siren was installed by the ditches and air raid drills were held from time to time. There were also orders to take off the white kerchiefs and bright head covers so as not to attract enemy planes. So air raids could happen here, too? Where then could they hide, that swarm of humanity stretching across the open steppe in the golden stubble? It was rumored that similar diggers closer to the front line were strafed by nazi planes and showered with leaflets carrying illiterate derisive appeals: "Girls and dames, don't grub those little pits, because our tankies will come and fill up the slits..."

Nothing of this sort had happened here so far. The women were reluctant to take off their white kerchiefs, although the officers supervising the work insisted on it. There were only a few officers, the rest being civilians — students, college instructors, office workers, and collective farmers, who were there either by reason of age or freed from military service until special notice ("Until the rifles are made for you," they were told). They lived like gypsies, spending the nights in cowsheds, sleeping in mangers or under them, while most stayed out in the open in strawstacks or made themselves dens of straw in the shelterbelts of wild apricots. Trucks brought them bread from Kharkiv, and water was carted in barrles by Grandpa Luka whose towering forehead reminded the history students of Socrates of Athens. Grandpa Luka was a merry sort and missed no chance to joke with the co-eds, which always boosted their spirits whenever he arrived.

Mariana was the first to give the signal when he showed up:

"Girls, there comes grandpa's mare out of the depths of the centuries."

Grandpa Luka sat in the front of his water cart, the rump of the mare concealing him almost completely, because he was a smallish man; only the top of his straw hat sticking above the rump indicated that he was on the cart. His appearance also injected animation among the teenaged shepherds.

"Hey, Grandpa Luka, Makhno wants to see you, aha!" one of them would yell at the top of his voice from the shelterbelt.

"Why, you rat!" Grandpa Luka would shake his whip angrily at the wag.

"That rat is getting real fat for all that!"

Grandpa Luka drove up to the diggers with a beaming smile, not in the least offended by the boys who were making fun of him. Besides, he himself resembled a little puny kid, his collar bones sticking out sharply from under a cotton shirt that had only one button dangling. When he was hatless, he really looked like Socrates, with his high forehead, packed with wisdom, and set abruptly into bony shoulders.

The diggers surrounded the water barrel, drank

greedily, and those who had had their fill grew merrier right away.

"Is it true that you were with Makhno's band once?" Tania Krivoruchko would needle the old man for fun.

"Must be true, if the kids tease me," Grandpa Luka retorted calmly.

"And you saw Makhno?"

"Sure — Makhno and the Czar and the Kaiser. I've seen them all and outlived them all. And I'll outlive Hitler, so help me God."

"Sit down and rest with us for a while," Olga invited the old man to the earth mound she had settled on. "Tell us something about the past."

Mariana looked the plain water carrier over with cunning eyes, as if she were comparing him with somebody else she knew.

"I simply can't imagine you were ever with Makhno's band," she said laughing. "You galloping around the steppe in a machine gun cart... Why, you're such a weakling your old missus must be knocking the tar out of you whenever she likes it?"

"She's got a right to, because she's mine, but with anyone else, forget it," he said, sitting down with a dignified air. "As for Makhno's band, girls, I didn't join it of my own free will, but was forced into it. One day a character, say, like you" — he nodded at Mariana — "all in buttons and belts swooped down on me and said, 'All right, get into the machine gun cart and be my driver!' What could I do? I got onto the box and took the reins. And that bully made me stand in the cart to make it look more chic..."

"Well, and did you drive?" Tania asked, looking him right into his eyes.

"What else could I do, if I hadn't managed to hide from those bandits but fell right into their hands. Before that, I hid for three weeks in a shack at my father-in-law's melon field. One morning we breakfasted on gruel we had cooked when suddenly we saw a britzka with Denikin soldiers rolling along. We knew their ways all right: once they nabbed you, they bumped you off as a deserter. The britzka turned right toward us. 'Hide under the straw!' my father-in-law said. I burrowed myself in it and lay there as still as a mouse.

Then I heard them driving up. 'Well, old man, got any deserters around this place?' 'None?' 'And what about water melons?' 'A good crop as you can see for yourselves.' 'All right, pick the best ones for us...' He went off, while I was lying there in the straw with the mice already nibbling at me. I thought the Denikin men would get the melons and leave, but they were in no hurry, made themselves comfortable right by the shack, and treated themselves to the melons. One of the bastards sat down right on me like on a sack and enjoyed his feast like that to the end."

Grandpa Luka took off his hat and leisurely wiped the beads of sweat off his broad Socratic forehead.

"Why is one of your ears torn off?" Olga asked.

"Once I fell asleep grazing the cows. A calf came up to me and chewed my ear off," the old man said without batting an eyelid.

"And you didn't feel it?"

"I was fast asleep. In my sleep, though, I felt something rubbing and rubbing against my ear. When I opened my eyes, I saw the calf standing over me gobbling up my ear..."

The girls almost believed it, so seriously did Grandpa Luka tell his story, but Khotina, a stout local milkmaid, knew the worth of his prattle.

"Don't put great stock in what you hear! The old man came back from the war with his ear in such a state."

"You were in the First World War, too, Grandpa?" Tania asked, her curiosity excited. "So you're a veteran of two wars?"

"Oh, daughter..." The old man squinted his little eyes in a far-off look. "The best years of my life were given to war and soldiering. Indeed, the years flowed by like water. Oh, was I a different man then!" he said casting a boastful eye at Tania, whom he seemed to favor over most of the girls. "I was so strong I could grab a horse by the hoof, and there was no way the animal could free itself. But now I've gone to seed."

"His voice still sounds young, though," Khotina said, coming up behind the old man's back and embracing him with a plump, suntanned arm. "When he starts singing in the stackyard at night, you can hear him across three mountains."

"That's to chase away sleep when I'm watching the stackyard," Grandpa Luka explained.

Tania looked empathetically at the old man, his withered neck and plain shirt with one button. The former soldier exuded serenity and kindness.

"Still, I can't imagine you taking part in a war, going into attacks, and shooting people. You did shoot them, didn't you?"

"More into the bright sky, daughter. At the front line I'd duck in a trench, stick out my rifle and blast if off more for the officer to hear than for anything else."

Mariana gave the old man a stern look.

"So that's what kind of a soldier you were?"

"I wasn't running after an Order of St. George, daughter. To kill a man went against my beliefs at that time, because I had accepted the teachings of Count Leo Tolstoy just before the war."

"For some reason that's just what I thought — that you were a Tolstoian," Olga said, starting slightly. "Did you ever visit his estate at Yasnaya Polyana?"

"No, I didn't go there, what with all the work I had to do. My mother, though, made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem from which she brought back a holy flame. She was away more than a year, during which time our household went to wrack and ruin, so father got really mad at her for her wanderings. When our pilgrim returned from Jerusalem with her lit candle, he snuffed it out in rage, threw all the icons out of the house, and chopped them to smithereens in the farmyard. So we, the younger ones, didn't have anywhere to get our beliefs from anymore. The Tolstoian preachers came to us themselves and converted a number of young men just like me. And that, girls, explains why I was such a bad shot!"

"So it follows you're a pacifist, grandpa!" Olga exclaimed. "Just like Rolland you stand 'above strife!'"

"I've been in different kinds of strife," the old man said, as if he didn't hear her right. "But one thing I can say for sure: there's no sense in war. It's like a plague that used to creep around the world, or cholera for that matter. Whoever's had a taste of war but once will have enough of spitting it out all his life."

"Spitting or not spitting, you can see they're at it

again! I'd just like to ask them what they want in our parts?" Khotina said angrily. "Nobody was picking on them, but here they come and burn, and you have to dig ditches to keep them out as if they were a plague of locusts. I hope our boys give them a good drubbing over there across the Dnieper."

"Soap won't wash a raven white," Grandpa Luka said, making for his water cart.

"Not everything's that bad in your case, grandpa," Khotina said. "Your son's in the navy somewhere in the Pacific, but my Trifon went straight into the fires of hell. I simply can't imagine him fighting over there. You surely know what a quiet, timid boy he was, afraid of killing a chicken or touching a fly. How could he possibly kill a human being?"

"Not human beings but nazis," Mariana corrected her curtly. "As for me, I'd chop up a nazi with this shovel like a toad."

"Oh girls, I see it isn't any easier for you," a tall woman with a puffy face, the mother of many children at the neighboring collective farm, said looking sympathetically at the co-eds. "You're young, you've got good educations, and you should've become mothers soon, but where's your motherhood? Where are your sweethearts now?"

"They'll come back decorated heroes," Shtepa said, appearing from behind the water cart, his face wearing the invariable smile. When the university sent the students to dig trenches, fate had put a shovel with a bent handle into his hands as well and dispatched him off along with the others.

"For you, boy," Grandpa Luka said with a sidelong glance at Shtepa, "it would be more fitting to be there and not here knocking about with the womenfolk. After all, it's your fellow students who are fighting out there."

"I was too late to pack in with them," Shtepa said in a jocular tone.

"See, he thinks he's funny," Mariana said indignantly more to the women collective farmers. "Thousands of our students reached for their knapsacks — and off it was to the front line, but this one was too late to squeeze into the crowd! He's just scared for his hide!" Her face

flushed with anger, she shouted to Grandpa Luka: "Don't give him any water, grandpa! Let him dry up and turn into a mummy!"

Taking his place on the water cart, Grandpa Luka looked at Shtepa in an estranged way.

"See, what being white-livered in this world is like..."

The remark cut Shtepa to the quick.

"You'd better keep your mouth shut with that Makhno background of yours!"

Without answering, Grandpa Luka snapped his whip in the air and drove away.

Toward evening of the same day, the siren went off in a shrill scream.

"German planes!"

"Take cover!"

Jumping into the ditches, the girls saw a nazi plane flash evilly as it zoomed over their line of ditches. Its machine guns went off with a crackle of bullets, and then something black and round broke away from the plane and came hurtling down with a shrill whistle that grew in pitch as it neared the ground. The plane swooped down so that the pilot, his teeth bared in laughter, could be seen in the cockpit from below.

"He dropped a barrell!" the diggers shouted. "An empty oil barrel drilled with holes to make it whistle the louder!"

"Has anybody been hurt?" an alarmed officer asked, as he came running up.

"He missed," the women answered.

"To drop a barrel — what a thing to do!"

"That Satan will probably drop a tractor on our heads next time! They say the nazis dropped wagon parts on the diggers at Ivankove..."

"I'd wish he'd drop himself to the ground!" Khotina raged. "He was roaring with laughter besides, that son of a dog. May you laugh till your mouth cracks!"

"We must insist on having anti-aircraft machine guns installed tomorrow," Mariana said, seething with anger, as she got back to digging. "Those nazi thugs have gotten too brash."

The girls worked with redoubled energy that day, as if in revenge for that air raid, for the loss of a life of peace, for their blighted destinies. Tania, though the

smallest and weakest among them, did one and a half of her quota of digging by evening. When the girls helped one another out of the ditch at last, the palms of their hands ached terribly and their bodies were broken with fatigue.

"I wish there was someplace to take a dip," Olga said, looking round the dry steppe.

After clambering up the earthen rampart, they watched the glorious sunset. Before sinking behind the horizon, the sun poured lofty sheets of light across the motionless pillared clouds that resembled a fantastic rocky landscape on some distant planet; somewhere beyond that landscape and the sheets of sunlight their boys were at war.

31

Parching heat filled the days of harvest time.

The evenings were tinged in gentle watercolor hues.

After the blindingly bright day, the skyline turned the color of hazy lilac, luring and calling the girls from the ditches to the poplars rising behind the stubble fields, where grasshoppers chirruped throughout the entire steppe and the high golden stubble rustled underfoot.

The vague outlines of spreading trees stood out against the sky at the edge of the steppe where a railroad halt was located.

Their arms round each other's waists, the girls walked to the halt.

Mikola Yuvenaliovich, resting with his colleagues in the shelterbelt after work, watched the three girls, his forehead furrowed by the thought that perhaps only a melancholy song was comparable to the state of the human soul as the three girls walked silently into the steppe at the decline of day. What a lot of good will and community of dreams and feelings they had to share to put their arms round each other's waists as gently as they did and keep walking.

As they walked deeper and deeper into the lilac blue of dusk, the expanse of the steppe chirruped and rang ever louder all around. The pleasant fragrance of the evening not yet poisoned by the war was filled with

purity and liquid luster, smelling of grain sheaves and echoing with the rattle of a bullock cart. It seemed their boys would come out of the shelterbelt any moment to meet them with merry student jokes and banter: "How are you getting along without us, girls?"

Then tractors with scrapers would arrive to level the ramparts piled up throughout the day and grade the earth dug out of the antitank ditches across the field. The field that had been golden before would turn ash-gray, and the soldiers' wives, watching how their work was being scattered across the plain, would start a song about hill slopes covered all in green except for one black slope on which a poor widow had sown her patch of land too late for lack of a horse and plow.

By that time the girls had walked far away from the ditches. Earth, scrapers, shovels, and the worries of the past day — all this receded into the background and only the one black hill loomed in their minds; it, too, was absorbed by the hazy blue of the vast steppe, and the girls' thoughts turned to their recent past: the sweet student life with all its enticements and heady passions in which everything was intertwined — love, jealousy, the happiness of reconciliation, the excitement of exams, and the fanciful dreams of a summer at Olbia.

"It's such a wonderful world it makes you want to live and live," Tania said reflectively. "This sky, the boundless steppe, songs, love... Who has the right to encroach on this eternal human right, on human labor and happiness? Once man lived like an animal in woods and caves, providing his food by hunting — then he had no other choice but to fight, pouncing on mammoths with primitive weapons. Now he has thousands of books which have brought together the wisdom of the ages; he's got telescopes trained on the sky watching distant worlds. Man has reached the bottom of the oceans and can fly through the air faster than a bird! There's nothing he can't do if he puts his mind to it. Everyone on earth would have enough land, space, songs, happiness and plenty if only we could learn to live without war. These ever increasing outbursts of human slaughter exact so much mental and physical effort from entire nations, but the main thing is that so many human lives, the lives of gifted people who could do so much for the

good of the world are lost!" Tania's excited voice betrayed sincere anguish. "To achieve what mankind has achieved and now go back to caves and pyramids of human skulls? That civilized bandit who swooped down upon us today and dropped that barrel — is he any better than a soldier of Khan Batu, although he didn't come on a Mongol pony but in a modern flying machine? He's a barbarian, a barbarian a hundred times over!"

"That's why Tolstoy must have rebelled against civilization in his old age," Olga said, "because he foresaw those unprecedented ruinous wars of today..."

"As a matter of fact, none of this had to happen," Mariana said reflectively. "All the workers of Germany should have united against reaction at the proper time and voted for Ernst Thälman in the elections to the Reichstag..."

"Nobody could have foreseen the outcome," Tania said with sadness. "Oh, if only people could see years ahead, everything would be different."

The stubble field ended, and the girls came out onto the road. Tania seemed to have heard a song in the air and listened intently into the dusk.

"The steppe's chirping and chirping," her voice rang sadly. "I wonder whether the grasshopper chirp like that over there as well."

The girls understood that "over there" was to mean the place their boys were now and where the last colors of day had faded in the western sky.

"I can't forgive myself not getting married earlier," Mariana said bitterly. "We could've gotten married, say, on May first... True, Slava was trying to spare me from being 'yoked,' as he put it, before graduation day, but I should have been more determined. Why did I listen to him? All those spring evenings with nightingales would have been ours then, ours!..."

As they walked on, Tania turned to Olga:

"Sing something for us, Olga."

Olga started to sing in the middle of a song, as if the melody had already been ringing in her heart.

It was a Greek tune they did not know. Olga came from the Nogai steppes by the Sea of Azov. Once she had told the girls that she had attended a Greek school there. Many of the Greek settlements had such schools

which were subsequently closed down for unknown reasons.

Olga was completely absorbed in the song, her exuberant voice enchanting the steppe, while her friends thought of her hard lot. She was a tall, lean girl with a swarthy face and dark rings under her eyes. As always, her lips were parched, as if she had been affected by a gnawing fever. Although Olga was their age, she looked like a mother with a grown child. For all her worn and grief-stricken appearance, she exuded grace and maternal kindness. The girls realized that her tired look was caused by the frustration she had suffered from her unlucky and almost hopeless first love. She wasn't born beautiful, but once she started to sing, she looked quite lovely, especially now after she had bid farewell to Stepura back in the camp and a small flicker of hope warmed her heart. Stepura promised he'd write her from the front line. So far she hadn't received a letter from him, but she waited and hoped, and that hope alone made her seem somewhat merrier and younger. The greatest change came over her when she chanted her passionate Greek songs while digging the ditches. It didn't happen too often, but when it did, she sang the songs with particular feeling, because, as the girls knew for sure, they were devoted to Stepura above all. It was for him, her distant love, that the melodies flowed out of her poetic soul in the Greek tongue, relaying the message of her loyal affection.

While digging the trenches, the girls had become even better friends, and now Olga had no secrets from either Tania or Mariana. On such warm July evenings and nights, she confided in her friends everything she had previously concealed and now longed to share with someone.

"He's a poet! He's a real poet, you have to understand!" she said heatedly whenever Stepura was mentioned. "I see all the best in him that comes from his people and his native land; everything in him is genuine like his Vorskla or Orilka — his power, steadiness of character, uprightness, and purity of heart. And what about his voice and his melodious tongue? Why, the tongue he speaks rustles like silk, and poetry itself shines in his eyes!"

"Add to all that his clumsiness to make the picture complete," Mariana remarked. "That's also part of his national character, I guess?"

"Laugh, if you like, but he's got character. If all the songs that have been created by your people throughout the centuries — even those songs that have been forgotten — live on in him, isn't that a mark of a powerful, profound character? And they do live on in him."

"I'm sorry, Olga, but his clumsiness and sentimentality never appealed to me."

"Mariana, you're not the one to appreciate him properly!" Olga exclaimed heatedly. "Choosy as you are, you regard him as just another of your admirers, because for you Slava is the ideal. All the others are no more than toys. Who knows, but if you hadn't been leading Andriy on for three years, everything might have been different between him and me."

"What am I to blame then?" Mariana said, playfully wriggling her shoulders like a gypsy.

"Stop being a coquette now at least. You know pretty well that you're the only one on his mind, and it's only you he dedicates his poetry to. Oh, if I could have but a ray of the warmth that shines on you out of his heart in vain! Couldn't he and I have been happy, after all?"

In the heat of her outspokenness, Olga told the girls something she would not have told anyone else under other circumstances:

"Once I was returning from the library late in the evening. I was exhausted — you know that learning doesn't come easy for me. Suddenly I saw the silhouettes of two people in a window on the second or third floor. They were two students: a boy and a girl. What college they were from I don't know, but that's how I thought of them — as two students. I saw each of their movements like on a movie screen, her undone hair across her shoulders, the outlines of her body, their restless arms locked in an embrace... I saw their faces drawing together for a kiss and remaining pressed to each other for a long time in bliss. Then they drew apart, looking at each other, and I seemed to see them smiling with enamoured eyes. Oh, girls, I thought I'd go crazy watching that love scene between two shadows! I looked

around and suddenly realized it was spring everywhere, an amazing evening, and everyone in the world was falling in love, loving, and being intoxicated from kisses, while I was left all alone... lost between love and loneliness..."

"I know what such evenings are like," Tania said with a sigh. "You quarrel over some trifle and then traipse around irritated and tortured until you're ready to kill yourself."

"I'll go to him right away, I decided!" Olga continued. "Just as I was, with my books and lecture notes, I turned into the boys' dorm. I plucked up my courage, squelched my shame, and knocked on his door. He was alone in his room, sitting by the table like a tired mower or tractor driver back home from the field after a hard day's work. Cigarette smoke stood in a cloud over him and the ashtray on the table was full of butts. I saw him through a haze, which made his presence questionable to me. He wasn't even surprised I had come and didn't seem to notice what kind of mood I was in. He raised his head, looked at me through the tobacco smoke, and it was apparent his mind was wandering somewhere else and he was seeing someone else, not me at that moment. Oh, how hurt I felt! I had come running to him and was standing there ready for every sacrifice, and what did he do? What do you think he was dreaming of at that moment? What do you think his verses in the opened notebook lying on the table in front of him were about? Without suspecting what I was really feeling, he showed me like a trusting child what he had written and even read some of his verses. Who do you think they were about?"

"About moonlit Poltava nights?" Mariana asked with a smile.

"They were about you, Mariana. I listened to them, and, my goodness, what a lot of effort and pride it cost me to keep myself from bursting out in tears..."

"Looks like you've really got something to blame me for, Olga," Mariana said, putting an arm round her. "But now everything will be different. I'm married, I'll have children to cradle, and I'll fix you up with him. Just let our boys come back as soon as possible. They'll be back — it just can't be otherwise!"

"What if their letters have already arrived?" Tania said hopefully. "Let's send Mariana to the university tomorrow to check."

"Oh, but will they let me go?"

"Sure they will. We'll take up your quota of digging."

"All right, I'm ready."

Involuntarily the girls started to spruce themselves up as they approached the railroad halt.

What lured them there every evening? They were afraid to admit it to themselves, but they came to watch the passing trains with crippled and wounded soldiers. In the evening of the day before, a hospital train had passed through. The women from the local state farm were running along the cars, calling out names to find out whether any of their dear ones were among the wounded. The girls looked into the windows and inquired as well, waiting anxiously for any student from Kharkiv to respond. There were none. Instead there were border troops, airmen, collective farmers, and but one student from Leningrad. Their boys were probably still engaged in fighting or had been taken to the rear by some other route. The girls visited the halt every day, but only once did they hear anything of the boys from an elderly wounded officer they had gotten into conversation with when the train stopped for a short time. He had heard about some students fighting somewhere across the Dnieper in the direction of Bila Tserkva.

"Whether they were yours or not I don't know," he said, "but their battalion is famed all along the front line. They went against the tanks with incendiary bottles and gave the nazis a good drubbing..."

Another train was coming in from the direction of the Dnieper that day. What if it, too, carried wounded? the girls' eyes queried one another as they hurried to the platform.

As the train approached, its whistle gave such a scream it seemed the whole train was in mortal pain. It rolled in with lights turned off, black and blind. When it stopped, the cars stretched far into the evening steppe. The cars were camouflaged with twigs, which made the shelterbelt on either side of the low embankment look twice its initial size. The flatcars carried factory equipment. In between lathes, pipes and metal blanks, there

were what looked like shacks, bundles, and women with children. The girls hadn't had time to ask about the passengers and where they were coming from yet, when someone called suddenly from a flatcar:

"Do tell, is that you, Tania Krivoruchko?"

Tania started.

"Yes, it's me!"

"Can't you see it's our plant up here? Your mother's on the train, too!"

The news struck Tania so unexpectedly her vision blurred.

"Where is she? Where's my mom?"

"Somewhere at the end of the train!" a woman said from the flatcar. "Run down it and ask. Your father stayed behind at the plant!"

Tania ran along the train.

"Mom, Mom! That's me, Tania! Tania Krivoruchko! Mom, where are you?" she shouted into the dusk, running on and on. Presently the train started to roll. The camouflage twigs drifted past Tania and seemed to be separating her from Mother forever. She heard someone shouting, saw women's kerchiefs on the flatcars through the dusk, and all of them represented mothers to her.

Tania broke into a run after the train. It wheeled away from her inexorably. From one flatcar she heard the sad, mournful voice of an old woman:

"Oh my, where are those Urals? They say eggplants don't grow there, and we'll all probably freeze to death in those cold winters..."

Tania kept running alongside the train that was gathering speed, and even after the last car flashed past her she kept on running into the steppe. Tripping on a tie, she lost her balance and fell on the clinker, bruising her knee. Tania lay exhausted and out of breath, her heart racing wildly. Her bruised knee ached sorely. She got to her feet with an effort and stood there like a waif, hearing the fading clacking of the train wheels through the ties under her feet. She was left all alone; she had no home any more, no plant, everything had been put on wheels, and she had missed her mother who had not heard her calling.

Everything that had happened resembled a horrible, incredible dream. In a few minutes she had experienced

the greatest blow since she had parted with Bohdan. She had come to look at the wounded, but instead she had suddenly been deeply wounded herself — hit right in the heart, stunned, and left to the mercy of fate. She had been intending to visit her parents but put the journey off from day to day, and now she had nowhere to go and nowhere to look for her dear ones. Why couldn't the train have stopped a little longer? She should have rushed to it, jumped on the first flatcar, and there asked where her mother was. But was she inwardly prepared to do that? The train was taking her mother and the evacuees to the hinterland, but here was the university, and here she hoped to receive a message from Bohdan.

The girls came running, picked her up, and lurched sideways to avoid an oncoming train.

"Scram, there's another freight train coming!"

The earth trembled again as the train rolled nearer. It, too, had its lights out, with only the locomotive funnel belching smoke and sparks. The flatcars were loaded with the pipes, machine tools and engines of a plant being moved eastward. What if her father was on it? Or some of her relatives and neighbors? She could jump on the train and go with them! Just like that, no matter how she was dressed, and all explanations would come later.

The flatcars camouflaged with acacia twigs flitted past her; the train whizzed over the tracks as if it had been fired from a gun, leaving a shock wave in its wake. Biting her lips, Tania stood by the embankment watching the retreating train. The red eye of the lantern on the caboose quickly faded into the steppe.

"Let's go," Mariana said, extending a hand to Tania.

"I'm alone now," Tania whispered. "All alone..."

"You're not alone, because we're with you," Olga said, pressing her cheek against Tania's.

They walked down the embankment, put their arms round each other's waists, and went back into the steppe, which, after the rumble of the trains, was filled with the gentle chirps of grasshoppers as before.

Previously when Tania had thought about the war as the girls talked over the distressing communiques from the front lines somebody would bring back from town, she still had hoped, for all the tragedy of the event, that by some miracle, the war would end one day just as suddenly as it had broken out. Reconciliation would be sought and means found to stop this horrible disaster which had already sucked millions upon millions of people into its whirlpool. But after she had seen the trains with dismantled factory equipment, it became absolutely clear to her how naive her fantasies had been, because any thought of reconciliation was out of the question. It looked like this struggle would be a long one, with no end to it in the offing. The war had crept up to every threshold and destroyed her home on the Dnieper's shores. What would happen to her mother? Frequently ill, she had stayed in her native town all her life, and now she was on a flatcar headed for parts unknown for an indefinite amount of time. And what about Father? Where was Grandpa? What would he say about his grandchild?

The world of her childhood was being destroyed; the open-hearth furnaces were going out; the shops emptied, and Father was now perhaps tearing down the last of what he had built with his own hands throughout his life. She had no home, there would be no more fine mornings on the Dnieper with the plant whistle hooting. Looking back at her past, Tania saw a life filled with the bright light of her youth, a life she saw only now in all its full value and charm. She saw it just as it had been — some hardships and human drama along the way, yet for all that, inspired by a sense of purpose that made possible the building of the Dnieper hydropower project, flight into the stratosphere, and breaking through the ice of the Arctic. This life was projected into the future and already seemed illuminated by it. But instead, there followed this savage onslaught, bleeding front lines, wailing sirens in the cities, and dismantled enterprises rolling eastward. And here she was left at the crossroads of life; she was still undecided whether to leave everything and follow her mother or

remain with her university friends with whom, more than with anyone else anywhere, she shared an affinity with everything related to the past and her first and last student love.

Ever since she had parted with Bohdan, her feeling for him had consumed the entirety of her being. Tania hadn't realized she could love so completely. She took the fact that she had missed her mother at the station as a deserved punishment for neglecting her parents and not going home immediately after the war broke out, for she had forgotten about everyone and everything but her Bohdan. There was still no news from him, which oppressed and tormented her. She conjured up in her mind the gloomiest pictures that could be quite probable in their fatal outcome. Had he been wounded? If she knew where he was lying wounded, she would drop everything and rush to him, sitting and looking after him day and night. Had he been taken prisoner by the nazis? She'd share his fate to lessen his suffering in captivity. Still, all of her wildest suppositions retreated before her unconquerable belief in his happiness, his lucky star, and his being alive. He was fighting somewhere. Sooner or later he would respond to her letters.

Absorbed in her thoughts, Tania barely heard what the girls were talking about, although they walked side by side along the shelterbelt through the fine dust of the road. They were talking about Khotina waiting for her Trifon, her warm-hearted boy who wouldn't so much as hurt a fly. "Should he return without arms or legs, I'd still be glad to see him back," Khotina used to say.

"Sometimes I wonder whether I would be able to do that?" Olga said. "I mean to love so boundlessly and do something really good for someone else. It seems to me I haven't done anything good in my life yet and that worries me a lot."

"Don't discredit yourself like that!" Mariana argued. "If anybody in our department was kind to friends and considerate by nature and not by compulsion, you were. You were born to be a nurse, you'd make a wonderful mother, and it's a pity that hare-brained Stepura didn't realize it in time."

"Mariana, enough of that. Don't joke about such

things. Everyone who's done good to somebody else must, as I see it, experience a particular joy which cannot be compared with anything else. That's probably what you call happiness. And that's probably what an ideal society of the future will be like, when doing something good, agreeable, useful and maybe even requiring self-sacrifice will be a necessity for everyone."

"At times I wonder whether the university hasn't given us too much of all sorts of delusions for our journey through life," Mariana said. "You just mentioned society of the future. For us, it's the most wonderful society we dream of and fight for. But when you look at things realistically, doesn't this war with its destructive force move us away from that future? After all, the thralldom of Kievan Rus under the Tatars set it back three hundred years. I don't think we'll be set back; I'm an optimist on that point, but sometimes when you get to thinking, it makes you feel strange, what with the savage age we live in and all the perfidy, brutality and treachery around us! A thousand years ago, when banqueting warriors scooped up wine with the skulls of their enemies, they at least warned their adversaries honestly and openly about the coming war: we're going to move against you. They sent them a message beforehand! But now, in the twentieth century, they attack at night like thieves and shower sleepy children and mothers with bombs."

"And that happened after they assured us of their friendship only yesterday," Olga added gloomily.

Tania did not take part in the conversation, although the same things were on her mind.

Mankind has known the Stone Age, the Bronze Age, and the Iron Age, she thought, but will there also be a Golden Age, as legends tell us? Will there be anything like it? Or maybe it has already passed without our having noticed it?

"Who's traipsing here so late?" a voice suddenly spoke from the shelterbelt.

The girls started and stopped in their tracks.

"Hände hoch!"

Grandpa Luka emerged from the undergrowth in the straw hat he never parted with, a rifle slung over his shoulder.

"You'll scare people out of their wits that way," Mariana said. "An advocate of non-resistance with a rifle — well, I'll be darned!"

"I'm guarding the steppe," Grandpa Luka said. "We've got a battalion of irregulars around this place. In the daytime we work and at night we guard the field and the railroad against saboteurs." Dropping his voice a key lower, he added: "The NKVD itself is supervising us."

"A Tolstoian and suddenly he's in with the NKVD," Mariana said with a smile. "As a Tolstoian, it isn't proper for you to take up arms!"

"Leo Tolstoy would have done so himself now," the old man said. "In this war, young and old will be fighting."

"Aren't you afraid of being out here alone at night?" Olga asked.

"What should I be afraid of? Back in the days when I was a young man, the devils were after me and I wasn't afraid. When you're single, you live as free as a lord. One night I was returning home after carousing around and a witch chased me for three blocks."

"A witch?" Mariana was tickled. "You really saw a witch?"

"Just like I'm seeing you now. But the thing is she wasn't standing on her feet; she kept rolling in a gray ball ahead of me. I stopped and so did she. I moved on and she did, too. Then she turned into a cat..."

"I guess you had a few good drinks that night," Mariana laughed. "I'd love to have a look at a cat like that just once."

"There aren't any around any more," the old man said. "Now all the witches and devils have been done away with: they can't stand living among modern man. In olden times, a housewife milked a cow, scooped up two glassfuls of milk, and carried it home covered by an apron lest her neighbor hex the milk by chance. In those days witches had their hands full at night, and after they were done, you'd hear of someone's cow being milked dry, another's being bewitched, and still another's cow giving less milk than usual. But now, my daughter-in-law works on a dairy farm and fills a pail up to the brim with milk. Then she lugs it around uncovered, and

on one hexes it, and the cows don't give less milk, because they drink water from automatic drinking bowls."

"I see you don't believe in evil spirits," Mariana kept pestering him. "Do you still believe in God then?"

Grandpa Luka fell silent and said with a sigh after a while:

"Whether there is a God or not nobody can prove. Conscience, though, is better than God."

"'Conscience is better than God' — that maxim should be written down somewhere," Olga said to Tania with a smile.

The cool dust stirred at their feet; the thicket of the shelterbelt stretched in a black wall along the road. Mariana's skirt got caught on some hawthorn twig and she started undoing it carefully.

"What a dense, prickly shelterbelt this is. Is your gun loaded, grandpa?"

"Everything's as it should be."

"So if a nazi paratrooper or something of that sort shows up, you'll let it off?"

"You bet! I haven't carried a gun for over twenty years now and thought I'd never do it again. But as you can see, I am. My old missus says I look years younger with it."

"Indeed, there's something raffish about you. No wonder the boys tease you about Makhno wanting to see you."

"Oh yes, they do, the rats. To tell you the truth, girls, sometimes I really seem to hear him calling me at night. But I know it isn't him calling, but my youth, the steppe, the horses, the drive of revolution, and a heady, free-wheeling life. By that time, I wasn't a Tolstoian any more. I was a devil and rowdy of the steppe, siding first with the Reds and then with the Blacks until I stormed the stronghold of the Whites on the Sivash in the Crimea. I, too, was invited to take part in Makhno's last raid when he made off to Rumania and then showed up all the way down in Africa, tearing around in his machine gun carts in a Foreign Legion. But that wasn't my path of life; as a working man I sought my truth here at home, in my native land."

The steppe was resting, filling with coolness after the blistering heat of the day. Here and there, the sky

was mottled with clouds. The moon appeared from behind a cloud and reigned over the steppe in the western part of the sky; somewhere far off behind a gully, the stubble fields were burning; huge red-brown billows of smoke lit up by the moon swirled and then drifted heavily low over the ground.

"There's something ominous in a fire at night," Olga said. "What if that's not stubble fields burning?"

"It's stubble all right," the old man said calmly. "The grain has been taken from there right to the railroad station."

"Will the fire reach our strawstacks?"

"Everything's been gathered in stacks in the gully, so there's nothing to burn."

Although it was no more than stubble burning, the fire looked really ominous as it crept across the steppe in a pall of smoke.

From the other side, somewhere near the village, came a barely audible barking of dogs that gradually built up into an alarming howl.

"Are they howling at the moon, or what?" Mariana asked.

"There are dog maneuvers at the state farm right now, so the exercise will continue throughout the night," Grandpa Luka explained. "They brought the dogs there no long ago to be trained to destroy tanks. It's a heart-wrenching sight to see those poor critters realizing what they're being used for. An old tank is rolled up and chunks of meat are thrown under it for the dogs, but however hungry they may be — they're not fed for a whole day before — they don't want the meat and go running away from the tank for all they are worth, probably because they sense their deaths."

"Pavlov probably never imagined the discovery of reflexes would be used like that," Olga said, listening to the dogs howling.

"Have you forgotten that the Assyrians had units of combat dogs?" Mariana asked in a teasing manner for some reason.

"Man's become violent in his ways," Grandpa Luka said, shaking his head sadly; and wishing the girls good night, he turned toward the village in the direction of the howling dogs.

The girls walked across the stubble field to their camp. Actually it was an unfinished, burrowed-out strawstack many of the antitank diggers used for night quarters. When the girls arrived, all the others in their group were already asleep; and soon the three girls were also lying on their luxurious bed of straw. The straw gleamed in the moonlight and seemed swollen with the showers of sunrays it had been deluged with throughout the day; even then, it gave off the breath of the sun.

Mariana and Olga made themselves as comfortable as possible and were soon asleep, but Tania could not fall asleep for a long time. She heard the call of a night bird in the shelterbelt and a hacking cough from up the strawstack where the men slept. She put her arms under her head and gazed at a star flickering high in the sky. At such moments Tania "tuned in on Bohdan's wavelength," as she put it and engaged in the most intimate conversations with him, hearing his voice and almost physically feeling him at her side. She thought how unjustly she had been jealous and how it had made her ridiculous in his eyes; although she had understood all that, she could not keep that feeling of hers under control. She regretted every single day and hour that had been wasted and irrecoverably lost because of their petty quarrels. She had been jealous of every smile he gave somebody else, of every girl he might have liked. Tania was always afraid Bohdan would leave her and find himself a better girl, because it seemed to her that there were many around. The fact that her jealousy came as a result of her boundless love for him was still no justification. Now that he had gone to the front line, she vowed never ever to be jealous again if only he came back to her. Let him be loved by everyone, let him be liked by everyone just as she liked him, her winsome Bohdan, if only he would come back alive!

While the stubble fields continued burning, the moon had sunk lower and swollen to a deeper red. It was frightening to watch the heavy smoke rolling and blanketing the steppe. The stubble was ablaze with everything that had been alive in it throughout the day — the chirping of the grasshoppers, the fragrance of the plains, and the gold of the sunshine. The fire turned everything in its wake black.

Something seemed to urge Tania to her feet. She got up, carefully picked her way between the sleeping girls, and wandered off into the steppe.

She felt strange being all alone in the steppe, with the smoke crawling toward her along the ground and overhead the void of the sky and the cold moon waning in a smokeless red heap on the horizon.

Where are you? What's happened to you? What's worrying and hurting you? Tania stopped at the gully and asked Bohdan across the burning stubble, addressing her laments, pain and loneliness to him. Is it hard for you? What can I do for you, my dear, to help you, to ease your pain, your soldier's lot and sufferings. Everything around is overshadowed by anxiety for you. I must have been a bad daughter to my parents, because I've already lost my home, and trains scream and rush past me to the east, while I crave only to be with you. Day and night I wait for just a word from you, a tiny message, but there's none. Why isn't there any message from you?

Her senses tuned to a different world; she retraced her steps to the strawstack.

"Is that you traipsing around, you sleepwalker?" Mariana asked, half-awake, and sat up in the straw as if she were alarmed by something. "What's that fire over there?"

"Why, it's the stubble burning."

"Oh yes, I forgot."

When Tania lay down, Mariana moved closer and put her arm round her.

"I've just had a dream, Tania. These nights in the steppe give you wonderful dreams. No sooner had I fallen asleep than I heard a beautiful young voice right in my ear. I couldn't make out the words, but I heard the voice laughing. Whose was it? I wondered. It was Slava's, of course! I tried to make out at least one word of what he was whispering, but he kept on laughing; then I felt him touch me in excitement..."

The next day, the train rushed Mariana back to her home in Kharkiv. She barely managed to get leave, but the girls supported her request in an insistent chorus. Mariana decided to stop at her house first and then visit the university where the letters for the girls had probably arrived. Slava was to write to her parents' address. This time she simply had to receive a letter from him, because there must have been some reason for that pleasurable exciting dream. An eternity seemed to have passed since she parted with Slava. His gentleness, smile, merry nature, and that fleeting ardor of their first short night together — could all of that really have been or had it just been a dream that had passed like the giddy intoxication of momentary ecstasy?

Mariana thought she was with child. It had to be a boy. He would grow up and look like his father, just as handsome, calm, and given to delicate banter. But would there still be wars when he grew up? No, there must never be another after this one! We won't bear children for war! she wanted to shout to the women passengers on the train, one of whom she saw was an expectant mother. If children are borne for war, it would be better if they were not born at all. Joy and happiness — that was what man should come into the world for.

As Mariana hurried along the station platform in Kharkiv, the first thing that caught her eye was the alarming black inscriptions on the walls with arrows pointing down toward the ground: Air Raid Shelters.

Orderlies were carrying the wounded on stretchers. Some women came running up, their eyes alarmed.

"On Track Five, on the fifth!"

"What's on the fifth?"

"A hospital train. They're sorting the wounded: some are being taken off, others will be transported farther..."

A moment later, Mariana, her braids tossing in disorder across her shoulders, was already running along the hospital train, looking anxiously into the windows of the cars filled with wounded soldiers. Some of them lay on the bunks and were being fed by nurses. Others had had their breakfast and were crowding round

the windows with bandaged heads and arms in slings, all their faces filled with eager expectation and hope of meeting a relative.

"Marianal"

Stepura called her first; otherwise she might have run past without recognizing him among the unshaven men, because he himself had a beard that made him look like an elderly peasant. How glad she was to see him! And how startled she was by his call! She pressed to the half-open window and looked at Stepura with joyous eagerness and anxiety.

"Andriy, my dear Andriy!"

His broad face was unusually pale, and he himself in his white hospital shirt seemed shrunken as if he had been purified by what he had experienced.

"Where's Slava? Have you seen him?"

Stepura took a long drag at his cigarette, slowly exhaled the smoke, and almost disappeared behind it, which looked like an ominous sign.

"Why won't you tell me? Have you seen him? You were together, weren't you?"

"Yes... We got into a grinder, a bloody grinder..." he said and lapsed into silence again.

She realized how difficult it was for him to say more than he already had.

"Come on, speak up," she insisted. "Tell me the whole truth!"

"The truth?"

Fumbling for words, he started to tell about the battle with the tanks, about some incendiary bottles, how their student battalion had been mauled by the tanks that had crushed their bodies to a bloody pulp. A lot of boys had been wounded, among them Lagutin.

"What then, what happened then? Where's he now?"

Knitting his brow, Stepura kept silent as if he were searching for the least painful words.

"We were taken in a truck to the Dnieper crossing. He screamed with pain all the way but had stopped screaming by the time we got there..."

Stepura disappeared into a cloud of smoke again. In the end, he forced the truth out of himself:

"He stopped screaming altogether."

Mariana was so upset she tightened her hold on the car window to keep from falling. Her face contorted, and her eyes filled with rage. Stepura had never seen such furious rage in her before.

"You're lying! Liar! Liar!" she screamed madly.

Instead of the Mariana who but a few minutes ago had rushed to his window with a bewitching smile and sincere joy, he saw now an infuriated she-wolf he didn't even try to calm down.

"You've made it all up on purpose!" she screamed, unable to hold back her fury. "You did it because you were jealous of our love! I hate you, you jealous cheat!" Tears of anger gushed forth from her eyes. "Now mind you: I'm going to have a child by Slava. Do you hear? I've got Slava's son!"

The wounded man looked at her as at someone demented, while she, still holding on to the window, sobbed and raved, hurling bitter insults at Stepura who meekly took the blows of her grief and despair with a downcast look.

"Cool down, Mariana, cool down." She felt a bony, firm hand on her shoulder, and looking round, saw Dukhnovich on the platform at her side.

He stood there leaning on a crutch, his drawn face stubbly with red hair. His unlaced brogans had no puttees over them, and his breeches were stiff with dried blood.

"You shouldn't be hollering at him like that. Better ask him what's what first... For your information, it was him" — Dukhnovich nodded toward Stepura in the window — "who carried Slava off the battlefield under the bullets even though he was badly wounded himself."

For a moment, Mariana didn't seem to understand what he was talking about, and then she wilted and calmed down.

"I'm sorry," she said barely audibly, glancing at Stepura.

Reeling like a drunk, she walked away. Watching her retreating figure, Stepura and Dukhnovich realized they were seeing a widow before them. The braids of a widow, the grief of a widow bore down on her drooping shoulders in an invisible burden.

She dragged her feet to a streetcar stop, and soon the streetcar took her along Sverdlov Street with a jangle.

She sat at the window, inconsolably gloomy, looking at the city of her short-lived happiness; for some reason her recent wedding did not leave her mind, but kept hammering away at her dim consciousness. He was buried somewhere beyond the Dnieper, Kharkiv had no Slava any more. She had no Slava. And that was how it would be for the rest of her life.

Back home, Klava met Mariana in the yard and told her that Slava's letter had been waiting three days for her.

"Don't be angry with us for reading it: he's alive and well."

Mariana barely pulled her feet into the living room and saw the letter in a glass dish on the table right away.

"Are you ill, or what?" Mother asked, seeing how Mariana unfolded the letter with absent eyes.

She bent over the letter and started reading it: "Mariana, my darling, don't you worry for me. Send me just one of your smiles, and I'll send you my assurances that we're immortal!..." Then something jocular followed. She could not read on; she collapsed forward with her head on the letter and burst into convulsive sobs. Mother and Klava could not understand what was the matter with her.

"What happened?"

"Slava... Slava is no more. He's been killed!"

The room seemed to have grown dark as sudden grief overwhelmed the women for a moment. The mother and sister, barely holding back their tears, started to comfort her.

"Maybe it's just a mistake?"

"Somebody could've gotten something mixed up. That's how it usually happens."

"No, it's true, true," she repeated again and again, fixing her eyes on the window in a glassy, absentminded stare. She was a widow, a widow. The dearest person she loved was no more. Her grief was only beginning.

Soon Klava had to leave for work on the second

shift — Mariana learned that her sister had already started working.

After Klava had gone, Mother sat down beside Mariana.

"My heart seemed to sense trouble even at your wedding. But what can we do about it? You're not the only one now to meet with grief. That's something you'll have to overcome, my daughter."

"Where's Father?"

"He's at the plant days and nights now," Mother said. "They're making tanks."

"I'll go and work there, too," Mariana said.

"Oh, Mariana..."

"I'll go, I will!" Mariana insisted. "I'll work day and night. There must be more tanks, thousands and thousands of tanks to fight them!"

Her head dropped on the table and she sobbed bitterly.

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I shouldn't have told her the truth. What did she need to hear that for? Stepura blamed himself that night as the train took him farther and farther from the front line. It would have been better if she hadn't found out at all or had learned about it from, say, Dukhnovich.

Her outburst still sounded in Stepura's ears. "You've made it all up on purpose!" she had screamed. Could she have really thought for a moment that he had told her a lie?

True, she knew Stepura only by his jealousies of the past and couldn't have possibly realized what a sharp change had come about in his heart not so long ago. Slava's death had turned everything upside down in Stepura. After what he had gone through, Stepura saw his late friend not through eyes blinded with smoldering jealousy, but with a purified and lucid vision of someone who had shared a common trial. Lagutin alone deserved Mariana's love, and he alone could have been her husband and merry companion for life. Slava's soul, simple and brave, his mind, brilliant and given to kind banter, and his handsomeness that had something light

and radiant about it — all that seemed specially created by nature for Mariana's restless, slightly troublesome disposition and wild beauty. Stepura found it horrible to realize that only after Lagutin's death could he, Stepura, honestly assess his rival. He recalled how he had seen his friend's handsome body naked as the orderlies dressed his gaping abdominal wound. It was a body fit to be sculpted by ancient masters, the body of a discus thrower or a young Hermes, and that is how he was remembered and loved by Mariana. For all its beauty that body was doomed to death and decay. Lagutin would not return to Mariana even a cripple, although she would surely have been glad to have him back regardless of any disability.

The hospital train moved slowly but steadily away from the front line. The wounded men were preparing to turn in. At such moments there were endless talks about injections, bandages, urinals and bed pans — things that dominated the life of these men who not so long ago had been healthy, had known love and merriment, and had displayed valor in action, but now were like broken creatures furious of their own helplessness or otherwise bitterly derisive of their present state.

On the bunk opposite Stepura lay a former collective farmer by the name of Dovhaliuk who had a fractured arm in splints.

Dovhaliuk had been an involuntary witness of the scene at the railroad station and seemed to have understood everything in the relationship between Stepura and Mariana from their brief and tumultuous conversation. When their neighbors had fallen asleep, Dovhaliuk sat down on the edge of Stepura's bunk and spoke under his breath.

"That girl who came to see you, was she a student, too?"

"Yes."

"What's she studying?"

"History."

"Well, her history doesn't seem to be an easy one. Was she his wife, or what?"

"They got married just before he joined the army."

"She looks like a boisterous girl with a lot of passion; it's a pity she's got to live through such black days. If

she's got no children, her misfortune is not so very serious. She'll get it over and then find herself another man. A widow's lot won't bowl a girl like her over. So don't you punish yourself for telling her the truth straight off. There's nothing worse than people deceiving one another. When a fellow villager of mine got killed in the first battle, I wrote to his wife right away so she'd know. Let her cry it out and then get down to thinking about how to live on and bring up her kids. Oh, those kids! If it hadn't been for them, a soldier could die much easier."

"How many have you got?"

"Three. The youngest one is just losing his milk teeth, and the whole spring through, he'd been throwing them into the loft to make his new ones grow stronger. I don't know how my old lady's managing with them now..."

Dovhaliuk lapsed into silence as if he were listening to the artilleryman groaning in his sleep on the upper bunk.

"Don't worry, you'll find your happiness yet," Dovhaliuk went on. "The main thing is to stay alive. I don't know anything about you or her and that other boy, but I can see that all of you were fine friends. There are cases when everything's quite different. Last year a boy returned from the army to Tarasivka, a village near ours. He'd done his stint in the army, been through the Finnish war, and here he was on his way back home where his mother and bride-to-be were waiting for him. He arrived late at night in autumn with the rain pounding mercilessly. At the railroad station, they told him to wait till morning and then set off, but he wouldn't listen, because he was anxious to get home quickly. In a field not far away from the village, there was an old dry well. It hadn't had water in it or any timber curb around it for ages. As bad luck would have it, he tripped in the darkness and fell into that well. The place around it was a waste. A hamlet had been there once, but the people had left it long ago and rarely did anyone show up there, so you could shout your head off and no one would hear you. A couple of days later, a hunter, a book-keeper of the local collective farm, passed by with a dog which had followed the soldier's scent. Near the well lay a suitcase the soldier had dropped when he tumbled into

the hole. 'Pull me out of here!' he begged. 'And who could you be?' 'I'm Andriy Mikhailishin from Tarasivka, back home from the army. The bookkeeper agreed to pull him out. 'Throw all the belts you've got up here,' he said. He tied the belts to one another, but they were too short to reach the soldier down there. 'I'll go get a rope,' he said. Then he took all the soldier's things and never returned to the well again. Know why? The thing is that bookkeeper had had his eyes on the soldier's girl! He had been making advances, but she kept turning him down. And now he saw a wonderful chance to get what he wanted. Besides, he was a greedy sort and took all the soldier's things..."

"Well, what happened to the soldier?"

"Don't rush me, I'll tell you everything. The bookkeeper bided his time for a day or two, while the soldier's mother and his girl were getting worried, because he had sent a telegram to tell them he was coming. They kept on waiting, but he didn't show up. So they sent a telegram to his unit — and he wasn't here either. A few days later, the bookkeeper lost his nerve, went to the Village Soviet and told that he'd seen a dead man in the well during a hunting trip. He must have fallen into it and tried to climb out but had been buried under the loose ground he had clawed at in his attempt to scramble out of the deep hole. The whole village went there and pulled the poor bugger out. He was clay-cold by that time, of course, but in the breast pocket of his service shirt he had left a note which explained how he had fallen into the well on his way home at night and how the bookkeeper had found him, tricked him and left him to die. See how it happens at times."

Listening to the story, Stepura could vividly imagine that night, the Red Army soldier worried stiff down in the well, the bookkeeper who came across him with the dog that led him to the well, and then the soldier's agony when he was left to die. Yes, such a thing could have happened. Hadn't he also stood at the edge of a precipice that was only slightly different from this one? Hadn't he also nursed a cruel momentary wish during his brief frontline experience to see his rival gone so he could have Mariana for himself? But he had crushed the beast in himself and let the man in him

have the upper hand. It wasn't the beast but the man who had carried his comrade from the battlefield and was ready to risk his life, taking Lagutin hundreds of kilometers under a hail of bullets to lay him at the feet of their one and indivisible love. "Here's your happiness, Mariana. I've carried him out of the fire for you and I'm giving him to you without asking anything in return. Hard as I tried, I didn't manage to save his life, but that was no fault of mine. Instead of happiness I've brought you heartbreaking news and sorrow that will last you a lifetime." What was she thinking about now during her first night as a widow? Stepura wondered. Wasn't it on such nights that the grief-stricken maidens of folk songs turned into poplars in the field, or into cranberry bushes that rose over the spot where their Cossacks' white bodies lay in the grave?

Stepura thought about Mariana the whole night through. There appeared something brotherly in his affection for her. She became dearer to him in her misfortune, and his fondness for her gained in depth, but at the same time, he felt that with Slava's death, an insuperable barrier had appeared between him and Mariana, a barrier he would surely never be able to bridge.

Hour after hour, the train chugged through country that was unrecognizable in the darkness, stopping now and then at a station, and then Stepura would see black, heavy trees that seemed to have been cast of iron outside the window. At times, some black bulks resembling Egyptian pyramids flitted by in the night-enshrouded steppe, making Stepura wonder what they could be.

All the men in the car were asleep. Dovhaliuk snored on his bunk, supporting the arm in splints with his other hand even in his sleep. Just before daybreak, Stepura dropped off into slumber, overcome by his troubled thoughts.

The black Egyptian pyramids that looked so mysterious and strange in the steppe at night turned out to be the slag heaps of the Donets coal fields in the daylight.

Slag heaps, pit heads, factory chimneys — this was the austere Donbas country Stepura had never seen before. This, too, was his Ukraine, a country of coal mines, and slag heaps that rose in the steppe like grand

monuments to human endeavor. It was just as worthy of his songs as his dear Vorskla or the moonlit Poltava nights with their willow trees and nightingales.

At the moment, though, his thoughts were not pre-occupied with songs.

Miners' wives came out to meet them on the station platforms. Their stern faces were etched with sorrow, while their eyes searched intently for a dear face among the wounded. Stepura recalled that Pavlo Drobakha's mother lived in a miners' settlement somewhere in this area, and probably she, too, came every day to look for her son; she might even be standing among the women just then, waiting to ask somebody about the fate of her Pavlo.

The hospitals and even schools in many of the settlements had been turned over to the wounded soldiers, and Stepura was brought to one of them. When the bus left them in the schoolyard, the first thing Stepura saw was a pile of school desks in the middle of the yard and by them a large heap of dirty, blood-stained bandages thrown out after the dressings were changed.

35

Two days before, Spartak Pavlushchenko had also been brought to this same hospital. He had been slightly wounded in the hand during the senseless attack ordered by Devyaty, but on the Dnieper crossing, he had almost lost his life during an air attack. He was brought to the hospital suffering from a concussion. His jaw had been dislocated and he was horribly battered, but the worst thing of all was his loss of speech. That was what worried him most of all, because he was afraid he'd remain dumb to the end of his life.

Spartak was beset with numbing thoughts, for a deep chasm had rent his picture of the war after the experience he had lived through at the Ross River. He had proven unprepared for the trials that overwhelmed him. As the son of an employee of a munitions factory, he had had an easy life thus far. Back at school it had always happened that he was the first in everything; he was elected to everything, and even after he had become a



student, he was elected either to the YCL bureau of his department or to the YCL committee of the university year after year, which confirmed the greater his confidence in his life's calling to lead, to be constantly in the limelight as an organizer and leader.

Since he was a good speaker, he got used to the rostrum early. Perhaps the happiest day of his first year at the university was during a demonstration at Dzerzhinsky Square when he, as an activist with a good voice, was invited to the highest rostrum to shout "Hurrahs!" to the columns of demonstrators passing below. It was a cold rainy day. The demonstrators were blue from the cold and tried to march past him as quickly as possible, but he was oblivious of the rain and reveled in his voice, passionately shouting his energetic "Hurrahs!" until his voice broke on the highest note and he let out such a squeak that all those present on the rostrum burst into laughter. For a couple of days thereafter, he was pestered by the department wits, especially by Dukhnovich who gave him quite a few hearty quips about his piping falsetto. Much as it provoked his displeasure, Spartak tried not to pay any attention to it. He had never been drawn to people like Dukhnovich and Kolosovsky whom he treated with certain prejudice, because he knew that they took the liberty of pondering over matters which, according to his convictions, should never be subject to any discussion or doubt whatsoever. He believed every such freethinker in the department should be kept under constant supervision to be carried out by none other than himself, since he hadn't a single blemish in his biography, a fact of which neither Kolosovsky nor quite a few of his fellow students could boast.

Yet the senseless attack on the Ross which he had led on Devyaty's orders had really taught him a lot. Whereas before the attack he sincerely admired Devyaty for his will power, he was prepared to spit in his face after the attack. He couldn't forgive Devyaty for organizing it so lightheartedly and bringing it to a worthless end with human losses incurred in vain. The men Spartak had led to the attack hadn't even seen the enemy, but were mowed down in broad daylight. It had happened at a time when every one of them could have performed feats

of valor under other circumstances and seen piles of dead enemies for their efforts. It was only there in the hospital, after the incident had faded into the background, that he tried again to find some explanation for Devyaty's behavior and orders. We were simply thrown under the bullets to die, he thought, but maybe it had to happen that way? What if our sacrifices which seemed so senseless at the time were necessitated by some purpose and checked the advance of the enemy for a moment at least?

Spartak wanted to examine all these questions and arrive at the truth.

The wounded men in his ward were looked after by Natasha, a dark-complexioned, kindhearted nurse who was the daughter of a miner. Young, though prematurely plump, she had become a nurse only recently — straight after graduating from secondary school. What made her different from the other nurses was her special kindness and attentiveness to the wounded. She was Spartak's only joy whenever she came running into the ward and darted a glance at him, after which they would converse with the aid of pencil and paper. Natasha could reassure him when he felt the worst, and perhaps it was only thanks to her that he didn't lose heart completely. She was sure he'd regain his ability to speak.

"Everything will be all right," she would say with a smile which made him feel better.

On learning that a new party of wounded soldiers had arrived and that some students were in it, Spartak immediately asked Natasha to find out exactly who they were. He wanted very much to know who had arrived as he went over his friends and acquaintances in his mind, feeling he'd be glad to see any and all of them now.

Natasha returned in a joyous mood (it was obvious she derived pleasure from doing him a good turn) and behind her, hopping and skipping along on crutches, followed — of all people — Dukhnovich. His red hair was cropped, and a coarse frayed dressing gown hung over his hunched shoulders. He entered with a smile that seemed to say: "Look what a funny sight I am now."

Dukhnovich sat down on a stool by Spartak's bedside, and trying not to look at the dislocated jaw of his fellow

student, he told him that he only had a slight wound, that he liked being here, and that among the new arrivals there was "our famous poet Stepura" who was having his wounds dressed just at that moment.

"What about Kolosovsky? Did he return from the reconnaissance mission?" Spartak asked in a note.

Dukhnovich told him what he knew about Bohdan's mission, which had ended in success; besides, Bohdan had also distinguished himself in the battle against the tanks. The student battalion had put up a good fight and had not let the tanks through. It seemed even the dead had gotten to their feet and hurled incendiary bottles at the tanks like curses. So Bohdan had a fine opportunity to display his valor.

"He must be still knocking the stuffings out of them somewhere over there now," Dukhnovich concluded with pride for his friend.

He didn't stay long at Spartak's bedside but said that he regretted not having jumped off the hospital train in Kharkiv and gone to his parents for treatment. Then he cracked some jokes about his looks and the dressing gown which looked like a prisoner's garb to him. Dukhnovich's garrulity, however, was somewhat forced, because he felt inhibited in Spartak's presence and uneasy at having to see his dislocated jaw and hearing instead of an articulate human voice the incoherent stammer with which the excited Pavlushchenko tried to respond.

Still, Spartak felt marked relief after Dukhnovich's visit. Dukhnovich wasn't the easiest type to find a common language with, but for all that, anyone at all from the student battalion was dear to Spartak at the moment. It seemed to him he would even be able to find a common language with Kolosovsky now. Wasn't it ironic that now when he had something new and humanely considerate to say to and share with his friends, a concussion had fettered his lips?

He didn't have a moment's peace when night fell.

The silence in the hospital was occasionally broken by a groan. He felt his throat being constricted as he wanted to shout and tell the whole world that he was a different man than he had been only recently and that his own misfortune had made him more responsive to

others. Oh, if only he could regain the power of speech! All his will was centered on that wish alone.

Exhausted by these torments, he finally dropped off into a fitful sleep only to wake up drenched in sweat shortly afterward and suddenly felt that he could speak: just like that—he could open his mouth and say anything he wanted to!

So as not to awake up anyone, he got up, threw the dressing gown over his shoulders, stole out into the schoolyard, and buoyed by the exhilarating anticipation, walked into the steppe. There he would try to speak. There he would shed his fetters, for now he felt he had sufficient power to do so. He ran along between the slag heaps without any sense of direction to try and convince himself that out there in the open, he could really regain the power of speech.

He stopped before a slag heap, winded and prepared to utter the first word, when all of a sudden, he got a creeping feeling he couldn't do it and lost all hope.

He breathed in deeply and, harrowed with uncertainty and fright, wrenched a word out of himself, at first in a little whisper, then more boldly:

"Mama... Mama..."

Then he threw back his head and shouted ecstatically for joy:

"Mama! I can talk!!!"

36

The dawn, the most beautiful dawn in his life, blushed from behind the slag heaps, reminding him that it was time to go back to his ward.

Stealing along the dimly lighted corridor, he bumped into Natasha who was on duty that day.

"Where have you been? What's the matter with you?" she feigned fear in a low voice so as not to wake up anyone in the ward. Instead of an answer the nocturnal infringer of the hospital rules threw his arms round her and hugged her joyously like some drunk. Although her body did not seem to resist his embrace, her lips whispered: "What are you doing? The doctor might see us!"

"Let him see... I love you! Do you understand? I love you!"

He had spoken. It came with difficulty and in a hesitant stammer, but it was human speech. She realized what had happened and imagined what was going on in his heart at that moment. Though standing like that, clasped in the arms of a soldier in a hospital corridor, was a wild thing to do and went against every rule, she succumbed to his sudden outburst of passionate tenderness. Then she pushed him away with a careful and gentle movement of her hand.

"Go back to your ward."

"Without you?"

"I'll come later."

For some reason he was sure she would come. And indeed, she did come when Spartak was already in bed. She stole into the ward without turning the light on, came up to his bed, sat down quietly on a stool at his side, and he took her hand into his. He knew that plump, roughened hand from the times when she had ministered to his needs as a nurse, but now her hand was different. It was intended for him. He started to stroke it. It's the first time in my life I've touched my happiness, he thought. What a lot of first things there are which we cannot always appreciate properly — the first word we utter, our first love. And here happiness, rare and inimitable, has also come my way, he thought with joy. She came to me in the image of this dark-complexioned miner's daughter with hazel eyes, who chose me from all the others and is sitting here at my side at daybreak as I see her little breasts flutter excitedly under her starched white nurse's gown. Previously that functional gown had seemed to make her unapproachable, but that was not the case now. I'm holding her hand in mine, feeling her tenderness and wishing it could be like this forever.

He had taken a fancy to Natasha from the first time he saw her. He liked the way she entered the ward and smiled gently and somewhat cunningly. He also liked how she handed out the thermometers and patiently heard out the complaints of the gravely wounded sergeant lying in the opposite corner. Whenever she came up to Spartak's bed it seemed that she smiled

somehow specially at him as if she were hiding something intimate behind that smile. The feeling Natasha aroused in him eased his suffering and bolstered his spirit whenever she was on duty; when she sat down at his bedside for a minute, he always wanted to touch the black ringlets of hair that curled from under her kerchief. Previously he would never have permitted himself to do that, whereas today he had the right, for she had nursed him back to health, put him on his feet, and made him a human being again.

"I was sure you'd get better," she said quietly in what sounded like a silky voice. "I knew you'd regain your power of speech."

"And I did, thanks to you."

"I really wanted it to happen very much, because for some reason, I pitied you. When I got home, I couldn't get your ward off my mind, and I was always wondering how my student boy was getting along."

Somebody coughed in the opposite end of the ward, uttered a groan and whimpered sleepily:

"Nu-u-urse."

Natasha gave a start, bent down quickly, and touched her flushed cheek to his. He caught the delightful fragrance of her hair and her sweet breath.

A moment later she was bent over the patient who had called her — artillery Sergeant-Major Khristenko she had donated blood for several days before. The whole ward knew that Natasha had volunteered to donate blood when the gravely wounded soldiers began arriving at the hospital, which made everybody like her the more. Spartak was proud of her and explained to some inner voice that his Natasha, his love, could not have done otherwise.

That was how it all began. It began at dawn, and during the day, although Natasha was off duty, she nonetheless looked into the ward several times as if by chance to attend to some business, but Spartak knew that she had come for his sake. Right from the threshold her eyes shone at him; it was for him she brought the most beautiful smile in the world, after which she would take a book from him to find a note tucked between its pages: "I love you, Natasha, my darling and savior! I want us to always be together."

Some time later she would bring him another book she was supposed to have borrowed from the library for him, and he would find in it a note as well: "I love you, too. I haven't seen you for an hour and I missed you terribly. We're breaking the hospital rules, and it seems everybody's guessed what's going on between us, but for some reason I don't mind one little bit..."

The affection that had overwhelmed them so unexpectedly soon became common knowledge, and they themselves stopped hiding their feelings, for they were pure, sincere feelings that had made them instantly richer, stronger and happier — so why should they hide anything? Did their feelings bring anyone harm?

Yet the next day Spartak met Natasha in tears by the operating room.

"What's the matter?"

"Our surgeon Yevdokia Pavlivna has found out about us. 'It's disgraceful,' she said. 'I won't tolerate any looseness within the hospital.'"

This made Spartak boil with rage.

"Where is she now?"

"Don't get mixed up with her. She's a wonderful surgeon with hands of gold, but the thing is she's an old maid and doesn't understand how we feel."

"I'm going home with you today in spite of everything. Agreed?"

"All right, we will go."

After lunch they really went to Natasha's house. He marched proudly with her through the whole miners' settlement in his hospital gown, showing himself off as her future husband. Leaving the grounds of the hospital and going to a nurse's house besides was against the rules, but he was prepared for anything now. Natasha's mother knew about him and seemed to be expecting him in her home, which two sons his age had left for the front line several days before.

Spartak sat with Natasha in her room which was pleasantly cosy and clean and had a painting with naively daubed swans on the wall: previously he would have laughed at such an art work, but now it even seemed nice to him. The wide-open window looked into an orchard with pear trees. Their fragrance carried through the orchard and stood in the room as well, for

Natasha's mother had brought in a whole plateful of pears and placed it hospitably before them.

"Help yourself, please," she said.

When she left, Natasha sat down on the couch very close to Spartak; the traces of tears were gone from her face now, but she was paler than usual after having donated blood again the other day. Her eyes glittered roguishly and she snuggled up to him.

"You're mine, mine."

Although she had finished secondary school that summer, she seemed to be more grownup than Spartak. She confessed to him with laughter that she had kissed with the boys when still at school, because in their settlement, girls started their kissing early, but all that was no more than foolery. It was only now that she felt what real love was like.

"Tell me everything about yourself, the university, your girls and friends..."

He told her everything frankly — how he had lived, what they had been like as students, and what fine boys Stepura and Dukhnovich from their student battalion were. There was also Kolosovsky with whom he had often quarreled, although he should not have done so; now he realized clearly that he had been simply intolerable at times and even wondered how she could have fallen in love with someone like him.

"No, you're all right," she assured him. "If you speak so well of your friends, that means you're a good person, too. I guessed right away that there was something special about you. I'm sure you were brave in action, weren't you?"

"It's not up to me to judge myself, but when I leave here, I'll fight a hundred times better," he said and wrapped his arms round her tightly. At that moment she realized that he was thinking about their imminent parting.

"I'm not myself whenever I think they'll discharge you from hospital soon. Don't you regret having recovered so quickly?"

"No, I don't"

"I was convinced you wouldn't. I've seen a lot of people in the hospital: one can't bend his leg, another his arm, so they're glad to get out of the war and work

in the rear, while others might as well keep on fighting for another hundred years. But you're not like them, not at all!"

She sincerely trusted in her elect, probably imagining him to be better than he was, but this really made him better, for he felt that a lot of things in his life would change after the hospital. He'd leave it with her love, and for this love he would fight the hated enemy with all his heart and soul. Now he did not delude himself about the threat to the country as he had early in the war, for the danger that loomed over his land and people was mortal; he also knew that the struggle was only beginning, that the overwhelming effect of the first defeats would pass, and the enemy would yet feel the force of crushing fatal blows.

"Their weaponry is better than ours so far, but they won't beat us, they'll never conquer us. Our people, Natasha, aren't the kind to recognize the rule of invaders over them."

"You're right," Natasha said, laying her head on his shoulders. "I've just been thinking about my girl friends. They're in such a mood now, they're ready for anything. If they're told to join the partisans, they will. If it's to the front line, they'll go there as nurses, orderlies or whatever else. You know, darling, I also want to apply to the front line."

"You're needed here just as much."

"Don't you want me to be fighting at your side?"

"I'll fight for two, for you and myself. You're already fighting as it is by giving your blood to the wounded."

"The commissar tells me the same thing. But don't be surprised when a miner's girl you know well suddenly shows up on the battlefield beside you one of these days. In a greatcoat, kersey boots, and with a nurse's knapsack across her shoulder."

He drew her nearer and gently kissed her hazel eyes. "You revived me," he said. "You made me happy. Wherever I may be, in whatever battles I find myself, you'll never have to be ashamed of me."

Stepura and Dukhnovich were sitting among the desks in the schoolyard where they had found a cosy place to while away their evenings talking to the chirping grasshoppers in the steppe and the blinking stars that filled their hearts with a sense of boundless eternity.

Whenever they got out of the ward with its nauseating medicinal smells and sat down together in the pile of school desks, they found it hard to believe they had already been in battle, been treated for the wounds each had received back at the Ross River, and were now enjoying a warm evening in an evacuation hospital amidst the slag heaps of the Donets coal fields instead of being at an archeological dig. Here it was calm and the stars shone brightly, while the part of Ukraine they had come from was filled with smoke and blood.

Gone were the university days, gone was the life they had been accustomed to, as were the plans they had nurtured; what remained was but an ardent desire to live and hope that everything from the prewar days would yet return and victory would be born of the throbbing black chaos that was now raging beyond the Dnieper.

It would be born — but when?

They had been thinking a lot about it. They didn't yet know that there would be the snows of the Battle of Moscow and the fighting at Stalingrad and at the Kursk Bulge, for they wanted to believe that this historic confrontation would end much sooner here in the Ukrainian steppes on the Dnieper. They thought like everyone else in the hospital and the whole mining region, greedily catching the communiques of the Soviet Information Bureau and waiting for some hopeful news about the long-expected turning point in the fighting. But instead of good news there were the crushing blows that came with the torrents of reports about changes in the directions of the front lines and terse words about yet another town or important line of defense having been ceded to the invaders after dogged fighting.

So many events had occurred within this time and had developed at such a stupendous rate, it seemed a horribly long time had passed since they had been at

the District Party Committee, said farewell to their university, and crawled on their bellies at the camp in Chuhuiv. Their student battalion had been routed, many left dead on the battlefield and others of the wounded scattered about at various hospitals.

"Now look, we've been cursing the misdeeds of the Middle Ages," Dukhnovich said reflectively. "And considering it the darkest of epochs, but was that really so? The Inquisition burned fewer people than any single nazi concentration camp. Yet what power of creation, what a thirst for discovery people had then! Marco Polo traveled across continents. Columbus sailed across the ocean. The soldier Servantes and the actor Shakespeare wrote for all of mankind. Startling developments were seen in humanism, the first telescope appeared, there were city-republics... Yes, man was great at that time!"

"But what about now?" they heard a voice ring out in the evening dusk.

Spartak Pavlushchenko appeared from behind the pile of desks. He was probably on his way back from Natasha's and was heady with love.

"Now I see that love follows immediately after a concussion," Dukhnovich said. "Hey listen, maybe I should also get myself whacked on the head so I'll know the taste of this honey called love? As it is, I can only congratulate others. So congratulations to you, Comrade Lover!"

"Say whatever you like, but she's a fine girl," Stepura said. "She knows some of our boys occasionally smuggle a bottle of vodka in on a string through the window and is well aware that others disappear in their hospital garb into the settlement for the whole night, yet she hasn't squealed to her superiors about it a single time. As a matter of fact, she breaks the rules herself once in a while, but... Are you going to marry her, Spartak?" Stepura asked.

"I will. By all means."

"Now or after the war is over?"

"Time will tell."

"I wonder if very many of us from the student battalion will be alive after the war," Stepura said.

"If there are, we'll have to live differently, absolutely

differently," Spartak said, sitting down on top of a desk with his legs on the seat.

"How, if I may ask you?" Dukhnovich said, shooting him a derisive glance.

"Stop being ironic, Miron," Pavlushchenko grew excited and started to stutter. "What we're living through now won't just disappear without a trace. We'll have to live in a friendlier and so-somewhat kinder way. Is it that impossible?"

Stepura lit a cigarette and remarked glumly:

"That's precisely what some of us lacked."

"I know what you're th-thinking about now, boys. See, Spartak's in love and he's so carried away, he's piping a different t-tune. But th-that's not just because I'm in love. The events on the Ross taught me a thing or two, boys: I realized I hadn't been living as I should have. You had every reason to give me the cold shoulder, and some of you even had reason to hate me."

"You're heaping it up too much, Comrade Komsomol organizer."

"No, it's not, Miron. I was unfair, terribly unfair to some of my university comrades. Our frontline university, brief though it was, opened my eyes to a lot of things. Now I have examined myself as a detached observer, comparing myself to you, Dukhnovich, and to you, Stepura, and to Kolosovsky, and I must tell you frankly that this comparison isn't in my favor. But I had claimed to be your leader, the man had to watch your every step, thought and action. I considered you unreliable people who had to be kept in check all the time, and I believed I was the one who had to do it. What right did I have to think that? Was it because I considered myself faultless from the cradle? Was it because I believed I was irreproachable? I consciously cultivated in myself a distrust for everyone of you, calling it vigilance, although it was actually a m-m-mania about vigilance."

"That is understandable after all," Stepura said, as if vindicating Spartak. "We lived in difficult times, surrounded by enemies. Capitalist encirclement — that was no empty phrase as the war has shown."

"But it has shown us something else as well. Especially me, when, say, Bohdan Kolosovsky, whom I thought

bearing our society a bitter grudge took up arms without a second thought and showed great courage in battle, because in his heart there was something more than the pain from the injustice and offense he had suffered."

"That's true, but what a price we have to pay for every little bit of experience. Take, for instance, the attack on the Ross when you led our company..."

"Yes, I did that. When I'm an officer, I'll never allow such stupid, senseless attacks. I'll value every single soldier, like Commissar Leshchenko does. If you have to die, at least die so that your life has been of greatest use to the cause — that's the whole gist of the art of warfare."

"It would have been better if we hadn't ever had to know anything about that art at all," Dukhnovich said, digging at the ground with his crutch. "I, for one, get rather sick of it. Still, it's symbolic that the first decree of our Revolution was the Decree on Peace. For ordinary people there's probably nothing more abhorrent than war, militarists, and militarism. I believe that sooner or later, mankind will abolish wars completely. They'll become something of the dark past like, say, the slave trade and cannibalism."

They talked long into the night. They could have talked like that to the wee hours of morning, but it was time to go. This wasn't their student republic, but a place where a strict routine had to be abided by.

From the balcony of the hospital, the duty nurse was calling them back into the ward.

38

The soldiers' wounds healed quickly that summer.

No sooner had the boys gotten used to the cosiness of the hospital than they were speedily discharged to make room for a new party of wounded brought in from the front line.

The doctors did not extract the splinters from Stepura's legs in the end. They X-rayed him, put their heads together, and decided against removing the splinters.

"Let them stay in there. They haven't damanged the bones, and you can have them removed after the war."

Under any other circumstances, Stepura would

certainly have been left in the hospital like a great many others, but the times were different now. They were discharged with their bandages still on, and Natasha, who saw their party off to the railroad station felt as if she were to blame for them having been discharged prematurely.

"Maybe you'll be kept longer in a convalescent hospital," she said in a comforting way, casting pitying glances first at Pavlushchenko, then at Stepura.

Dukhnovich was in higher spirits than anybody else. Although he hobbled along just like Stepura, he could not deny himself the pleasure of quipping at their rather unsoldierly looks.

"Here go the Don Quixotes without their Resinantes, the Knights of the Sorrowful Countenance in tattered puttees," he joked on the way to the station. "On the whole, though, you did the right thing chucking us out at the proper time, Natasha, because otherwise not just Spartak but, I, too, would have fallen hopelessly in love with you. I'd have stolen you away from Pavlushchenko."

"Oh, no, you wouldn't."

"Does that mean you get on so well together?"

Natasha blushed visibly.

"Yes, we do."

She pressed herself tightly to Spartak, looking lovingly into his face, her gentle eyes flushed with affection.

Natasha reminded Stepura of Mariana, probably because of the tight knot of black braids that showed on the nape of her neck from under her starched kerchief.

Natasha's warm empathy for the boys and her sense of guilt for something that wasn't absolutely her fault touched Stepura, and he wanted to comfort this kind girl and tell her that only the war was to blame for sending ever more parties of maimed people and discharging them prematurely from hospitals with their wounds still unhealed.

At the station, the miners' wives were seeing off their husbands and sons who were supposed to be taken to the camp at Chuhuiv. Some of them seemed to have left the mines and showered just recently, because their hair was still wet. In and around the station, there was

moaning, weeping, singing, and the rollicking playing of accordions.

Stepura's attention was drawn to a group of people in the public garden outside the station: a teenager, serious and stiff like a young Buddha, was zealously playing an accordion, while opposite him, amidst vodka bottles scattered in the trampled grass, two men, probably father and son, were dancing in a circle of relatives. Their mien was just as serious as the accordion player's. The father was slowly and sparingly stamping the ground with but one foot as if he were performing some important ritual, swinging his arms more like a conductor than a dancer, whereas his son was dancing violently, kicking aside with all his might any empty bottle that got under his feet. His wet mop of hair bobbed up and down wildly, and sweat rolled down his face, but he kept on and on.

A stout round-faced woman, apparently the mother, stood in the circle with arms folded at her breasts, and without wiping away the tears that streamed down her cheeks, she watched the mirthless dance of father and son. A black linen jacket, probably her son's, hung over her shoulders; the relatives told her something now and then, but she did not turn their way, staring fixedly through her tears at the old and young master of her home performing their farewell dance. She must have been imagining them on the battlefield surrounded by the horrors of war, and in his mind's eye, Stepura also saw them attacking the tanks on the fire-belching defense lines beyond the Dnieper.

After saying goodbye to Natasha, the boys boarded the train which was bound down south to the Sea of Azov. Through the window, they saw the two miners still dancing in the garden. The young man was already ghastly pale from the heat and drink, but whirled around the circle as wildly as before, while his father, more hunched by now, was sadly swinging his drooping hands.

At this little station crammed with shouting and yelling evacuees — mostly women and children — the boys witnessed a tumultuous scene. A clamorous outburst of shouts made them rush to a car out of which a tightly packed suitcase suddenly went flying through

the air right before their noses; on hitting the platform, the suitcase burst open, and wads of banknotes spilled out of it. The thick wads of brand-new ten, thirty and hundred-rouble bills lay scattered on the platform, but nobody touched them. Some moments later an infuriated pack of yelling women dragged the owner of the suitcase, a fat bald embezzler of public funds, out of the car.

Dragged up to the open suitcase and made to stand in front of it, he tried to justify himself, but instead of listening the women struck out at him from left and right.

"You parasite! You fielthy crook!"

"Our men are dying on the battlefield, and here he is making a fortune!"

"He must've stolen somebody's pay, that's for sure!"

The sound of blows raining down on him carried along the platform. The culprit shuddered like a fish with every blow, which made his eyes pop out of their sockets in overwhelming terror.

A tall, smart looking militiaman appeared on the scene and the owner of the suitcase immediately broke loose from the women to appeal to him for help. Yet the wads of banknotes that had spilled out of the suitcase and still hadn't been touched spoke for themselves. The militiaman was quick to realize what kind of character he had to deal with.

"Your documents, please," he said.

As it turned out, the man had been swept along with the tide of evacuees from beyond the Dnieper; he worked in a bank, and the suitcase was certainly stuffed with public monies he hadn't neglected to run off with on his way east.

At heart, the militiaman obviously shared the sentiments of the women, because when they started to pommel the man again, the representative of law and order pushed them back more for the sake of appearances.

How the incident ended the boys could only guess, for soon the train rolled out of the station.

"I don't envy that type," Dukhnovich said, stretching himself out on a bunk. "I wouldn't want to have his suitcase for anything."

"I guess a certain amount of scum always appears at times like this." Stepura mumbled, lighting a cigarette. "I'm more drawn to people like the ones that danced in the garden. What a lot of sorrow and energy there was in that dance."

"Could have been the last of their lives..."

That same day they saw the sea. The so-called convalescent battalion they had to report to was situated on the edge of the town on the grounds of large seaside parks and an open field. But it should have been called a convalescent army, what with the crowd of men that had been sent there from different hospitals.

While the boys registered, they suddenly came across an old acquaintance — Lymar from the geography department — among the clerks.

"Oh, so you're here, too," he said in a dully tedious way, his sharp chin bent over his terribly long registers. "Another one of your historians is here already."

"Who?" Stepura asked with a start.

"That tall one... Kolosovsky. He arrived from a local miners' sanatorium today."

The news excited the boys. The world, it proved, was a small place indeed. Bohdan was here, so their numbers had grown.

"Where can we find him?" Stepura asked, delighted.

"You'll hardly find him till evening, because everybody goes his own way the whole day long in this place."

After he was through with his registers, Lymar could give a little more of his time to the boys. They sat down in the shade of a tree, and Dukhnovich, looking at Lymar's ink-stained fingers, remarked derisively:

"So you've switched your bayonet for a pen?"

"Somebody has to do that, too."

"Could you put in a word with your superiors on my behalf? For a position as a clerk or an office boy at least?"

Lymar got the joke.

"What's your handwriting like?"

"Illegible as hen scratches," Stepura answered.

"Well, you'll have a tough time then," Lymar said with a smile that crinkled not only his lips but seemed to have spread to his pointed chin as well. "Being a clerk nowadays calls for some skill."

"Are you stuck here for long?" Dukhnovich asked.

"I'll stay as long as I'm ordered. Ours is a soldier's life."

"You've shifted gears pretty fast, man."

Lymar plucked a leaf off the tree, chewed it for a while, then spit it out.

"I get the shivers whenever I think of that rye field with blood-stained people running around racked with horror, and from above the whistling and crashing that turned day into night — it was like the end of the world roaring with the clash of demons and the elements!" He recounted his experience as if they hadn't gone through the same thing. "I heard shouts and groans, then I ran on, stumbled through the field, fell down, my heart bursting for fright, but I felt not shame, only fright, beastly fright and regret: that's volunteering for you, I thought. No more than a gesture! Otherwise you could've stayed alive! But here you could be a dead man! A mortar shell hits you in the back and it's curtains for you! I had but one wish: to get out of there and into the rear by all means! As an orderly, servant, emptying bed pans, cleaning latrines, anything but going back into that hell! After the hospital I got a break as you can see: now I'm clerk with the Sea of Azov maritime army."

"So you regret having handed in your deferment?"

"Regrets or no, we probably shouldn't have been in such a hurry."

"If everyone thought like you, who would do the fighting then?" Stepura asked with a frown.

"You fellows are idealists. Haven't we had lots of people in the hospital who gave themselves temperatures or scratched at their wounds only to stay there a day or two more? Not me. I endured my time honestly."

"You call that honesty?" Stepura snapped at him. "Why, you've simply broken down."

"Call it whatever you like. I've done my stint, spilled my blood, and that's enough. Let the others have a go at it. People are needed in the rear as well. Besides, there are rumors that the student battalion will be recalled from the front line altogether."

"Why?" Stepura asked, amazed.

Lymar glanced round furtively and said:

"I'll tell you as a friend: an order's supposed to arrive any day now, and all of us, that is those who are left then, of course, will be recalled."

"And what about those who die in action every day?" Stepura spat out, looking angrily at Lymar. "Or those who've already died? Who'll recall them?"

"Are we any better than them?" Dukhnovich asked acidly. "Or is it because we're intellectuals or some gift from heaven?"

Lymar had no answer to this question, after which the boys lost all desire to talk to him.

They found Kolosovsky toward evening by the sea in the company of some sailors and airmen he must have made friends with at the hospital. Bohdan and five or six others were walking down the beach laughing while one of the sailors was gesticulating, probably telling a funny story. A bandage showed from under Bohdan's garrison cap sitting aslant on his head, but his wound did not seem to cause him any trouble any more, because he was laughing loudly and heartily which he rarely did.

His eyes still brimming with laughter, Bohdan greeted the boys, joyously shook Dukhnovich by the shoulders, threw his arms round Stepura, and seemed to be most of all surprised to see in their company Spartak Pavlushchenko whose hand he shook vigorously.

"We thought you were still on the Ross holding firm against the enemy, just bristling at the thought of action," Dukhnovich joked. "But here you are already rambling by the sea just like the rest of us sinners."

"I got a tiny scratch and was sent away from the Ross the same day as you" — Bohdan carelessly fingered his bandage — "and since then, I've been loafing around here with them," he said and introduced his new friends to the boys.

Although Bohdan was rarely in a merry mood himself, he liked cheerful, reckless people. Fate had thrown him together precisely with such men at the hospital from which they all were transferred to this convalescent battalion.

There were tankmen without tanks, sailors without ships, border guards far from distant posts, and even a pilot whose plane had been hit and had gone up in flames over the sea. Despite the tragic times, none of them had lost confidence in themselves nor were their spirits broken, which attracted Bohdan the most to them. They were people of the highest caliber. He felt he could trust them completely, for their friendship was reliable, they'd never let you down, and even at the hardest moments — be it on a battlefield or even in captivity — they'd meet death with courageous contempt. They didn't seek hideouts or escape routes in their lives which they led with sincere hearts. They were well-qualified for such an existence, for they had everything they needed about them: both a song and a joke, friendship and courage.

The convalescent battalion consisted of men who arrived on the shores of the sea with their bandages still on, their wounds still unhealed, garbed in faded, blood-stained field uniforms that were no longer serviceable. Neither were the men themselves "serviceable," since they had been wounded and burned, had splinters in their bodies and bullets in their chests — they were literally men with an admixture of iron and steel.

Apart from undergoing routine treatment, they were almost free of any duties, as free as the birds of the air. They were free to use their domain of parks, arbors and fields, and in the evening, their songs carried across the sea in defiance of death itself; throughout the night the brilliant moon shone down on them, because most of the convalescents preferred sleeping right on the ground under the stars.

In the morning, their lusty youthful appetites were curbed only by the stale, mouldy bread they packed away with the quips of the sergeant-majors as seasoning.

"Mould means health."

"And it'll guarantee a sailor that he'll never drown."

They had a lot of spare time, and each used it as he pleased. Stepura and Pavlushchenko angled for gobius with the primitive tackle they had made. Dukhnovich, though not much of an angler, eagerly helped them in this next to fruitless effort, while Kolosovsky and his host of freebooters went foraging far beyond the town

where the lean and hungry convalescents found plantations of cucumbers, carrots, cabbage and red, juicy tomatoes. The gifts of nature they picked up during these expeditions were brought back to camp to a common pool to support those whose wounded legs did not allow them yet to go on such distant sallies.

"In this place you've really got to trot about to find a bone," Dukhnovich remarked one evening as he sat on the beach with his friends gnawing the carrots Bohdan had brought them. "Soon Stepura and I will join you conquistadores, too."

"We'd probably give out without his rabbit grub," Stepura said, making short work of the lavish gifts of the local farmlands.

"To give out in body is certainly a bad thing, but not the worst," Dukhnovich corrected him. "Lymar's given out in spirit, and that's much worse, brothers."

Bohdan derived pleasure from watching his friends enjoying the vegetables as the sea rustled at their feet, while not far away, a group of convalescents were talking quietly about the prewar days — something the men there were fond of doing.

"Look how beautiful the sea is," someone said in a soft voice, "but there's nothing I like better than a rolling field of ripening wheat. That day I was just about to go out into the fields, but no sooner had I walked into the village square than the loudspeaker startled me: 'Attention! Attention! Stand by for an important government announcement!' At that moment all sorts of things went through my mind: what could the government announcement be about. Was it about war? For some reason war was the first thing that entered my head, probably because it was the worst thing I could think of. Shortly thereafter, all the executives of our District Soviet were rushing throughout the villages with classified letters for the chairmen of the Village Soviets. When I got to the Village Soviet, the chairman wasn't in. I asked where he was and they told me that he was at a field camp. So I raced off and gave him the letter. He opened it in front of everybody, and in it were call-up notices for such and such men to assemble at the Village Soviet. So it was mobilization — and war. The men took their notices silently and silently

set off for their homes. For some reason that silence was what struck me most."

"I was in Sevastopol when the war started," another man said. "In the middle of the night, warplanes suddenly droned in the sky, and anti-aircraft guns went into action around the port. In the beams of the searchlights huge parachutes came floating down one after another over the bay — as we learned later, those were five hundred-kilo mines dropped into the bay. Two of them landed on the shore and wiped out several buildings. The cadets of our naval school were lined up on alert and stood there without understanding what the fire, parachutes and detonations meant. It was terrible and funny at the same time. But there was something unhealthy and nervous in the way we laughed it all off. Whose warplanes were they? Turkish? German? At six in the morning the city radio station announced that one plane had been downed and that by the debris of its engine, the country it belonged to was being determined..."

The calm sea spread before them, and only a path of moonlight — narrow by the shore and widening in a beautiful streak toward the horizon — rippled lightly in the breeze. Those who were healthier bathed under the moon, their wet muscular bodies glistening in its light, while along the shore, songs resounded here and there as if there were no war on. Even the calm sea protested war with its very appearance, which seemed to say: "I'm supposed to exist for the rustle of poplars... for the happiness of sweethearts... for fishermen's campfires... for reflecting the grand glow of waterfront open-hearth furnaces..."

Not far away there was a metallurgical plant. It worked with its lights dimmed, but no amount of screening could conceal its glowing furnaces, just as a healthy man cannot conceal his glowing health. The vague light radiating from the furnaces broke through the roofs of the shops and could be seen far and wide. At times, anti-aircraft guns clattered the whole night through when the sky over the sea and the plant was filled with the ominous drone of enemy warplanes and crisscrossed with the beams of searchlights. There were no air attacks now, but occasionally the dull rumble of

detonations was heard from far beyond the horizon at sea where ships with evacuees from Odessa were being bombed. There were people in the convalescent battalion who had miraculously been saved after their ships had been bombed.

Whenever Bohdan sat on the seashore listening to the boys talking about their university days, he always saw a smiling Tania in his mind's eye. She was barefoot, her legs, arms, face and clothes powdered with dust — just as he had seen her the last time at Chuhuiv. He had written her two letters, but was not sure whether she had received them, for otherwise, knowing her as well as he did, he realized she would have come to see him long ago. Perhaps she would make it after all before he was sent back to the front line again. Oh how he longed to see her for a moment at least here in the torrid steppe by the Sea of Azov! Where was his darling now? Hadn't they the right to this sea, to the fragrance of the steppe, and the rustle of the moonlit parks?

His heart burned with longing and pain of separation. What if Tania had left with her parents for the east, and his letters were still at the university? Swept away by the storms of war, his love was moving inexorably away from him and disappearing into the vastness of the hinterland. Without her, something was missing in this enchanting night with the full moon reigning over the calm bright sea.

Searchlights flashed alarmingly over the sea. Was an air attack imminent? Or were the searchlights simply probing the sky?

The boys were constantly talking about the order, according to which the students were supposed to be recalled from the front line. For an instant, Bohdan really wanted to be sent back to a different life without the whistling air bombs, crumping mortar shells, and maimed people — to a life of his beloved work, his sweetheart, and carefree university days. But he chased away even the flashes of such a dream, because what he had gone through and pondered over within these first black weeks of war pointed his way to another community of men that belonged not to the world of peace but to that of war. Did the tankman Vasiliy and the young pilot Andreyev whose plane went down in

flames or those sailors lounging on the sand nearby and singing seek any relief or privileges from the war? If they dreamed of anything, their dreams were now quite specific: the tankman dreamed of getting behind the controls of a tank again and not landing in the infantry, while the pilot dreamed of having a plane again and flying against the enemy, while Bohdan...

"We won't go looking for that order," Bohdan said, interfering in the conversation of his friends. "If they recall the students, let them recall everyone, not just the elect. Why should it be only us? Have we got kids or families?"

The boys agreed with him completely, yet they were simply dying to know where they would be sent and when.

"What if they've forgotten about us altogether?" Dukhnovich said with a smile, throwing pebble after pebble into the sea out of boredom. "I, for one, wouldn't be against it."

But they had not been forgotten.

Next morning they all were lined up for parade.

"Artillerymen, one step forward!"

"Tankmen, two steps forward!"

"Sappers! Cooks! Chemists! Topographers..."

They were mustered throughout the whole camp, sorted, and then for days on end the clerks listed them in long registers with numerous columns. The more quickly the wounds of the convalescents healed, the greater was the interest in them.

Almost every day, the camp was visited by recruiters from military schools. On every such occasion the men were lined up for parade with special diligence, and then the words would loudly carry across the parade ground:

"Volunteers, one step forward!"

When students for an armored force school were recruited, Spartak Pavlushchenko volunteered and tried to talk the boys into joining him.

Stepura and Kolosovsky refused outright, reasoning that since they had started as infantry cadets, they would remain in the infantry and share the fate of their comrades. Dukhnovich seemed to waver at first:

"A training course in Vologda or Vladimir? Well, that sounds tempting."

But then he refused, too:

"Now if I graduate from a military school, I might be harnessed to the armed forces for the rest of my life should I stay alive. And well, saluting to the end of my days would be too much for me."

"You've got a distorted view of an officer's life," Spartak remarked. "To be an officer is..."

"No, I was born a common soldier," Dukhnovich interrupted. "Although our sort get the worst of it on the front line, we'll be as free as birds after the war, that is, if we survive as thinking matter. There'll be the university again and Mikola Yuvenaliovich, our glorious helmsman, standing at the lectern and showing us some antediluvian potsherds: 'Am-pho-rae! The golden dust of centuries!'"

Imitating the professor, Dukhnovich uttered that "amphorae" in such a solemn and affected drawl that the boys could not help laughing.

The day Pavlushchenko was to leave, all of them went to the railroad station to see him off.

"Believe me, pals, I'm not going to that school because I got the jitters on the front line like Lyamar," Pavlushchenko said sincerely when they had reached his car. "I can see now that this war's going to be a drawn out affair and regular officers with modern training will be much in need."

"You want to end the war being a marshal, don't you?" Dukhnovich needled him.

"That's not the point," Pavlushchenko argued calmly. "Ranks and decorations... No denying it, I want them. Who doesn't? But what happened at the Ross has sobered me. I saw that war isn't just decorations, but sorrow for the people, a nightmare and the most horrible calamity imaginable. I also realized that desire alone is not enough for victory — that's obvious to me now. I want to get myself into armor to strike at them with all my might and not barehanded like we did on the Ross. Also, my tanks might get to crush the soil of Germany one of these days — that's why I'm going."

Bohdan listened to Spartak attentively, understanding his mood. Lately they had become good friends, and what had previously divided them, they both took for no more than a misunderstanding or bickering which they should

have eradicated a long time ago, then extended their hands to each other with the same trust they were doing now on parting.

"Tell me now at least," Spartak said with an unexpectedly warm ring to his voice as he held Kolosovky's hand in his, "what was your father arrested for?"

Bohdan was utterly surprised to be asked to recall the event that had disastrously marred his days of youth.

"I think it was because of his mustache," he replied in a grave joke.

"What mustache?"

Pavlushchenko obviously did not understand him.

"My father liked to wear a mustache; it was long, black, and conspicuous. I remember when I was still a kid that one of Father's friends said in jest at the dinner table: 'Oh, Dmitro, you'll get it one of these days for that Zaporozhian Cossack mustache you've grown...' And that's exactly what happened."

"Well, and what else apart from the mustache?"

"Because of his connections," Bohdan said with a frown. "Father was friends with lots of people — Yakir, Fedko, Blücher..."

"Just because a man was friends with some people... well, as for me, I wouldn't arrest him," Spartak said thoughtfully. "Our fathers, I think, wouldn't have been able to promote the Revolution without friendship."

A command rang out on the platform and Spartak rushed to his car.

"Well, farewell, boys, and take care!"

"Don't forget to write us once in a while!"

The car was full of volunteers for the armored force school, and Pavlushchenko immediately disappeared in the crowd. His stocky figure reappeared in a moment, however, when he tried to get a final look at the boys on the platform over somebody's shoulder. Bohdan found something touching in Spartak's attempt to see his university friends for the last time.

"Good luck!" Bohdan shouted excitedly when the train started to roll out of the station and Spartak's face, distorted as if from pain in the huddle, drifted away quickly. Bohdan wondered where their paths of life

would cross again? On the battlefield? In some hospital? Or would they never ever meet again?

No sooner had the train departed than a long freight train loaded with factory machinery moved off in the same eastward direction.

"They say it's an aircraft plant," the boys heard an elderly railroad worker say at the kiosk where they had stopped to have a glass of mineral water.

The train, which seemed to be endlessly long was guarded by antiaircraft machine guns mounted on the flatcars beside the carefully stacked freight covered with tarps.

"All that will become a plant again somewhere," the railroad worker said, his eyes following the retreating train. Kolosovsky would recall these words many a time thereafter.

The boys returned from the railroad station toward night. From afar, they saw what looked like a pile of green-skinned water melons lying between the trees in the park. When they came closer, it proved to be a pile of green helmets. In the bustle and noise that followed, the men tried on the steel helmets and received rifles and cartridges.

Apart from the men of the convalescent battalion, ammunition was also issued to a group of draftees who had been brought by ship the day before. They were obviously civilians for whom every piece of military equipment aroused either wonder, sorrow, or lively interest.

"If a bullet's got a yellow tip, what does it stand for?" a young draftee asked his sergeant.

"I've told you already: it's a tracer!"

Then another draftee, holding a clip of cartridges in his hand, pestered the sergeant:

"And what's this one with the black and red bands?"

"Armor-piercing incendiaries!" the sergeant shouted, half crazy from issuing the ammunition. "Shoot them a few times and then you'll see what's what for yourselves! All of them are good!"

The warm evening draped the seaside parks. Somewhere right by the sea, a young beautiful voice started to sing a song in a slow, pensive way; soon the whole Babylon of convalescents was listening to it.

*From o'er the mountain broke the bright day,
My sweetheart he's left me and gone far away...*

The soldiers standing by the trees or sitting in groups on the trampled grass amid their new equipment were listening to this simple song that seemed to be sung as a farewell.

In one group sat an elderly, hunched reservist in glasses who looked like a bookkeeper. As he listened to the song like the others, he kept turning a grenade he had just been issued in his hands. Either he was really interested in its design and shape like a man interested in an apple of an unknown variety, or, carried away by the song, he was simply twisting it mechanically until the inevitable happened: the safety pin slipped out and the men sitting at his side instantly lurched away from him and his grenade in horror.

"Throw it away! Throw it away!" they yelled.

Clutching the grenade convulsively in his hand, the man looked around bewildered as if he wanted to shout: "What shall I do? Where can I throw it if you're all around?!"

Everywhere he looked, his horrified eyes came across the faces of people like him. So he tore the helmet off his head, covered the grenade with it, and threw himself on top of the helmet.

When the acrid smoke cleared, a pile of human flesh and tattered clothes was all that remained of the reservist.

"The old bugger's gone and done it now!" someone in the crowd said with a sigh.

"But he was warned beforehand!" another man said angrily.

"He pulled the safety pin out by accident — and that was it."

"He could've thrown it away, but you see, he spared the others."

Soon orderlies appeared and quickly carried away the body without uttering a sound, while down by the sea, where no one knew what had happened, the song continued, the same tune about a sweetheart and the bright dawn.

It was the last song the boys heard at the convalescent

battalion. During the night, they boarded a train; the sea and the parks were left behind, and only the moon — that lofty, cold heavenly body — accompanied them through the expanses of the steppe.

40

The Dniprohes *, Ukraine's electric power heart, was still beating. The steppe giant of the Zaporizhya Steel-works was still belching smoke into the southern sky; other plants were working round the clock as well, and streetcars were still running between the old and the new parts of Zaporizhya. But in the sky over the city hung barrage balloons like the wraiths of war, shutting off the airspace in a steel enclosure against enemy aircraft. Crews of girls sent the balloons up into the sky every evening, and aerial guards spent the night in them watching over the city, while the plants continued working for defense and the blast- and open-hearth furnaces produced iron and steel.

Barrage balloons in a clear sky over Zaporizhya, ruined buildings, bomb craters in the streets, and crowds of people seized by anxiety — that is what Bohdan Kolosovsky's native town met him with.

When the men poured out of the train, one soldier even fired at a balloon, for half asleep as he was, he took it for enemy paratroopers descending on this quiet town draped by the haze of dawn.

"What are you firing at? Can't you tell the difference between friend and foe?" the girls shouted angrily at him. They had just reeled the balloon in and were pulling it along the street with a rope while it kept tugging at their hands as if it wanted to get back into the sky to its lofty post.

After lining up in a hurry, the men crossed the town in the direction of the Dnieper in a forced march.

"To the defense of the Dniprohes! The Dniprohes is in danger!" — this appeal seemed to have electrified the air in Zaporizhya.

*Abbr. for Dnieper hydropower station

Could it really be true? Could the danger be that near? When they were still on the train, there were talks that they were being taken beyond the Dnieper to Kriviy Rih or farther, but now it turned out that they were to defend the hydropower station with the home guard.

The column stretched out along the street as the men ran on, breathing heavily, sweat darkening their service shirts and pouring in dirty streams from under their helmets. To the jangle of the gear, Bohdan ran with his friends through places he knew well; then their path took them along the main thoroughfare of the Sixth Settlement. It was with soul-racking pain that he ran past public gardens in which trenches were being dug, past movie theaters he had been to countless times, and past blocks of buildings flooded by morning sunlight where his friends and acquaintances had once lived. So that's where fate had brought him at this hour! Here and there, where apartment houses had once stood, there were only heaps of ruins, pieces of walls, and the exposed interiors of living quarters. He had grown up in this place and seen how a new socialist town had taken shape in the straight rows of residential blocks before his very eyes. His father had always considered himself a Dniprohes man, since he was in charge of guarding the project with a security regiment that was well known throughout Zaporizhya and enjoyed the patronage of the local enterprises. During May Day parades, he wore a service cap that was as blue as the water of the Dnieper. To wear such a cap was Bohdan's childhood dream. Everything about his father's regiment was unusual: its brass band with its large silvery trumpets was famous throughout the area, and when the regiment marched through the town in their blue caps, it seemed a blue river was streaming along the broad sunlit streets. And in front of the regiment, striding in a measured martial tread, was a man of a proud and courageous bearing — his father Dmitro Kolosovsky, hero of the revolutionary battles in the southern Ukraine. And now, instead of the father, it was the son running down the central street of the Sixth Settlement not in a blue cap but in a heavy green helmet, and it was not to a parade he was hurrying but to war.

Cadets from the local military schools, civilian irregulars in greasy caps and coveralls, and the newly arrived reinforcements of draftees were all moving in one direction — toward the Dnieper.

The sight of the glittering river ahead took Bohdan's breath away.

This was the Dnieper, the blue song of his childhood. It struck his eye with a dazzling blue and a mighty sweep of light; the buttresses accentuated its graceful curve, and by the sill, the water churned in a white lacework. The huge concrete comb of the buttresses spanning the river from bank to bank, the cranes over the dam, and the palacelike appearance of the power station faced with dark-red Armenian tufa on the right bank — all these structures combined with the rock of the banks, the blue of the Dnieper, the green hills of Khortitsya Isle, and the high, vast cupola of the sky merged into a whole like one concordant creation begun by nature and perfected by man. It had an air of both power and harmony, brilliance and purity. Not a single speck of dust seemed ever to have fallen on this structure or on everything else that shone with a newness and a sort of perpetual festiveness. It looked like this piece of radiant reality was taken from the future as a model of what the earth would be like some day.

The column of exhausted men awash in sweat, weighted down by their military gear, and overwrought by the forced march, was moving across the dam. Way down below shoals of fish had gathered around the buttresses.

"Hey, look how many of them there are!" someone shouted.

The fish hovered at the foot of the dam, their heads dug into the concrete, for they could not swim farther upstream. Everywhere in the transparent water which the sunrays penetrated, the dark backs of the fish stood out like the shadows of motionless torpedos.

Below the dam, the Dnieper glistened in a broad, dazzling stream out of which jutted the reddish sun-seared rocks Bohdan had known since childhood. There was the Rock of Love, the Two Brothers, and the Rock of Fools on which the Zaporozhian Cossacks were supposed to have caned wrongdoers to beat the foolish-

ness out of them. Life had teemed here for centuries! Bohdan used to sunbathe at the rock with the other boys and dived from it into the gentle Dnieper water. Now, as in the days of his childhood, white gulls exhausted by the heat, were sitting on the rock and staring at the dam, the running soldiers, and at Kolosovsky, wondering perhaps where all these men were hurrying to, what had happened to the world, and why everyone was so alarmed.

Behind the rocks rose the sunlit Khortitsya, the isle of the Cossacks, washed by the Dnieper on all sides. Abounding orchards covered the island over which towered 75-meter high-voltage pylons, the tallest in the whole area. Somewhere on that island was the Sich railroad junction at which Bohdan had boarded the train that took him from his native town into the wide world for the first time.

On the right bank, at the end of the dam was a checkpoint controlled by border guards in green caps. Did that mean the state border had already been pushed so far east? A horrid possibility indeed. The faces of the guards were grim, their eyes implacable. Such men in green caps had executed Gladun. The border guards blocked the road leading onto the dam to hold up the flood of evacuees and checked everyone's documents — some were let through; others were told to wait to one side. They were especially interested in the military, watchful to discover deserters or panicmongers among them. Presently they stopped a man riding a saddleless horse.

"Get down!"

The man cursed and threatened them with grave consequences, for he was of no mean rank judging from his collar tabs, but the guards were indifferent to his outburst — they grabbed him by the legs and pulled him off the horse regardless of his ranks and tabs; the only thing that mattered to them was the Dniprohes which had to be defended.

Tall silver poplars stood over Lake Lenin, providing some shade from the heat at last. While the officers were clarifying the situation, the men could have a breather. They leaned on the concrete parapet in the shade of the trees and keenly took in Lake Lenin and the Dniprohes

they had heard so much about and which many were seeing for the first time.

"I never thought it looked that grand," Stepura said to the boys, unable to take his eyes off the dam. "You feel the inspiration of the people in this structure. And what a site to build it at! It was constructed at a place where the Dnieper's rapids had roared incessantly for centuries."

"Yes, it's really the pride of our times," Dukhnovich said, scanning the panorama of the station. "Remember what Napoleon said in Egypt before the Battle of the Pyramids: 'Think of it soldiers; from the summit of these pyramids forty centuries look down upon you.' Here we've got only five years looking on us, but what a period it was! Those were five years of new, socialist civilization."

"Mind you, it hasn't got a single scratch anywhere," one of the soldiers remarked. "The nazi planes must have bombed it more than once."

"They did, but they missed," said a local irregular who was passing by. "Instead of the dam, they hit the cliff."

Was all this built by millions of hands only to be bombed in the end? Bohdan thought. Why, it was created for centuries of peaceful life.

"I think even the most bestial barbarian simply could not raise a hand against such beauty," Stepura said. "To destroy with bombs such a masterpiece of civilization... It's intended for eternity, this creation of man."

"I saw the first concrete being poured here," Kolosovsky said, his voice thick with emotion. His thoughts turned back to the past and the times when emergency work at the project went on not only by day but also throughout the night under floodlights, and banner-bearing workers from the local enterprises came to the foundation pit to save the structure from the spring floods. Familiar faces passed before his eyes, and voices of long ago resurfaced in his memory.

You who designed the Dniprohes, you who mixed the concrete here, you the earth diggers, fitters, power engineers, men and women in rubber boots and coveralls who worked here day and night, you are marked to be destroyed by a single blow, and all the work,

passion, energy and love you have set in cement for all time is to be thrown under the jackboot of war...

The sharp words of a command interrupted Bohdan's impassioned thoughts.

The men moved on.

On their way to the barren sunbaked crest of rock on the right bank, they passed a black forest of transformers and workers' settlements immersed in orchards. Their line of defense was to run somewhere between the new Kichkas and Veliky Lug. The higher they climbed, the hotter were the wind and the sultry breath of the August steppe that hit their faces.

Shortly after, they were atop the crest and stopped, weighted down by their hot, heavy helmets and the sky that bore down on them like a huge helmet of merciless heat. Open plains stretched into the distance as far as the eyes could see, and the pungent smell of wormwood stood in the air.

"Dig in!"

Entrenching tools were produced, the packs were laid aside, and the digging commenced. Not a shot was fired yet; there was no sound of war nor any sign of the enemy, yet here they had to dig in. The dry, hard earth yielded unwillingly to their tools. Everything here had the grayness of the steppe about it — gray wormwood, gray hypericum, and silverish gray olive trees glimmering in the nearby shelterbelts. Their twigs were prickly and the fruit was astringent, but the men fell on them eagerly.

The defense line was alternately manned by soldiers and the home guard organized at plants which arrived in large and small groups from Zaporizhya. There were quite a few among them who after a night shift at the open-hearth furnaces had approached their Party organizations after hearing about the approaching danger that threatened Dniprohes and asked to have their exemptions from military service cancelled.

Whether their requests were complied with or not, they jumped onto the streetcars at their plants in whatever they were wearing at the moment and with whatever weapons they could lay their hands on, and the conductors did not remind them to buy tickets, knowing only too well where they were bound for after they

jumped off the streetcars. They appeared in whole crews on the hilltops of the right bank.

Where was the enemy?

There was no enemy yet, only the heat and the silence of the steppe.

Unexpectedly the boys came across one of their number from the student battalion, Mikola Khartsishin from the geography department. He was one of the political officers with the irregulars. They learned from him that the rest of the student battalion had been brought in with the other units and that Leshchenko had been appointed regimental commissar. They were fighting somewhere in the direction of Kiev now.

Covered with dust and loaded down with grenades, Khartsishin was hurrying with his unit somewhere farther out into the steppe, and to the boys' query about the overall situation, he just shrugged his shoulders.

"Nobody knows anything for sure. We put scouts on trucks and sent them off in the direction of Kriviy Rih and Nikopol. If they come back, they'll tell us."

The armed irregulars continually arriving from the left bank were plied with questions.

"What's going on in town? What's the news?"

"All sort of scum are raising their heads. They're pillaging the bakeries so mercilessly there's flour standing in the air."

"I saw two marauders being executed by firing squad for stealing goods from a store."

"And did you hear what happened at our place?" a white-browed irregular digging not far from Kolosovsky said as he threw down his spade and looked round at his neighbors with a grin. "By our power shop, the meridian burst one night!"

"What? What meridian?" his neighbors asked, not understanding what he was talking about.

"The geographic meridian, of course. It got busted right by our power shop. There would have been an accident if the damage hadn't been discovered right off. Welders and a crew of blacksmiths got down to work in the tick of the clock — you know what our fellows are like — and by morning the meridian was riveted and welded, and you couldn't even see the place it got busted."

"That's a wonderful cock-and-bull story," an elderly man breaking wormwood to use for camouflaging the trenches said to Bohdan. "Actually, the situation is going from bad to worse every day. The radio says the fighting is supposed to be way off in Bessarabia, but we're already expecting it here at the gates of Dniprohes. There must have been some reason why they got us up on our feet and going."

"Sure," Bohdan said with a frown. "But I still can't believe our Dniprohes becoming a frontline objective."

"One night some bigshot just short of being from the general staff visited our plant," the elderly worker said. "Well, in any case he must have been at least a ministry department manager. We volunteers asked him, 'Give us some weapons to fight with,' and he told us, 'We haven't got any.' 'So what should we do?' 'Forge yourselves swords,' he said. We thought he was joking, but he was dead earnest on that point. Well, our plants could forge anything, but where was that fellow yesterday? The Party organizations are doing whatever they can to rouse the people and organizing units of volunteers, so the only thing left is the weapons — not swords but real modern weapons. 'Why aren't there any?' we asked the bigshot but he just shrugged his shoulders and said, 'It just happened that way.' I got real mad and said it shouldn't have been allowed to happen! Why is it that when I bungle up my work, I'm made to answer for it? Why is it that when a soldier does something wrong, he's put to the rack? And here was this man telling me it just happened that way and no one was the wiser!"

A lot of what Bohdan saw that day, he didn't understand either and couldn't find any justification for. There was an atmosphere of disorder which should not have existed at such a time, especially at a place like Dniprohes. As he saw it, the best divisions should have been brought to defend the station and such an important industrial center — in any case, that's what he would have done. The reserve divisions, cadets, and irregulars from the enterprises would now have to bear the brunt of the fighting scattered as they were along the defense lines without tanks, aircraft, or sufficient artillery. The fewer of us there are, the greater the

responsibility bearing down on each of us, Bohdan thought. The workers are saying their plants are being dismantled and moved to the east train after train. But you can't move the Dniprohes, you simply cannot! It must be defended.

A group of workers stood on a hilltop, and calmed by the silence, they talked and watched the scene around them. The sky was deep blue, their native plains unrolled on all sides, and way down below, far across the Dnieper, was their dear town with its forest of black factory chimneys that seemed to grow out of the ground. The workers peered at the sky, the steppe basking under the sun, the town with haze and smog hovering over it on the left bank, and Bohdan seemed to hear their flurried thoughts: But this is our homeland! It's something we cannot live without...

"What d'ye think, Cossacks?" the light-browed irregular who had told the story about the meridian asked with a merry glint in his eyes as he clambered out of the foxhole. "Are we going to water our dry earth with the blood of that filth?"

"If it were up to me, I'd take those Khortitsya colonists by their throats for starters," said a tall lean worker with hollow cheeks. "No sooner do nazi planes drone at night than flares come hissing out of the chimneys of the colonists' houses."

From the town, trucks brought weapons and grenades made at the Zaporizhya enterprises; the grenades were rough to the touch and seemed still hot after the working. From the neighboring collective farms, huge slabs of fatback were brought for rations; they were taken from the trucks and laid out before the men like white Polar bear skins.

"Divide it up!"

There was also shining white bread to go with the fatback that was thick as the palm of a hand, but what the men lacked was water. Had the Dnieper been nearer, they would have drunk it dry.

Those who were sent to the river for water brought it in whatever receptacles they could get hold of — pails, messtins, water flasks. Stepura returned with a helmet full of water. He called Bohdan and Dukhnovich to his foxhole, and they drank of the water slowly and greedily.

It was the best water in the world. Warm, soft and sweet, it smelled of the blue summertime Dnieper, and while Bohdan drank his fill he could not believe that they would be ever deprived of the possibility of drinking this water, its incomparable taste living on only in their thirsty memories!

41

Stepura's foxhole was surrounded by big-headed cotton thistles, chicory, and dogrose. Dukhnovich and Kolosovsky were asleep on the wormwood under the thistles, and even in their sleep, the sweat was rolling down their faces in dirty streams. Stepura's helmet, emptied of the water he had brought, lay at their feet.

Exhausted by the heat of the sun, Stepura sat spiritlessly by the foxhole and smoked. The thistles, blue delphiniums, and dogrose were all friends of his childhood. They seemed to have come from the banks of his Vorskla and settled here on the Zaporozhian rocks. Lower down, rough-leafed soapwort spread along the ground in brown patches. In the summer when he used to run after his grazing cow barefoot and his feet got cracked, chapped and dirty from the morning dews, there was nothing better than soapwort to wash them clean, on Sundays at least. He'd rub them so hard the soapwort would peel the dirty skin off in the end. That was so long ago it seemed it had never have happened at all. Everything changes and he himself had changed and grown up, but for him, the image of his mother did not change: in his memory, he saw her now as he had seen her from childhood on. She had been left alone after her husband and sons went off to the war, and now she was probably living only with the hope of receiving some message from them. Whenever he came home on summer vacations, it was a holiday for her. The only thing she did was fuss over him so that he would have a tastier meal, get more sleep, and gain more strength for his studies. She simply could not understand why he was bursting to work on a par with his brother who drove a harvester combine, although inwardly she was proud to have her fellow villagers

see her suntanned son the university student either at the stackyard or at the steering wheel of the combine harvester day in and day out. But now, instead of a golden summer with the peaceful rattle of combine harvesters, fate had led him to a different summer of black smoke clouds! Woe had overwhelmed every one of them. People were not living for harvests or for peaceful labor any more. His hard-working father who had been a gardener and won medals at the USSR Agricultural Exhibition for his cabbages and tomatoes had gone to the war with his awards. Stepura might otherwise have gone home for summer holidays to his parents' joy instead of sweltering on the defense lines by the Dnieper.

That's where the front had been rolled back to. Only two months before he would have taken it for a bad joke if anyone had told him that one fine August day, he'd be lying here on the rocks at Zaporizhya to defend Dniprohes with rifle in hand. Yet for all the difficulties and bitterness of this August, Stepura was not seized with the despair he had been crushed with at Kaniv when he was wounded and waiting on the bank to be ferried across the Dnieper. At that time, it had seemed to him that everything was going to wrack and ruin without any hope of salvation. At the sight of the village women beset with the sorrow that was creeping up on them like a black cloud, he had a frightful momentary vision of his people dying out. It was a sudden despair from having been thrown into confusion by the first calamities, the first bloodshed and the deaths of so many of his comrades. Although there was no ray of hope yet and the war, like a steppe fire, was rolling on ever faster in an all-destructive raging wave that was already puffing out its hot breath at the Dniprohes, Stepura was certain of the invincibility of the power of a people whom no war could vanquish nor any fire destroy. A people who had created structures of such beauty as he had seen that day could not be overcome. The factory chimneys of Zaporizhya were smoking on the horizon, and production was going on, although bombs rained on the factories night after night, and closer by, on the granite shoulders of the Dnieper banks, Dniprohes stood out in all its beauty as the symbol of

a new Ukraine and a new socialist civilization. The people called it the electric heart of the Republic, the electric sun of Ukraine, and indeed it lit up the whole land like the sun. Love of the country that built it, its energy, its aspirations for happiness were embodied in this proud firstling of the five-year plans. The intellect and hands that were able to build such a thing were much stronger than all the forces of destruction!

Long before Stepura had seen the Dniprohes, he had written verses about it. Why had he indulged in that naive rhyming of long ago? Had he craved for fame? What was fame, after all? Was it really so essential for man to be happy? Scribbling those verses, he had considered himself a poet, but perhaps it was only now that he was becoming one without writing poetry, after his heart had filled with the sorrow of his people and he came to understand as never before their thoughts, their pain, and their struggle. No, he did not want fame; he did not want anything except that there be no mothers' sorrow, that the sky over his land not turn red from the fires at night, and that the finest creation of his people — sunlit Dniprohes — would ever stand in all its beauty.

The irregulars were talking and calling to each other as they touched up their foxholes or cleaned their rifles. There were a lot of young workers among them, brave and sensitive; but the majority were elderly men who had families, children and grandchildren. Although they were armed with rifles, they did not look much like soldiers; even here on the defense line, they remained people of labor who derived little pleasure from having had to leave their machine tools, furnaces and cranes to take up arms.

After waking up, Dukhnovich remained lying on his back for a while, looking into the silent brilliant blue of the sky.

"Doesn't it surprise you that the sky is blue?" he asked Stepura.

"What color should it be?"

"It could've been black, for instance."

"A black sky? With the sun shining in it?"

"Well, maybe not exactly black, but brownish orange, brown, or something of that sort. Mother Nature's

clever, incredibly clever, Andriy. She made the sky purest azure, the tenderest hue of her color scheme. It's the most pleasant to the human eye for the whole of this fantastic bowl under which man was intended to live. So let's live!"

"Yeah, but look what they're doing to this sky," Bohdan said reflectively. He, too, had woken up and was lying on his back, with one arm under his head. "Even the sky has been befouled by the nazis."

"Do you remember Vasilkivsky's paintings in the Kharkiv Gallery?" Dukhnovich asked with animation — his friends knew very well his passion for painting since he did the designing of the wall newspapers in their department. "No one could render the color of the sky like Vasilkivsky. The 'heavenly' Vasilkivsky — that's what they called him. This sky really looks like the ones in his watercolors of the steppe..."

The city of Kharkiv, the picture gallery they had visited many a time, and Vasilkivsky with his poetic vision of the boundless steppe sky — all this was far from them now. Their young student battalion had been scattered far and wide by the maelstrom of war. They were now among new people with new unit numbers, and the only thing that remained of their days in the student battalion were the black plastic lockets they carried.

"How many of our university crowd will never return to the lecture halls," Stepura said with a sigh. "Moroz is gone for ever, so are Slava Lagutin and Pidmohilny..."

"And our irrepressible Drobakha, conqueror of hearts, minstrel and flimflammer," Dukhnovich added.

They recalled those who remained on the Ross with Commissar Leshchenko and spoke of Leshchenko himself, who was with a new regiment beating off the enemy attacks around Kiev.

"We were fortunate to have started out with him," Kolosovsky said. "I can't imagine a better commissar for our student battalion."

"Remember how he burned our passports on the train?" Stepura recalled. "That was really symbolic — our graduation party illuminated by a fire of passports and record cards."

"Listen, boys, what if we're really idealists, as Lymar said," Dukhnovich suddenly voiced his doubts. "What if the majority of us fight only out of necessity, by compulsion, or because of the instinct of self-preservation — and nothing else?"

"In that case, all these people must be considered idealists, too," Bohdan said getting to his feet and looking at a new unit of irregulars coming up the hill just then.

"All this is vitally important for them just as it is for us," Stepura added. "It's all infinitely dear to them — from Dnirohes itself to this thistle."

"A thistle exists in this world not without a reason," an elderly irregular remarked, waddling by. "It's like a barometer in the steppe: when it's prickly there'll be sunny weather; when it's not, you might as well expect rain."

Dukhnovich stretched out his hand to a thistle and touched it with a finger.

"It's prickly, which means there'll be parching heat or a drought. A rather distinctive denizen of this planet, I'd say: not much of a beauty, but it's prickly."

"Why don't you think it's beautiful?" Stepura objected. "It looks like a Cossack steppe patrol in a purple cap."

"You know what I've been wondering about, boys?" Dukhnovich continued. "Will man's inherent attachment to his homeland and to a definite place on this planet — say, to the Dnieper and these boundless steppes the poet of our department turned to frequently — remain with him in the distant future as well? It's affection and magic, but will this feeling remain forever?"

"I don't know what will be, but for right now, it gives man strength," Stepura muttered. "It'll never disappear, just like love for one's mother."

"I really don't want that feeling to disappear, so don't get me wrong," Dukhnovich specified. "There are things without which the human soul would be totally colorless and utterly miserable. But still, how many millenia will man remain excited about the thistle, that cactus of the Ukrainian steppes?"

"As long as the sun shines," Stepura answered with a smile. "I hope you agree with that, don't you?"

A group of soldiers carrying water from the Dnieper was passing by not far away. Bohdan saw Vasya the tankman among them and called out to him:

"Vasya, come over here to us!"

Vasya was an exuberant regular. He was the only friend Kolosovsky had from his days in the hospital. Vasya had met the boys on the march and joined them eagerly now — he was in no hurry anyway.

"Who wants some water?" he asked, extending Bohdan a dented pail which was not empty yet.

The boys drank from the tilted pail in turns.

"My foxhole neighbor here is almost a student, too," Vasya said, motioning to a pale irregular in a white embroidered shirt, standing at a short distance away and smiling shyly. "He's a local teacher from Khortitsya and graduated from Kiev University."

"Holoborodko," the teacher introduced himself politely upon coming nearer. In reply to Dukhnovich's question of what department he graduated from, Holoborodko replied: "Philology. And what about you?"

"We're historians, former historians, that is."

"Why former?"

"Well, maybe future historians for that matter, but so far instead of historians, philologists and poets" — and here Dukhnovich gave Stepura an ironic look — "all of us here are just ordinary soldiers out to do our duty."

"That's true," the teacher said quietly, and when Stepura passed the pail on to him, he accepted it gratefully and started to drink unhurriedly.

He was of middle age and had a kindly face. He was dressed as if he were on his way to a district teachers' conference, one of those traditional conferences which used to be held at this time of year: he wore a new cap and white shirt with a finely embroidered collar that spread around his shoulders on a new cheviot suit mercilessly girded by a belt with a cartridge pouch.

"What fantastic steppes these are!" Vasya said with rapture, making himself more comfortable on top of the parapet and looking around at the scenery. "That's where we should have built our tankodrome!"

"Aurochs once roamed these steppes," the teacher said in a mild voice.

"What's an auroch?" Vasya's interest was instantly piqued.

"The auroch is the ancestor of our domestic bull. Judging from the chronicles, the last aurochs died in the early seventeenth century."

"It's a grand land, it is," Vasya said gazing at the steppe. "But why isn't there any sign of the enemy? The recce here, to tell the truth, is pretty lousy. We tankmen would've been boiled in oil for such a bad job. These bunglers must be brought to heel, don't you think, Bohdan? They should have sent us, eh?"

Bohdan looked at him with a smile; he liked the boy. Short of stature and stocky, his face was scarred with burns. Although he was only in his late teens, he already had slouching shoulders as if he'd been sitting in a tank too long. His face was of an earthy color, while his wide-set, bright eyes had a gleam of mischief in them, which made him look like a ready prankster. Back at the hospital, Bohdan had learned that Vasya hailed from Saratov; before he joined the army, he studied at an automotive transport school in the Urals and then served on the border where he took part in the tank battles right from the outset of the war. Even now he did not lose hope that sooner or later he would be "riding a tank instead of a spade," as he put it.

"Is it true that your Khortitsya" — he turned to the teacher — "was once the capital of the Zaporozhian Cossacks?"

"Yes, and for quite some time."

"Those Cossacks were real fighters! Aren't we of the same cut? Isn't there anything left in our powder horns? Or will we give all this away to the nazis? The enterprises are still working and so is the Dniprohes. I guess there's current running through those wires," he said, pointing to a power line nearby.

"It's a high-voltage line. Everything's high-voltage around here," a red-browed irregular who was an eager talker interjected from a neighboring foxhole. "After work you hear at the buffet now and again: 'Make it a shot of high-voltage!'"

"What does that mean?"

"It's vodka, a hundred and twelve proof, and no less."

"Wow, that's a whopper," Vasya remarked merrily. "Remember, Bohdan, we had that Cossack of a man, Dudka, in our ward?" he said, turning to Bohdan. "Six days after the operation he asked for a hundred grams and told us he'd been visited by a grand dame in his dreams. That Dudka was a fantastic joker. When he started emptying his kit of quips, it made the boys' stitches burst with laughter!"

The men spent the rest of the day talking and joking.

During the night, a number of units were withdrawn from the hills and their commanders hurriedly led them to some other location. At first it was thought they were being taken to Khortitsya Isle which, as rumor had it, was supposed to have been captured by an enemy landing party since sounds of fighting were coming from the island all the time. But, as it turned out, Khortitsya was not their destination.

The soldiers and irregulars marched through the settlement on the right bank; everything was immersed in orchards except for the roof tiles gleaming in the moonlight. The men did not keep to any roads but moved in a straight line, crushing fences and flowerbeds, trampling rose bushes and vines with broad dew-covered leaves and heavy cool bunches of grapes. Time and again they halted, and the commander of their company, Lieutenant Lukianov, called Kolosovsky, who was a local, to ask directions. Kolosovsky felt ashamed at not recognizing the locality. Either the orchards and settlements had grown considerably in recent years, or the wartime night had confused everything in his mind. The dew, the apples gleaming between the leaves, and the fragrance of the night flowers all seemed unreal, lurking, wary, and gripped his heart with pain.

While they were checking the locality against the map, Stepura stood among the trees and listened to the soldiers heartily crunching apples as enemy warplanes droned overhead. It was an ominous drone of bombers hovering over this land of dew-covered orchards, hydro-power stations, and new workers' settlements. The land was exposed to their infernal strikes and could offer no resistance but its nocturnal beauty, gleaming apples, and the gentle fragrance of lovage, violets and mint. Beauty versus war — no, that's not enough, Stepura

thought. War called for steel, ruthlessness, ardent desire to neutralize the nazis, and a hurricane of steel to shield and defend everything we have. In the deep clear night, the trees stood silently as if listening intently to something.

Such a bright romantic night was meant for the songs of girls and the passion of sweethearts. But no songs were heard, for the night reigned supreme over the orchards. Someone shook a branch nearby and apples started to drop to the ground with a thud. Under another apple tree, somebody's hands were rustling between the leaves and plucking off apples along with the leaves, after which a delicious crunching followed. For some reason, Stepura was afraid of plucking off the apples and remained standing there, looking at the moonlit fruit-laden tree.

"Pick some for yourself," he heard a soft, kindly voice nearby. "Why don't you pick some?"

It was Holoborodko, the teacher.

"If you don't want to, here, have a taste of mine."

He took an apple from inside his shirt and gave it to Stepura who, before biting into it, sniffed it to enjoy its fragrance. It smelled of all the orchards in this area, all the sunny peaceful days of prewar times. In the meanwhile, the apple tree was being determinedly attacked, and someone was mercilessly bending a branch.

"Be careful or you'll break it!" he was warned.

"Do you suggest we leave it for the enemy?"

Moments later the branch broke with a crack, and the apples dropped to the ground and were picked up; other men came running to a neighboring tree and started shaking it lustily.

"Adam strayed into sin under such an apple tree," Stepura joked with bitterness in his voice.

"It's a pity these orchards are being destroyed," the teacher said. "All of a sudden, human labor has lost its value. All this was cultivated by workers. Apart from their regular jobs, they were gardeners, floriculturists, vine growers..."

"My father had a knack for gardening, too."

"I've heard you write poetry. Is that true?"

"Well, it depends on how you look at it."

"When I studied at Kiev University, I had two friends, Hnat and Leonid, who were remarkable poets. I wonder whether they're alive now. With this war that a lot of talented people we are losing..." After a pause he continued: "Nobody wants to die, of course. Everyone wants to survive this war, but not at the price of becoming a slave to foreign invaders. Did you hear what a comedy they enacted in Rovno?"

"No, I didn't."

"In their train, they brought a certain Vishivany, a pathetic claimant to the mace of Hetman of Ukraine..."

"We know the worth of such shows. Looking at the Czechs, the Poles, and the other nations of Europe, you can see quite well what fascism has done to them. The same things, if not much worse, are being brought this way, too."

The men set off again. Through the wide-open doors of houses on their way, they heard the weeping and clamor of people with bundles in their hands who were obviously getting ready to be evacuated. A cloud suddenly darkened the sky and blotted out the moon. Actually, it was a mighty oak tree under which several platoons could have found refuge from rain or sun.

"They call it the Cossack Oak," Holoborodko explained to Stepura. "It's over seven hundred years old. This spring we brought the children here. Taras Shevchenko once rested in its shade. You should have seen how many young people gathered under it on holidays. The meetings of the local collective farm used to be held here instead of at the club."

The giant stood there silently. For centuries it had heard the tumult of distant battles, the hubbub of the Zaporozhian Sich and the clanking of Cossack swords. It had rustled in the wind century after century, stretching ever higher in its vigorous growth.

The men admired its power and might from under their helmets. Such a tree could withstand any storm or thunderbolt.

When they moved on again through the settlement, one flare, then another suddenly streaked into the sky, and rifle fire burst out.

The men ran across the road in a pack and came upon a group of civilians who turned out to be from the local

District Party Committee and were accompanied by the commander of a raiding battalion.

"The enemy's close by," he warned. "They have just fired on the truck with the scouts we sent out along the Dnipropetrovsk highway. It's been hit by a shell, but some of the men made it back."

Lieutenant Lukianov ordered his men to dig in right there in the orchards. No sooner had Stepura started on his foxhole than he came across the wiry roots of apple trees he had to chop with his shovel. With every blow he delivered, he felt the pain he was causing the roots. They had just finished digging in when they were ordered to run to another place with orchards and vineyards where their shovels again chopped through living roots.

The flares hissed into the sky ever closer and the sound of firing grew louder. From behind the orchards came an alarming rumble rolling in the direction of the Dnieper.

"That's where their tanks are!"

"Not tanks but tankettes."

"What's the difference!"

"Cadet Kolosovsky!" the company CO called through the trees. "Take a group of volunteers and find out what that noise is."

Stepura, Vasya, Holoborodko and several other soldiers and irregulars volunteered to join Kolosovsky.

After running across a farmyard and through gardens, they came to what looked like a public garden with clipped hedges and sanded walks. The flares burst in the sky very close by and tracer bullets cut through the darkness, smashing windowpanes and tiles and ripping off leaves and twigs which rained on the men like hail.

Kolosovsky ordered the men to drop to the ground and crawl in the direction the rumble and flares were coming from. Thuya bushes gave off a pungent odor; the sand crunched under their bellies.

"Somebody's standing between the trees over there," a soldier nudged Stepura. The warning made Stepura press closer to the ground.

Indeed, a figure loomed between the trees. The tracer bullets darted through the public garden on a level with the figure, but it remained standing.

"Why, that's Lenin," exclaimed Holoborodko who hugged the ground ahead of Stepura.

They crawled off quickly to the figure and saw that it was a modest bronze statue of Lenin that had been erected in a flowerbed.

Breathing heavily, the soldiers crawled up to the statue and surrounded it in a tight half-circle. For all the flares illuminating the statue and machine gun bullets hitting it again and again, it stood firm.

After a short rest, the men adjusted their helmets and crawled on toward the rumble and bursting flares, while a hail of bullets whined over their heads.

Not far away from Stepura, someone emitted a light moan as if a sigh had escaped his lips. Stepura crawled up to the man. It was Holoborodko. His embroidered shirt quickly darkened with blood. Stepura bent over him to see whether he was breathing, but Holoborodko was dead, covered in a light sweat and giving off the fragrance of apples that were crammed into his shirt.

42

The Dniprohes was still in operation.

An incessant, steady hum stood in the turbine room. The powerful turbines lined up one beside the other in the room throbbed mightily, making the whole building vibrate slightly.

The turbine room was suffused with sunshine. Green palm trees stood side by side with the huge silvery olive-green turbines, and between them walked their master — man. From the day the first turbine had been started, the station had never once ceased generating electricity. The rhythm and running pace seemed to have been set at the Dniprohes for eternity.

Higher above the turbine room was the main control room, a bright semicircular room with windows in all its walls.

As usual, an engineer stood on duty by the panels, watching over the control instruments that connected him to the people who for all these years had been receiving energy from the Dniprohes.

When the engineer coming on duty took over from the

night shift, he confirmed that everything was in order, although, while putting his signature in the logbook, he, just like his predecessor, clearly heard machine gun fire coming from around the Fourth Settlement and shrapnel bursting right above the station.

The engineer on duty — a tall man with hair streaked gray and the lean face of an ascetic — belonged to the generation for whom the Dniprohes represented their youth as Young Communist Leaguers, their ripened maturity, and the greatest pride of their lives. He came to the project a country teenager who dug the earth, broke the Dnieper rock, mixed concrete, studied after work, and was now in charge of the control panels. No one had called him Vanka for a long time — now everyone knew him as Ivan Artemovich.

During the night, he saw off his family who joined the evacuees. His wife and children with their bundles were already on the left bank by now along with the families of other Dniprohes employees, and today a train would take them eastward by an unknown route. Ivan Artemovich knew only that the train was going somewhere to the North Caucasus. Where would he find them? Were he to leave, too, they agreed that wherever the Dniprohes people stopped, they would come to the railroad station every day and watch in turns day and night under the station bell so as not to miss the last Zaporizhya train with Dniprohes employees.

They had been packing the whole night through. The children had torn at their parents' hearts with whimpering, for they were frightened by the bullets hitting the tiles on the roofs and by the flares they saw for the first time in their lives. The flares sizzled menacingly over the orchards, bursting now and again in a deathly light and then dying out in the darkness.

In all that rush, Ivan Artemovich did not have time to shave. The stubble on his cheeks irritated him, since he was not used being on duty in such a state.

The electricians gathered by the window that gave on Khortitsya Isle and discussed the rumor that the Germans had overrun Nikopol where they were supposed to have seized the militia station, NKVD headquarters, and the City Soviet which was in session just then to consider measures to strengthen the city's defenses.

"Come on, who could possibly know all that? And where's Nikopol anyhow?" the engineer said, angered by all this talk.

As a communist, he believed that people should not give way to rumors; on the contrary, he saw it as his duty to set the people's minds at rest and try to check the spread of alarmist moods. The sense of fear that was already hanging over the whole area could not be allowed to reach the control panels. The man in charge had to be calm and poised just like the instruments which flashed their multicolored lights on the black panels.

The engineer's paramount duty was to be keenly alert so as to avert any breakdowns.

Ever since the Dniprohes had been built on the solid rock of the Dnieper's banks, the station had had no serious breakdowns. Ivan Artemovich had seen many power plants and had been to France, but he knew quite well there was no station in the world to match this one. It was a beauty set in a southern landscape and surrounded by orchards on all sides. In springtime, blooming apricot trees welcomed him on his way to work, and through the window he saw orchards all around. In no other season but spring was it evident how many orchards there were: the leaves had not come out yet, but the cherry and apricot trees were blooming white in gullies, on hill slopes, and on what used to be refuse dumps and wasteland. Yet the mighty power of the Dnieper was the dearest to his heart of all. The Dnieper water behaved differently at the dam. A thin layer of water spilled over the dam evenly and gently like snow-white lacework, while the pressure of hundreds of tons of spring flood water made it scud over the dam with lightning speed and hurtle into the depths where it exploded with a tremendous roar. During spring floods, when surplus water was being discharged, a drumming roar filled the entire area. In the after bay, the falling water raged in a white storm of foaming, sending up clouds of radiant spray. The roar and rainbow spray of churning water gave Ivan Artemovich the sensation that he could subdue this elemental force and put it to use for man.

Then huge blackout curtains appeared in the control

room and in the turbine room as well, where they covered the entire glass wall of the oriel. From then on, the interiors were shut off from the starry nights, from the Dnieper, and from the evil drone of enemy planes. From behind the curtains came distant detonations that resembled the explosions in the quarries farther downstream. However they were not explosions of quarried rock, but detonations of bombs. One bomb landed in the forebay and another one hit a cliff; the shock wave sent the glass in the large oriel crashing. The bombs gouged the bank, stunned hundreds of fish, and rained down on the enterprises on the far bank almost every night.

Some ten days earlier, troops from around Odessa who had managed to evade encirclement retreated across the dam. After they left, life followed its usual course at the station — everyone remained at his post, the power plant continued working, and the turbines whirled on.

Day after day, dust-grimed troops crossed the dam as did wagons with evacuees, herds of cattle, tractors, and combine harvesters. It seemed the entire Right-Bank Ukraine was moving across the dam to the east, and the cows lowed plaintively as they plodded past the glittering store windows of the town.

The avalanche of evacuees had rolled across the dam at last, and for several days, crews of demolition experts headed by a colonel walked around the station studying the dam's structure, and the colonel asked the workers and Ivan Artemovich some questions.

"If we have to ruin the station, it must be done so that it will be effective only for the duration of the war," the colonel said to Ivan Artemovich. "That's how we see it. The station has to be put out of operation, but not destroyed. We'll destroy the dam partially, let the oil out of the ball bearings, and burn the generators. In short, we'll put the station out of action for about a year."

So we'll be back in a year's time, the engineer thought.

Yet Ivan Artemovich still could not come to grips with the thought that the station would also fall to ruin. He took the crews of demolitionists, the firing beyond the settlement, and the departure of his family as some-

thing unreal and illusive which could not break the Dniprohes or its settled rhythm.

Whenever Ivan Artemovich took over the shift, it was as if he were entering an electric fortress in which he felt surer and safer than anywhere else. Indeed, man was probably nowhere as conscious of his power as at this control panel. For the duration of the shift, he turned into the energy baron of the region, for the Dnieper with its titanic energy yielded to his will, and so did the work of the turbines and the power transmission lines fanning out for hundreds of kilometers. Those who were used of seeing Ivan Artemovich as a modest-looking, careless angler out on the Dnieper in a motor launch, wearing only swimming trunks on his lean, bony frame, did not recognize him when he donned his blue smock and took up his position at the control desk. Ranged in a semicircle in front of him were black panels with measuring instruments, indicators that flashed colored lights on and off, and automatic devices that recorded temperature, voltage, and frequency. All this data reached him in the end. Responsibility changes a man, and so Ivan Artemovich's face took on a particular expression when he was on duty. After he signed for the destiny of the station in the logbook, he began to live a different life that was businesslike, tense, and out of the ordinary. In his mind's eye, he saw all those he supplied electric power to as a tangible reality of ore mines in Kriviy Rih, metallurgical works along the Dnieper, distant coal mines in the Donbas, and countless stackyards in the steppes operating throughout *the night on the power and with the light originating at the Dniprohes*. The station was in constant contact with its consumers, and Ivan Artemovich simply could not imagine that this contact would suddenly snap and the whole region plunged into darkness.

The firing coming from the depth of the settlement was growing in intensity, and the artillery pounded away into the steppe from Khortitsya Isle. It was a good barrage, so perhaps the enemy would be thrown back and the situation stabilized.

"Ivan Artemovich!"

Lida, a fair-haired student doing her practicum who looked far too serious for her years, called him to the

telephone. He walked up to the desk and took the receiver.

"Control desk engineer here."

"This is Kriviy Rih. We're surrounded by tanks. Cut us off!"

The request sounded incredible. One of the largest substations supplied by the Dniprohes was asking to be cut off from the power grid with a single blow. He felt blood flushing to his head and throbbing in his temples. They were demanding to be cut off. To do so, it was enough just to turn the switch. Hating himself, he walked over to the panel and put his hand on the black ebonite handle of the switch. He had to make just one movement, but he found it difficult, horrible and hateful. Still, it had to be done!

Lida jumped to her feet and stared at him as at someone demented.

"Ivan Artemovich! What are you... how can you do it?"

"Go away."

Gray in the face, an unpleasant glint in his eyes, he turned the switch off with a jerk.

"No, no! It's a crime!" Lida screamed, covering her face with her hands.

That instant the telephone rang again. Who could it be this time? He put the receiver to his ear reluctantly with a senseless movement of his hand.

"Control desk here."

"This is Dniprodzerzhinsk! The substation is in danger! Cut us off immediately!"

Ivan Artemovich looked at the control panels as if he were bidding them farewell. His face beaded with sweat, he walked slowly to the panel like someone doomed, stopped by the measuring instruments and stiffening in a momentary effort-collecting pause, he turned the switch off with still greater ferocity. Lida was crying, her tiny fists clenched in misery by her head which had dropped to the table.

"Just to think we're doing it ourselves... Why, you're killing them... To cut off the entire right bank — how can you?"

He gave her a look that seemed to say: Yes, I'm cutting off the plants that had been fed by our power.

I'm cutting off the steppes we gave light to at night. I'm cutting off all that life with a flick of my hand.

There was still the left bank which needed electric power to drive the cranes dismantling the factories. They had to be supplied with electricity to the very last moment.

Polia the cleaning woman phoned from the entrance-gate office:

"Ivan Artemovich, I'm alone here! There are passes on the desk and all the documents are lying around just like that. There are wounded men in all the rooms. What am I to do now?"

"Stay there. Don't let anyone get into the station."

"What about the wounded?"

"Let them through."

The electricians and Lida saw something through the window that faced the left bank and called out:

"Ivan Artemovich, come over here! Look, some people are fussing around there."

A number of trucks drove from the left bank right to the entrance of the tunnel running through the concrete body of the dam below the waterline; soldiers rushed to the trucks and began unloading heavy crates into the tunnel.

Lida watched them in alarm.

"I don't understand anything. What are they carrying there?"

Ivan Artemovich knew the answer. He had known it since the day before. The crates held TNT. The chief engineer and the demolition crews were making everything ready to blow up the dam. But what could he tell this girl who had come to study a peaceful profession and instead was watching men pack the station with explosives which, along with sundered concrete, might also blast the people in the control room into the sky?

"Will it really happen, Ivan Artemovich? Is this really the end?"

The girl looked at him with a plea in her eyes. Her cheeks were wet and red from tears, and he felt embarrassed, even ashamed to face this young girl with the eyes of a frightened bird, ashamed for everything that was happening in a world going to ruin, plunging

into chaos; life itself was losing any semblance of order and terminating on an abyss.

"There is nothing more for you to do here, Lida. Go to the left bank!"

"And what about you?"

"We must remain here."

"Why? Why?"

"Why, oh why!" one of the electricians rejoined angrily. "We're communists — that's why. We'll leave last."

"And I'm supposed to leave first?" the girl whimpered. "I won't go, I can't, I'll stay with you!"

Her stubbornness made the engineer angry.

"You have been ordered to leave, so leave!"

"Don't shout at me. I have a right to stay. I'm on practicum here."

"Your practicum is over."

Lida's sobbing welled up the more.

"What did I study for then? What have I tried so hard for? To see the ruin of the Dniprohes?"

"Quiet down. You won't see its ruins!" Ivan Artemovich shouted, unable to hold himself in check any longer. "Go now! You have to leave!"

She could not leave by the front door now, because an enemy sniper had already zeroed in on it.

Ivan Artemovich took her by the shoulder, led her up to an elevator, pushed her angrily inside, and slammed the iron door behind her back. Through the metal net he saw once more her tear-stained face distorted with pain, and registered it in his memory before the cage dropped.

When he returned to the control room, the electricians stunned him with more bad news:

"The enemy's on Khortitsya!"

He rushed to the southern window. What he saw now was not the figment of a nightmare or hallucinations: extended in a chain as if for a mop-up, the invaders were slowly descending the slope to the river with cottages scattered along its bank. From there, they could survey the whole panorama of the station. Already they were befouling the majestic structure on the Dnieper with their eyes and probably considering it their richest booty. Here was a living, throbbing, priceless Dniprohes,

and over there, lines of nazis advancing on it — those two realities could drive a man crazy. So the rumors about the panzer breakthrough as well as the sudden capture of Nikopol and the nazi landing must have been true. All that time, Ivan Artemovich had kept a flickering hope that the Dniprohes would be spared and the spirit of destruction would never prevail here. But seeing with his own eyes how the helmeted nazis trampled the sacred earth of Khortitsya, the engineer felt a destructive force awakening in him. He had a belligerent readiness to blow up, at this moment at least, everything he had built, everything that had been the beauty and the glory of his people for years. Let the generators burn! Let the dam burst! Let everything turn into a heap of ruins as long as it did not fall into the hands of the invaders!

The engineer called the electricians; moving away from the window, they discussed how to terminate their last fateful shift.

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The heavy iron gates were thrown wide open; clotted blood covered the concrete walks leading to the grounds of the Dniprohes. Previously a sanctum sanctorum that was off limits to any outsider, the station was now receiving groups of wounded without any passes. Fresh wounds, blood and bandages were now the only passes that mattered to Polia at the entrance gate. Letting in the wounded, she looked intently at each to see whether there were any able-bodied deserters, and then called out: *"Make yourself comfortable in the garden over there."* After that, she returned to her post at the window where security guards with caps pushed low over their foreheads had sat before. This was the first time she had sat there. Her big rough hands that were chapped and cracked from work with wet rags, brushes and pails were now lying in a mastery way on the desk with the fresh passes.

Polia, Polia the cleaning woman... Ever since she had joined the project, she had been known by that maiden name of hers, although it would have been more proper to call her something different after all these years. People remembered her as a girl from the outset of the

project, and so the pet name stuck, notwithstanding the fact that she had a grown son, a student at an aviation school, whom she had seen off to the army two days before. She lived alone now. Since early morning she had been in the entrance-gate office with a Polish carbine she did not know how to handle, amidst documents the employes from the security department had abandoned when they left for the settlement where the firing had not abated since the night before.

She had been put in such a position by the whim of circumstances. Her large gray eyes were set in a broad, stern face lined early by wrinkles — there had not been many smiles in her life, but tears had distorted that face many a time. She had known injustice as well as rewards. But all that was something of the past now. There had been other things on her mind ever since she had been put in charge of guarding the Dniprohes where she represented both the security arm and the management of the station. Illiterate though she was, she saw clearly now what had been right and what had been wrong in life. The people who worked on the project had known how to do a good job; at night they were joined by the workers from the local factories who came with their brass bands, and in the foundation pits work, was carried on under floodlights. She also remembered how they had saved the project from the spring floods, without sparing themselves or being afraid of catching cold. Every summer, streams of tourists came to have a look at this fascinating kingdom of electricity where apples ripened right beside the transformers and red roses flamed amid the black forest of metal structures the whole summer through. Now bullets whizzed in this kingdom, soldiers walked around the gardens, enemy snipers fired at the doors and windows, and the electricians had to use the underground passes to reach the open-air substation. Trucks with explosives kept arriving from the opposite bank. She thought it would have been better had she gone blind so she wouldn't have to see the dynamite being packed in the dam where every drop of concrete, every steel rod of the frameworks seemed to have been put there by her own hands, where everything down to the last screw had been planned not by engineers but by herself.

A special freedom and purity of nature reigned at the Dniprohes. Even the birds loved it. The swallows constructed whole colonies of nests by the floodgates and in the most inaccessible places on the concrete ledges. All that spring, a cuckoo had been calling in the maze of girders of a high crane rising over the dam, an unlikely place for a cuckoo which preferred willow trees and groves. It had untiringly promised a long life to the Dniprohes? So had it been nothing but a lie?

Old Man Dnieper had seen many a woe, but this one was incomparable with anything of the past centuries. How many times had we boasted that we would beat the enemy on his own soil, but here, the whizzing bullets pinging against the concrete brought death to the very grounds of the station. So where are you, generals, with your science of warfare? Where are your planes and armor to shield the troops who held back the enemy in gory fighting while others were placing explosives in the dam?

During the second half of the day, the number of wounded was swelling.

Two soldiers approached the entrance gate, supporting a third, almost dragging him along the asphalt, for he must have been a heavy man. His helmet had slipped low over his eyes and blood trickled out of his mouth.

"Here, bring him over here," Polia said, showing them through the open gates into the shady garden in which the grass had been cut not so long ago and was still drying in swaths on the ground. The wounded man was put down on a swath in the shade of an apple tree. His chest and stomach had been ineptly bandaged with a bed sheet that had turned deep red from the blood and looked like the taffeta tables are covered with during meetings.

"Take my helmet off," the wounded man asked.

The helmet strap must have been pressing into his throat.

They removed the helmet.

One of the two who had brought him looked somewhat feeble-eyed and had a stubble of red hair, the other one was also unshaven but had a swarthy Gypsylike complexion. Both stood sorrowfully over their comrade.

"What is that smell?" the wounded man asked feebly. "Could it really be hay?"

He probably found it strange to be smelling hay at the Dniprohes.

Apart from hay, the fragrance of ripe varietal apples stood in the air. Stalks of mowed weeds pushed up out of the ground where he had been put to rest, and the apples that had fallen from the trees covered the stubble. A glistening red apple lying by his shoulder had been speared by a stalk on impact and oozed juice. After the stench of powder, explosives and gas, the wounded man must have been keenly aware of the aromatic fragrance of the sun-warmed apples.

"Water," he wheezed.

Polia made for the entrance gate where she had a barrel of water, but the lean swarthy man who looked like a Gypsy stopped her:

"Don't, Polia. He mustn't drink."

On hearing her name, she gave him an astonished look.

"Who are you, since you know my name?"

"Remember Kolosovsky, I'm his son."

"Is it really you? Bohdan, isn't it? I wouldn't have recognized you for anything."

"But I recognized you right away."

Yes, it was Kolosovsky's son. In the dry glitter of the hazel eyes as well as in the long face and inborn martial bearing, there was an unmistakable resemblance to his father, the Red Army officer whom everybody at the Dniprohes knew before he was arrested during the Yezhov purges. When the smart looking, mustached Kolosovsky, Sr., conducted exercises with the Dniprohes regiment, Polia saw many times the officer's starry-eyed youngster who mixed freely with the men after school, probably having made friends among them. The boy literally grew up in the regiment. All this seemed but yesterday, and here she saw this tall swarthy young man standing before her with a stubbly face that had turned so dark from the sun. His uniform was covered with the dirt of trenches and with blood, while his strong hairy hand clutched a submachine gun of Soviet make which very few soldiers had at that time.

Before he left, Kolosovsky, Jr., bent over the wounded man as if he wanted to ask him something or hear what he had to say.

And hear it he did:

"I hadn't lived my fill... I hadn't drunk of beauty..."

When Kolosovsky straightened up, tears glistened in his eyes.

"Take good care of him, Polia. We're leaving our best friend with you."

"I'd be glad to take care of all of you..."

Before she had managed to ask Kolosovsky what was going on in the settlement, he and his red-headed friend were already by the entrance gate; he glanced around for the last time, and the two of them rushed toward the orchards enveloped in the smoke of battle.

"Water, water," the wounded man wheezed again, moving his head as if the helmet strap was choking him, although the helmet was lying upturned nearby and the sun beat down on it.

"You mustn't drink, sonny."

"I can do anything now," he moaned fitfully. "I'm burning inside."

The young man was evidently of a strong constitution, for the blood of his life was oozing out of his mouth effusively, yet he lived on. His intestines were torn and so was his chest, but his heart beat furiously in defiance of death. He wheezed and kept gasping for breath.

"I hadn't lived my fill..."

His lackluster eyes drifted upward to the metal structures against which bullets pinged bringing down white splinters of shattered insulators.

Fumbling in the blood-soaked tatters of his shirt at the belt, he produced a small black object.

"Take this, please."

Polia guessed it was the locket of death she had heard about. She opened it clumsily and took out a strip of paper: Stepura Andriy Minovich...

She did not finish it, for the telephone in the entrance-gate office rang persistently.

"Have you gone deaf over there, or what?" she heard the angry voice of the engineer on duty in the receiver. "Leave your post and come up here immediately."

"And what about the documents?"

"To hell with the documents!"

"What about the wounded?"

"Send them over here, too."

"Can't they simply go up the dam?"

"No, the nazis are already plastering it with mortar shells. We're withdrawing through the tunnel. Hurry up, we can't wait!"

She heard the engineer bang down the receiver.

Only now did Polia realize the full extent of the danger. There was only one thing left — to grab her bundle and run! The bundle she had brought in the morning was ready at hand. But what about the wounded and the heaps of blank passes? In the offices, there were still cabinets crammed full of papers her betters had once so respectfully called "documents" — what should she do with them?

No, she could not leave it at that!

She grabbed the bundle with her personal belongings stuffed into a huge pillowcase, shook everything out of it, and quickly started to fill it with folders, order books and papers. She had never thought that paper could be so heavy, for she could barely lift the pillowcase which now contained a whole office. Lest the inkwell fall into the enemy's hands, she grabbed it off the desk so vehemently the ink was slung to the opposite wall and ran down it in streams and blotches.

The wounded had already left the garden; there was only that Stepura, Andriy Minovich, lying in his former place in a pool of blood.

"What am I to do with you?" she asked, stepping up to him. "How can I take you along?"

But the next moment she recoiled from the man who was lying calm and motionless before her. His eyes were closed and his parched lips no longer begged for water. Polia's heart contracted with pain: why hadn't she given him Dnieper water so he could drink his fill! He hadn't had his fill of the Dnieper water or of beauty... Who would bury him here? The Zaporozhian orchards would rustle for him, the sacred Dnieper would churn, and the Dniprohes would be his tombstone!

The firing and ominous rumble drew nearer, and moments later the greasy side of a tank flashed amid the orchards. Breaking trees in its path, it lumbered toward the open-air substation, gouging up flowerbeds, crushing blooming roses, and tearing power lines.

Short of breath and bent double under the weight of the stuffed pillowcase, Polia ran clumsily down the slope to the tunnel. She was not afraid of anything and did not start at the sound of whining bullets, protected as she was by the bundle of documents that kept slipping from her shoulders onto her head and seemed to be pushing her onward. The bullets whizzed by on all sides, glancing off insulators and metal pylons.

When Polia, breathless and disheveled, ran up to the engineer, electricians and wounded soldiers, who had gathered at the tunnel entrance, and took the burden off her shoulders, everyone gasped: the pillowcase was riddled by bullets, and papers stuck out of the ragged holes.

"What made you lug away those office records?" Ivan Artemovich asked with a frown.

"I just couldn't leave any documents to them," Polia said, looking round from where she had come running.

By that time, enemy tanks were freely wheeling over the substantial grounds of the Dniprohes, crushing orchards and firing incessantly.

The bullets did not reach the tunnel entrance so far. From this vantage point it could be seen that the enemy was placing precision mortar fire on the dam, although there was not a single living soul on it.

When everybody started to move off and Polia reached for her pillowcase, an officer in a blood-stained service shirt, a lieutenant she knew from the security unit, came up to her. He bent over the stuffed pillowcase, angrily fumbled among the papers for something, then took a matchbox from his pocket, struck a match, and in a minute, all the documents were ablaze.

"So that's all? And I tried so hard..."

"For which effort I thank you very much."

Of all the documents, there was one left — the

logbook with the last entry Ivan Artemovich was holding under his arm. With it he entered the tunnel.

The entrance to the tunnel was half-covered with sandbags. Previously a truck could easily drive through the tunnel, but now it was packed so full of explosives a man could barely move in it.

"What's that barricade at the entrance for?" the wounded men asked.

The engineer kept silent. He knew that the pile of sandbags had been placed there to enhance the effect of the blast which would rattle the whole structure from inside very soon.

As they moved deeper into the tunnel, damp and cold hit their faces. Water splashed like in a mine, thick cables ran along the walls everywhere, and icicles of lime washed out of the concrete by ground water hung down from the roof like stalactites.

The engineer, the lieutenant, the electricians and Polia walked up front in a group followed by a long line of wounded men whose tread filled the tunnel with rumble. The line seemed endless. Some of the men were carried, others were helped along, and so the progress of the line was slow. Far from everyone realized the danger of this march, nor did they have any idea what a dark titanic power hung over their heads now in millions of tons of tumultuously churning water.

How slowly they were moving! the engineer thought. We should have covered that stretch at a clip, for the demolition men won't wait or spare us, once the enemy gets to the dam.

While ordering Ivan Artemovich by telephone to get the people together and take them through the tunnel to the left bank, the chief engineer had not told him everything. But judging by the alarmingly nervous ring in the chief's voice, Ivan Artemovich understood that everything had been decided and was ready. The only thing left was to press the button. When would that happen? His feet hurried on of their own accord, he wanted to break into a run, but the wounded could not run; they could not be abandoned, and so, turning round now and then, he urged them to hurry up.

One of the wounded limping along on a stick, mumbled discontentedly:

"There's nowhere to hurry any more."

"Oh yes, there is."

"Maybe you'll tell me where, then?"

Ivan Artemovich had no choice but to tell them the truth.

"The dam will be blown up any minute now."

A clamor of alarm rolled down the tunnel.

"That can't be!"

"Oh yes, it will happen soon."

"When?"

"Maybe in an hour. Maybe in a minute, or even right now!"

With curses and groans, the wounded set forth at a quicker pace.

The deeper they walked into the tunnel, the narrower it became, and the wet concrete vault covered with the lime blotches hydraulic engineers call "white death" seemed to be getting lower. Throughout all these years, the "white death" had not eaten the walls away or prevailed over the dam, whereas the black death of war was already hovering over the trudging men with the immense mass of concrete doomed to destruction all around them. The engineer was not the only one who was grateful to the designers of the dam who had foreseen the tunnel.

But would it save them? Would they manage to slip through these concrete vaults to the other bank, or had the fuze already been lit? Perhaps in a moment, the man-made cave would heave and burst asunder, and thousands of tons of water would pull them into the black void forever?

"Hurry up, comrades! Step on it!"

The tunnel seemed endless, and it looked like no matter how much ground they covered, there would always be this dampness, lime icicles, and the sullen echo resounding through the otherwise silent vaults which no sounds from above could penetrate. Right then, there was only the sound of shuffling feet, falling drops, the heavy, labored breath of struggling people, and the unbearable anticipation of a sudden explosion.

"Halt!"

"What's the matter?"

"The tunnel's blocked."

A pile of crates with TNT rose out of the darkness ahead, barricading the passage. The crates were so tightly packed no mouse would have been able to slip through between them. It was a fatal impasse that made them feel like being buried alive.

"Comrades, there is a way out!" the engineer's voice came suddenly.

In one place between the crates, there was a narrow space the demolitionists had left for the escapees. It was just big enough for one man to squeeze through.

They started to crawl in a disorderly fashion over the crates, one shoving the other to get ahead in the huddle. It certainly checked their progress.

"Get the wounded through first!" the lieutenant from the security unit ordered.

It was a torture for the wounded with shattered bones to be squeezed through the narrow space regardless of their groans and screams. The whole procedure took an unbearably long time while the decisive moment continued to approach relentlessly. Polia, Ivan Artemovich and the lieutenant stood to one side waiting patiently until everyone had passed, after which they followed.

The explosion did not overtake them in the tunnel. When they emerged from the darkness, the first thing that dazzled their eyes was a mass of red clouds. They were almost like the bright red clouds at dawn when the sun rose from behind the Dnieper cliffs. But at that time, the sun was sinking behind the dam and cranes of the Dniprohes into a ruddily glowing steppe.

The senior officers from army headquarters had gathered on the bank by the floodgates. Indifferent to their rank, Polia immediately lit into all those colonels and generals, and swallowing tears, gave them a piece of her mind about the poorly organized defense. They did not answer her, but kept peering silently through their field glasses at the far bank and the power station.

The director's chauffeur Mikola Strashny came up to the Dniprohes employees and excitedly told them that he had been trucking explosives to the tunnel that day, too.

"Imagine, they didn't even have any TNT around, so it was flown in to Zaporizhya by plane!"

"A lot you know," Polia said angrily. "On the other bank is a whole train car packed with explosives. They left it behind just like that."

Standing a little apart from the officers and civilians were the director and chief engineer of the Dniprohes as well as the People's Commissar for Electric Stations who was acting as the representative of General Headquarters. Ivan Artemovich came up and handed him the logbook.

The commissar took it, and after looking through it, said with a frown:

"Comrade engineer, in a year's time you'll be taking over your watch again."

Then the secretaries of the Regional Party Committee arrived and also trained their field glasses on the far bank and the dam which was still being shelled by mortars.

A special messenger showed up and reported to his chief that the residents of the waterfront neighborhoods had refused to move. He was referring to the part of town which had appeared below the dam during the past few years.

"Why did they refuse?"

"They don't believe the dam will be blown up."

A group of women streetcar drivers came up to find out when the current would be switched on, since their streetcars had stopped. Nobody answered them, but they kept on waiting without knowing the dam would be blown up any minute now.

The sun set, the sky flecked with fleecy red clouds darkened, and white twilight draped everything around, but the people on the bank did not take their eyes off the grand structure, as if they wanted to have a long last look at it. The kilometer-long crest of the dam as well as the dozens of buttresses, floodgates and spillways stood still in the deepening twilight as if waiting for something.

The explosion that followed was more like an earthquake that jarred the granite banks. The engineers and workers took off their caps and looked on tensely as the dam gradually broke up like in a slow-motion film. The breach was immediately filled by a roaring mountain of churning water, and above it appeared the black

cloud of the explosion expanding in the twilight glow. From that moment on, this was a realm where a different power reigned, the power of destruction. Everything roared and groaned in the black chaos of the breach, and the mad element of water raged with wild force. It wrecked what had not yet been destroyed and thundered amidst the ruins, sending up a mighty spray.

Like a voice out of the past, the tumultuous roar of water crashing down rapids split the air over the twilight-draped Dnieper. There was something primevally savage and menacing in the subterranean rumble of the watery chasm.

Deafened by the drumming roar and rumble, Polia stood among the people, frenziedly holding on to the concrete of the parapet as she stared at the black, impetuously gushing wound of her Dniprohes. It was a moment when scalding tears blurred her vision against her will, when the world was sinking into darkness and she wanted to die.

45

During the night, Soviet tanks approached Zaporizhyya. Much as they had hurried to the defense of the Dniprohes, they were a couple of hours late. They assembled in the Sixth Settlement, their cannon trained on the Dnieper. What worried the tankmen most at that moment was how to get to the right bank and whether a bridge could be thrown across the breach in the dam. A reconnoitering party sent there got all the way to the breach and saw that the idea of a bridge was out of the question. The dam had been blasted eighty meters wide, and down in the chasm of jagged concrete the water seethed with supernatural force. There was a shapeless mountain of broken concrete slabs, some of them hanging on reinforcement rods high above the water. The dashing waterfall below thundered so violently it made the extant part of the dam tremble.

Flames roared out of the power station where the windings of the generators were ablaze, like everything else that had still been in operation earlier that day.

On the right bank, flares exploded in the sky now and again, and the sounds of battle carried across the river.

Those who had failed to reach the left bank or had not been issued withdrawal orders held their ground.

Kolosovsky was among the troops who had remained on the right bank.

Given the rapid flux of events, one day of fighting was tantamount to a lifetime. In the morning, Kolosovsky was in charge of a section; then he took over a platoon after its commander had been wounded; an hour later, the company commander was killed and Kolosovsky took command of the company, or rather, what remained of it. From the Company CO, he had inherited the Soviet submachine gun which had mowed down quite a few nazis that day.

Besides Vasya, Dukhnovich and a few others from the company's initial actions strength, there were also men from the local home guard, a raiding battalion, and some stray troops. The local boys who had not yet experienced fear volunteered to go on reconnaissance missions and from time to time brought back grenades without fuses of fuses without grenades.

The day had been a horrible one, vicious and straining. In the morning, they held back enemy infantry who rolled up in armored troop carriers to the outskirts of the settlement, and after disembarking, rushed headlong into the attack with drunken shouts. With cocked heads and submachine guns at their hips, the nazis made straight for the orchards and fired blindly.

Bohdan let them get nearer for close quarter combat and mounted counterattacks several times. Going into a counterattack produced a strange sensation which made him unafraid of anything, even death, but after the battle, he couldn't light a cigarette for his trembling hands, which disgusted him. When they had pushed the enemy into the depth of the settlement, they held him under fire from the local recreation center, from lofts, from behind the bushes in the public gardens, and from verandahs. On one such verandah, Bohdan was almost killed when a German grenade with a long handle landed by his feet and he kicked it around the corner of the house at the last moment. Then they beat off an attack of tankettes that had burst into the streets. In this engagement, Stepura was mortally wounded. At times, feats of valor are accomplished out of despair or

necessity. Stepura, however, performed his feat consciously: he rushed from an orchard with an antitank grenade raised high to head off a tankette and stopped it, but when the grenade went off, it maimed him hideously.

That day, they saw the enemy at close quarter, tired at short range on the greenish-gray uniforms crawling across gardens, heard orders jabbered in a foreign tongue from the depths of the orchards and from behind buildings, and occasionally fought in close combat.

Then strafers swooped down with an ear-splitting roar. A dense pall of smoke and dust mantled the area where they wheeled and ravaged the ground with fire, and after their crosslike shadows flitted across the yards and disappeared, the pilots probably convinced that everything living had been rubbed out down there, the men who had survived the attack crawled out from the bushes and cellars, and Kolosovsky again regrouped them into a fighting-trim unit.

In the brief lulls between the skirmishes that had pressed Kolosovsky's unit almost right to the Dniprohes, they kept waiting for a withdrawal order to come from the left bank. Kolosovsky's heart contracted with pain every time he looked at the left bank which could previously have been reached within a matter of minutes, but now had been extended to a horrible distance that might prove insurmountable in the end. At moments it seemed he would not get out of there alive, and the panzers would crush them to a pulp and tatters that would blaze on the Dnieper's granite rocks like the remains of the Paris Communards at the gray wall of Père-Lachaise.

But no withdrawal order reached them, after all: either they had been forgotten, held for dead, or the headquarters runner had been killed by a bullet half-way.

At twilight, Kolosovsky and his composite unit were still on the right bank. There were a lot of such stray troops, either large or small, hastily organized of particolored and desperate stragglers who were now deciding what to do for themselves.

Kolosovsky's unit waited for night to fall to attempt to fight their way across the dam. Zaporizhya was ablaze

after almost uninterrupted air raids on its factory district throughout the day. Brief dog fights had also taken place over the Dnieper and Khortitsya Isle, and even now AA guns fired into the evening sky as if they were hammering something into it. From Khortitsya Isle came the clatter of heavy-caliber machine guns which sent echos hurling back from the Dnieper cliffs far and wide after each burst.

Kolosovsky was readying his men for the spurt across the dam when the powerful explosion suddenly rocked the whole area. They could only guess what it meant, unable to believe that the dam had been blown up and their escape route cut off completely. Still, they clung to the hope of fighting their way across. The enemy did not bother them with fire any more, only sending up flares now and again. The flares dropped to the ground nearby, hissing venomously like snakes.

Kolosovsky decided to send scouts to find out what enemy strength defended the approaches to the dam. Among the volunteers was Dukhnovich who that day had astounded Kolosovsky by his self-possession and ability to find his bearings under the most complex circumstances. Kolosovsky appointed Vasya to be in charge of the scout team.

The return of the team was awaited impatiently. Taking cover behind bushes and in ditches, the men talked in whispers about the probable outcome of the mission.

"That's the last you'll see of them," Kolosovsky heard a hoarse voice affected by liquor, from behind a bush nearby. "If they manage to get through, they won't give a dam what happens to us. But they'll never make it. What do you think that big bang was? The dam's been blown up. Right now they're on the other side, and we might as well do what we like... The only thing they're good at is ordering 'Forward,' 'Hold on to the last man,' but when we're driven from pillar to post and everybody realizes we have to take the back track, nobody's got a tongue in his mouth. They've made us suckers by telling us there'd be a signal, we'd be recalled, and nobody would forget us, but how did it all end up?"

"There's supposed to be an order forbidding any retreat," came the reply.

"Those who issue orders are the best off, because they're far away," the discontented voice muttered on. "But here we've been left to the mercy of fate and Papa Stalin can't help us at all. We're sitting tight all right, but what's the purpose of it?"

"So what do you suggest — surrender?"

"No, just skip it and go home."

"To your warm stove I suppose? Or maybe you'll hide under you wife's skirt? Do you think they won't find you there?"

"If they do, so what? They're civilized people."

"Civilized, you say? Then why are they clawing our land to pieces?"

"Stop wising me up on politics. I'm so fed up with it, it makes me puke..."

Unable to listen to this muttering any longer, Kolosovsky crawled up to the men and asked:

"Who's letting his tongue loose here?"

"This one," the soldiers said, pointing to a big-faced man reclining on what looked like a bundle. "Why did you stop? Respond."

Kolosovsky crawled nearer.

"Who are you?"

On recognizing the commander, the big-faced character made as if he wanted to get to his feet, but instead squatted down.

"Private Khrapko."

"So you think the best thing is to go home?"

"Why not?" he said, a ring of impudence cutting through his voice. "Why should we all croak here? What good have I seen anyway? I haven't had one decent meal in my lifetime!"

"Oh you poor hungry maw," a young home guard said derisively. "Just look what a phiz he's grown on such a meager diet."

"That vestibule of your is just asking for a good duke," another soldier remarked.

"You better watch your tongue, man," Khrapko snarled back.

"Listen now, Khrapko," Kolosovsky said. "Such blabbing might..."

Kolosovsky did not finish, because the scout team returned. Vasya sat down on his haunches, and still

panting, reported that the dam was guarded by an armored car and a couple of jabbering, laughing Germans.

"If we lick them, the dam is ours!"

Kolosovsky made up his mind without wavering.

"Get ready for the breakthrough," he ordered under his breath. The order was passed down the line in a whisper. "You stay at my side, Khrapko. Have you got a grenade?"

"Yes."

"You go first."

"Why me?" Khrapko jumped to his feet. "What about you?"

"I'm going, too, don't worry, but you'll go first," Kolosovsky said, angrily pushing him forward. "Go and die. Die before our eyes, you traitor!"

Khrapko pushed his way through the bushes at a crouch, and following on his heels was Kolosovsky, grenade in hand, leading the unit stealthily on.

The Germans had not expected an attack. They were just talking loudly by the armored car when Kolosovsky's unit stole up to them, and a couple of grenades were enough to get the enemy out of the way.

The men's boots clattered loudly on the dam when they crossed it at a run. The dam was theirs again! Kolosovsky's heart raced with the heady joy of victory. A reawakened energy was irresistibly drawing him to the life on the opposite bank. Their hope of getting to safety any moment now mounted with every step. The roar of the waterfall neared. There was something alarming and ominous in it, but they ran on impulsively.

Kolosovsky almost fell into the abyss that suddenly appeared at his feet. Someone actually did fall into the black raging whirlpool below either from despair or by accident.

"Who fell down there?"

No answer followed.

"Is Khrapko here?"

Khrapko was missing: either he had gone over the edge himself or somebody had pushed him into the jagged breach.

Kolosovsky was out of breath standing there at the gap. The extant part of the dam vibrated under his feet

from the pressure of the water that seethed below and hurled spray into his hot face.

They had fought their way on to the dam only to see this black raging void of water and then turn back — Fate seemed to be exposing them to ghastly mockery indeed. They had no other choice but turn back.

"Follow me!" Kolosovsky ordered. "We'll break through in another place! We'll get across in the reed-covered flats!"

Moments later the men were running across the dam back into the darkness of the right bank. The Germans had no time to come to their senses when Kolosovsky's men rushed past the dead guard by the dam; pursued only by bursting flares and indiscriminate tracer fire, the winded, utterly exhausted men disappeared in the dark orchards and the metal maze of the forest of transformers.

The Soviet troops on the left bank heard what was going on across the Dnieper. The commander of their army was still alive. Eventually he, too, would be fighting in encirclement and meet a hero's death, along with his staff, in the Zaporozhian steppes. Zaporizhya would hold out for a few more weeks. Khortitsya would be recaptured from the enemy for some time, and the Secretary of the Party Central Committee would utter the popular phrase: "What are you boasting about? The Zaporozhian Cossacks never surrendered their isle!" The phrase sounded like a reproach they would remember for the rest of the war. For another few weeks, the blast furnaces would be cut by electric torches and taken out of the town in parts, and thousands of train cars would roll eastward with factory equipment.

But the bleeding of the largest wound in the Dniprohes could not be stopped by anything. Day and night it would bleed with an unending avalanche of water that added to the horror of war the horror of the elements: the flood submerged the lower part of the town and descended upon the troops who got stuck in the reed-covered flats. When the water subsided in Lake Lenin above the dam, the old village of Kichkas resurfaced, and one after another, the black rapids covered with green slime appeared and broke into a roar that echoed far and wide.

Still remotely far was the day when our regiments would force the Dnieper in a withering attack and establish their first bridgeheads on the right bank. As yet it was the nazis who were establishing bridgeheads in their furious incursion into Left-Bank Ukraine across the Dnieper as their panzer armies pushed on and on to the east, overrunning ever more territory engulfed by conflagrations and scorched in the heat and oppressive dust of that black summer.

Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia had already fallen into the enemy's hands. Nazi divisions were being amassed at the walls of Leningrad. Moscow was preparing for a difficult defense. Smolensk was ablaze, and partisan warfare was spreading through the forests of Byelorussia. The time would come when the forests of Bryansk Region, Byelorussia, and Ukraine would strike terror in enemy hearts; the snowy fields around Moscow would turn black with their corpses, and frostbitten columns of German soldiers would be escorted by our troops to POW camps. But so far, the self-confident vagrants were still cocksure in their supposed impunity, and even when captured, they would chatter away about when and which of our cities would fall, when the German armies would reach the Volga and the Urals, and when we would meet our dreary end.

Millions of people in Ukraine took to the roads — the hard roads of retreat, exhaustion and despair. The columns of evacuees blacked with dust and sorrow trudged down the roads, their retreat covered by troops who were just as black and wearied. Officers and commissars in ragged, sweaty shirts and the indefatigable toilers of war — privates, regular and irregular troops — now bore the whole brunt of the fiercest enemy attacks. Retreating eastward as they did, they faced the west constantly, confronting all the tanks, mortars and motorized divisions advancing from that direction.

The enemy paid dearly for the battle on the Dnieper and the left-bank bridgeheads. Hitler and his generals, however, did not want to look back at their losses. In the middle of September, the enemy's motorized units assumed the offensive to the north of the Kremenchuk



bridgehead, breached our defenses along a 200-kilometer front, and after linking up with the panzer groups around Lohvitsya, cut off a considerable number of Soviet troops of the South-West Front which heroically defended Kiev and then held the line on the left bank from Kiev to the east. For many days and nights, the battles raged on over large territories, and our troops doggedly fought their way out of the encirclement, dying in unequal combat that had sapped their strength to the ultimate limit. Among those who fell were Front Commander Colonel-General Kirponiss along with the officers of his headquarters, and the writer Arkadiy Gaidar. Pockets of encircled troops kept up resistance while the panzer group of von Kleist swung away to the south, captured Orikhiv and advanced on Mariupol, thereby seriously threatening our troops in the south with encirclement. The appearance of enemy tanks in our rear in the Zaporozhian steppes was sudden and unexpected. The grain that had to be moved eastward was still lying in golden piles on the collective farm stackyards, and caravans of evacuees were moving down the roads, when fighting — just as sudden and stiff as anywhere else that summer — broke out in this area as well. On the last lines of our defenses, the warring sides clashed again and again in battle, as desperate as only battles in encirclement can be. Breaking up into large and small groups, our troops fought their way out with indomitable persistence. Then one day, the commanding general of the army gathered all those who had remained alive. Addressing the wagon and truck drivers, staff officers, and even wounded from the field hospitals under his command who were lined up at dusk in a steppe gully overgrown with blackthorn, he said:

“Comrades, we are surrounded. Our fate is not to be envied. But as long as we hold arms, we shall remain soldiers of our country.”

After abandoning his car in the gully and refusing to be flown to safety by plane, he led the remainder of his army against the enemy. The unequal battle with enemy ambushes raged the whole night through. Its dramatic fierceness had no limits as our troops fought back from every available cover. At dawn, the ground around the shelterbelt running behind the village was covered with

heaps of dead soldiers, Soviet and nazi alike; the general was among the dead, lying on the ground flanked by two dead soldiers.

The Germans buried him with military honors and even erected a small monument to him, giving the valor of this Soviet general its due (at that time, they still allowed themselves such gestures). After the war, the steppe village was named for the general, and in the center of it a tall obelisk was unveiled with the inscription: Lieutenant-General Smirnov Andrei Kirilovich (1895—1941).

Armies perished, which made some people believe that this was the end. But it was only the beginning. Even in those days of bitterness when many fell in unequal battle, others were breaking through the encirclement, moving eastward across the steppe. The vast plains still had astonishingly quiet places which had not yet been disturbed by the rumble of war. There were still sanctuaries of calm, where bright estuaries glittered on the edge of the steppes, and where birds, unfrightened by shooting, were peacefully foraging by the sea before their autumn migration.

47

Two girls were walking along the empty beach by the sea bordering on the Nogai Steppe.

"Is this where you were born, Olga?"

"Yes, Tania. Over there is the white lighthouse on the Bilosaraiska Kossa spit jutting out into the sea. I remember that lighthouse blinking since I was a child."

"Does it still work?"

"We'll wait till evening and see."

In the broad depression stretching along the sea, the calm mirror surfaces of estuaries glimmered here and there, broken by strips of land suffused with gentle purple-blue.

"What's that?" Tania asked.

"It's the *kermek* blooming. That's what we call our everlasting flowers. They bloom the whole autumn through until the first frosts. Look, eagles!"

The girls stopped and watched a rare sight: the birds were wheeling grandly high up in the sky from which the world must have looked quite differently.

"Are they real eagles?"

"Yes, real steppe eagles. They circle over the steppe and sea like that throughout the whole summer."

For some time they watched the eagles soaring, yet their thoughts were earthbound and centered on people.

"You should see what a lot of quails, starlings and other birds gather here toward autumn," Olga said as they walked on. "The whole seaside swarms with birds."

Screaming white gulls flew overhead.

"We call these gulls *kahantsi* and *heroliks*..."

"How quiet it is here but for the cries of the gulls."

"There's no one out on the sea now. I remember standing on the seashore once when I was a little girl and seeing white sails drifting one after another across a calm sea far out toward the horizon. There was a blue haze over the sea and the fantastically beautiful sails that were dazzling white in the sun looked like caravels. I asked Mother what they were. They're going for clay, she said. How simple and mundane it sounded: going for clay..."

There was as yet no trace of war on this quiet seashore which seemed to be at the end of the world, and neither the gulls nor the eagles had ever heard shots, except from hunters. It was a deserted, barren place, with only fishing boats, skiffs, and barks stand out black on the shore, lying there somewhat forlorn and abandoned, some of them cracked from neglect.

The girls sat down for a rest on a felucca. It was a long time since they had experienced such inward calm.

"That's the present we get in return for what we've lived through, Tania."

They had been swept into the whirlpool of events like birds hurled into the air by a storm. After digging trenches, they returned to Kharkiv. The city was in a noisy turmoil and cheerless, its streets blocked by crow's feet and sandbags. There was an abundance of food everywhere; butter was on sale on the square by Red Army Hall, and the soldiers simply put it in their helmets if they hadn't anything else to take it in.

At the university, which the girls visited first, they

came across Mariana among other acquaintances who had just received their stipends. Her grief had made her somewhat estranged. She told them that she was working at a factory which would soon be evacuated.

"Are you going with it?"

"I don't know," she said tersely, shooting a meaningful glance at the door of the personnel department by which they had met her. "I want to stay."

"What for?"

"For anything... radio operator, saboteur, anything I can do. I've got nothing to lose now," she said, an edge of embitterment in her voice.

She parted with the girls almost coldly.

There were a lot of strangers sitting on and around their bundles in the lecture halls and corridors. These were students who had been evacuated from Kiev University. Their conversations revolved around the fighting at Kiev in which many of their fellow students had taken part as volunteers. For both the Kiev and Kharkiv students the future looked the same—evacuation to Kzyl-Orda somewhere in the plains of Central Asia where they were to find refuge.

The girls, however, were far from contemplating such plans. The way they saw it, their future was with those they had to find by all means. After all, there was a flicker of hope. From the brief letters awaiting Tania and Olga at their department, the girls learned that Bohdan and Stepura were wounded and could be visited, so no force could keep the girls in Kharkiv now. That same day they set out to Mariupol, from which Bohdan had sent his letters, and agreed to visit Stepura in his Donbas hospital on the way.

They missed Stepura at the hospital, for he, too, as they were informed, was in Mariupol at the same strange sounding convalescent battalion Bohdan was at. They rushed off to Mariupol to bring the boys news that the war was over for them and the students would be recalled to continue their studies at the university.

They already imagined being with their boys again, riding together in a train to the plains of Central Asia.

"It's simply wonderful," Olga said, "that our country's so big and there are places beyond the Volga, the Urals, and in the Kazakh steppes no bullet or war will reach!"



In Mariupol they met with bitter disappointment. From Lymar, whom they came across among the headquarters clerks, they learned that the boys had been sent to the front line again two days before.

Tania gave vent to her tears for the first time since the outbreak of the war. After she parted with Bohdan, she had never cried (at least Olga had never seen her tears), but now she completely lost control of herself. From that day on, a brutal stubbornness appeared in her nature.

"Probably that's what having Fate's hand against you really means," Olga said dully, dropping her eyes to the ground. "Being right beside them and... Still, let's hope, Tania," she said, putting her arm around Tania's shoulder.

The only comforting news was that the boys, as Lymar told them, had left in good spirits, and after their departure headquarters received a message that Bohdan had been decorated with an order for some feat of valor he had performed back at the Dnieper.

"An Order of the Red Banner is something they rarely hand out nowadays. So you ought to be proud, Tania," Lymar said and boasted he would be recalled and transferred somewhere else, but Tania already wasn't listening to him. She did not hear anything in the world but the voice of her heart which longed to follow Bohdan and seek him at every possible front line.

Where could they go now? they asked each other. Back to the university?

"No, never," Tania said.

She simply could not imagine herself studying while he was fighting. To find herself in a different year from Bohdan was absolutely unacceptable to her. No, she would wait, she would wait until he came back and they would continue their studies together.

They did not want to leave this place, for it had become dear to both of them, dear if only for the reason that their sweethearts had been here convalescing and writing letters back to the university. It had been their last address and the location of a rendezvous that did not take place. The girls stayed so they would somehow be closer to the ones they loved. There was something symbolic, a sort of a mark of loyalty in their decision.

To legalize their status, they went to the YCL committee in the town and applied for work, any kind of work, for there was nothing in the world they would not be willing to do for the war effort. For several days they worked building an airfield in the steppe. Then they joined a hospital, donated blood, and gathered vegetables for the wounded on a plot the hospital had been allotted outside town. From morning till night, they picked tomatoes. On the road passing the plantation, they saw trains of evacuees — children grown old from tears, women giving birth on moving wagons — traveling on to Taganrog day after day. The only thing the girls could do to remedy the misfortunes of those people was give them tomatoes.

After the vegetables had been brought in, the hospital was transferred to another place, and the communiques from the front line now carried the name of a new direction of the enemy advance — Melitopol.

Tania had no choice but accept Olga's invitation to go with her to her parents' home.

As they sat on the black, cracked felucca, Tania reached for her little student case, took out Bohdan's photograph and looked at it. She had looked at her chosen one who was the best of all for her so many times before. Could it really be possible that this young man so full of vigor would be killed? Would that youthful smile of his turn to dust, as would his arms that had so passionately embraced her, and his high forehead behind which he had gathered such a lot of knowledge ranging from the Assyrians and Babylonians to the present day?

"What will happen if he is no more, Olga? I simply can't imagine myself without him. I was happy just being with him even when we quarreled and sat in different parts of a lecture hall. Without him, life would lose all its meaning for me."

"Keep chasing away those thoughts," Olga advised. "Why does he have to be killed? You'd be better off imagining him as a hero, a battle-seasoned officer with the Order of the Red Banner on his chest. You've heard it yourself that he got a military decoration."

"I plead in my heart that the bullet will miss him. Am I being superstitious?"

"I guess I am, too."

The girls got up and walked down the beach, past the blue *kermek* and creeping patches of leafless dark-green salt grass that looked very much like the sparse vegetation of a tundra or perhaps Mars.

Ahead of them, a large village sprawled along the coast for several kilometers, and in one place, a cluster of poplars rose almost by the sea.

"We live over there by the poplars."

Tania recalled a cold November evening in Kharkiv when the wind swept the poplar leaves down the lanes in Shevchenko Park as she and Bohdan returned from the late movie. Some of the leaves were still green, but chilled by frost, they rustled down the lanes with a steely sound. Would the leaves ever ring again for her and Bohdan, or was all that something from the distant past which would never come again?

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Olga's home was in complete disarray; preparations for departure were underway. Her mother, a portly, swarthy Greek woman who looked like Olga's elder sister, was tying up bundles when the girls entered the house. The first few seconds she froze in confusion, and then rushed over to embrace her daughter with tears in her eyes.

"I just didn't know what to think, because you hadn't written us a line. And who's this?" she asked, walking over to Tania.

"Tania, my friend," Olga replied. "My best friend."

"That's good. It'll be the merrier with the two of you being together."

After she had promptly sat the girls down to table for lunch as if she knew they were hungry, she went back to her packing and told them what a horrible stir had excited the village since early morning.

Only a few days before, the village people had worked peacefully. Talking about evacuation was regarded as cowardice, since to the west there was still the Dnieper, the Kakhovka defenses, and Melitopol. Thousands of people, some of them all the way from the Central Asia,

were digging antitank ditches, and the invaders were sure to meet their deaths somewhere there in the west. For all that, a telephone message came from the district center ordering them to set the tractors rolling, to drive the cattle beyond the River Kalmius immediately, and to evacuate the families of Party and Soviet functionaries.

Local life was disrupted with a single blow.

"Imagine, Mikhailo's Fedorka went to the front line," the mother said of their neighbors. "Mikhailo was supposed to have been killed, but a couple of days ago he suddenly phoned the Village Soviet from Zakharivka asking for someone from his family to come to the phone. The clerk didn't believe him and said that Mikhailo was dead, which made Mikhailo yell and curse insisting it was him and no one else. His mother and wife came running to the Village Soviet and burst into tears by the telephone, afraid to pick up the receiver. In the end, Fedorka spoke to him. That same day, she asked her field team leader for a gig and drove to see Mikhailo in Zakharivka where his unit was stationed."

A shortish, energetic, long-nosed Greek with a sun-burned face, ran into the house. It was Olga's father. He greeted his daughter, gave Tania a hasty glance, embraced her as if she were one of the family as well, and said almost merrily:

"Mind you, students, stick close to our folks now. We'll meet on the other side of the Kalmius."

He had been a communist since the twenties and was employed as a mechanic at the local machine and tractor station. That day, he was to escort the tractors which were to leave immediately, while the families would follow with the wagons early the next morning.

"Come now, none of that," he said, gently breaking away from his wife who had burst into tears. "We'll be singing with you yet, old girl! In a family chorus, eh?" Even at the moment of parting he recalled what a lot of songs had resounded in their home.

The master of the house picked up the bundle of food that had been prepared for him and rushed out of the house. A moment later, they saw him sitting on a tractor rumbling down the street.

Shortly after, the village street was abuzz: Fedorka

had returned from the front line after slipping out of the encirclement on the gig.

The girl ran to her farmyard which by now was filled with people from every part of the village. Fedorka, a pale-faced young woman with black hair, was standing with a whip by the gig and telling them rapturously about her Mikhailo:

"It was a lie about him being killed. You should see him now. Before he wasn't much to speak about, but now he's a lieutenant commanding an artillery platoon! I saw his gun with my own eyes and a full set of ammo in crates beside it. 'See, what a mess we've been in, but we didn't leave anything behind,' he said to me. 'Our gun might be small, but it takes on their tanks all right!' Somewhere beyond Chernihivka, they had been surrounded and thought it was curtains. One of the lieutenants was so scared stiff he wanted to change his uniform for a private's and asked Mikhailo for his shirt. He gave it away and pulled on the lieutenant's instead. Later on when everything cooled down, Mikhailo came across a general. 'Comrade Lieutenant,' the general stopped him. 'I'm not a lieutenant but a private,' Mikhailo said and told him what had happened. The general heard him out, and said: 'Well, you're a lieutenant from now on. You get this rank for not having lost your head.'"

But the neighbor women wanted to know something else.

"Did you happen to come across my man there?"

"What about mine? And mine?" she was asked from all sides.

"I didn't see any of your men but Hritsko Kharchenko from Bakhtarma; he's on Mikhailo's battery. I cooked supper from them with the woman whose orchard they halted in. I cooked some *kulish* gruel for them, spent the night there, and in the morning, all hell broke loose. Mikhailo took me by the hand and said: 'Well, Fedorka, I'm sending you back home, for we've got some fighting to do. Keep away from the main roads, though; take the back roads instead. Tell the folks back at home that retreat isn't the end yet and don't let them panic. We've got guns and enough ammo, so there's nothing to be afraid of.' He's a brave sort, you know, and a communist besides. He'll get to Berlin yet, mind my words!"

The crowd had not yet dispersed when an army truck with two Red Army soldiers sped into the village from the steppe. They stopped at the farmyard and inquired where the hospital was.

"We're looking for dressing material. There's been a fight at Manhush and our wounded are lying there and have to be picked up. Maybe some of you will go with us?"

"Why not? I'll be the first to go," Fedorka agreed right away. "I've already been there. My husband's a lieutenant."

"We'll go, too," Tania said.

"You see, we're students and have taken a civil defense course," Olga explained to the soldiers.

"Climb in!"

After picking up medicine and bandages in the deserted hospital, they rushed off into the steppe.

On the way, the girls learned from the soldiers that panzer units had broken through somewhere at Berdyansk and were now advancing down the main road toward Mariupol, bypassing the roadside villages. Now the whole seacoast with dozens of collective farms, fish factories, village Soviets and the Bilosaraïska Spit were cut off by the enemy who had left all that outside his attention for the time being, knowing that it would not get away from him anyway.

Saddened and pitifully helpless, the girls grew silent in the back of the truck. What would happen now? Only that morning, they had walked along the sea and delighted in the quiet, not sensing that danger was near, and now all these Ukrainian-Greek villages scattered along the coast of the Sea of Azov, in which they had found their last refuge, were already in danger of being surrounded.

"Cheer up, girls," Fedorka said, seeing their mood. "I've been in an encirclement myself, and I'm still alive for all the trouble I thought I was in. They really looked like a horde except for their motorcycles. But they can't encircle everyone. Troops are like water, you know — they trickle through the fingers."

"They trickle through fingers, you say?" retorted the frowning soldier who kept staring fixedly into the steppe. "Do you know what happened at Chernihivka? Did you

ever see tankmen burning to death in their tanks after their ammo had run out?"

"Don't try to impress me, 'cause I've got a husband fighting out there," Fedorka stuck to her view of things. "My Mikhailo doesn't panic. He's got both ammo and a head on his shoulders. Such a man could slip out of hell right through the devil's fingers. He was a skipper once, and now he's an artillery lieutenant and he told me: hold on, for you're an officer's wife from now on."

Some wagons raced across the steppe at a gallop; they were overtaken by trucks with AA guns aimed at the sky; and along the shelterbelts, abandoned, wounded horses were roaming. The truck with the girls stopped by a tall stand of unmown Sudan-grass. The wounded soldiers crawled out of the grass and greeted them with undisguised joy:

"We'd already given up hope that you'd ever return..."

All the men were very young, and Tania realized that she was involuntarily looking for the face of her dearest among them. He was not there, but instead she noticed a swarthy lieutenant with a dense stubble on his chin, apparently a Caucasian, who bore a slight resemblance to Bohdan. She rushed over to him to bandage his wound. He pulled up his blood-drenched shirt permeated with dust and showed her the gaping wound in his back.

"My lung must be pierced," he said.

"Gorky also had a pierced lung," Tania comforted him, putting on the bandage. "And look how long he lived. You'll live just as long."

The wounded man gave her a grateful look for what she had said.

They had a truckful of wounded now and were just about to move off when one of the men suddenly stunned them:

"Wait a minute, there's still the brigade commissar. He's also been wounded."

"Where is he?" Fedorka asked with a start.

"Over there by the shelterbelt."

They turned toward the edge of the grass stand where it bordered on the dense prickly shrubbery of the shelterbelt. Several men were holding the defense there, each lying on the ground facing the west.

The brigadier commissar was lying on a heavy machine gun among the defenders. His unshaven, grimy face was covered with bruises, and only deep in his sunken eyes was there a lively, stubborn glitter. His head was bound with a dirty bandage and his officer's cap lay on the ground.

"We've come for you," Fedorka called to him. "Climb in here quickly."

He did not stir from his machine gun.

"Climb in I tell you!" the "officer's wife" repeated authoritatively.

"All right, get moving," she heard him reply in a dry commanding voice. "We'll cover you."

"But you're wounded."

"That's none of your concern."

It was obvious that the commissar could not be talked into leaving. They drove off with a peculiar feeling of guilt, for their truck was perhaps going that way for the last time.

In their wake, the whirling dust slowly settled on the road and beclouded the shelterbelt receding in the distance.

The girls involuntarily kept looking back at the shelterbelt where a handful of soldiers and the unyielding commissar had stayed behind to cover the retreating Soviet troops. It was terrible to realize that he had doomed himself to a horrible fate, perhaps even to torture.

As they approached the village, they heard the clatter of the machine gun from the shelterbelt.

"That's a real communist for you," Fedorka said. "He's wounded but refused to leave. For some reason, I knew he wouldn't."

"Why did you think so?" Olga asked.

"Because I've seen people like him. Mikhailo said to me: 'Fedorka, you just can't imagine how dreadful a soldier's shame can be. We can't look people in the face because of our retreat.'"

A dense cloud of black smoke billowed over the village. The oil tanks at the machine and tractor station had been set on fire; wagons rolled down to the sea at a clip.

"Move off to the spit!" the chairman of the Village Soviet shouted to the girls when their truck stopped

at the hospital. "District center doesn't respond to our telephone calls any more." To prove his point, he showed them a receiver with torn wires which he clutched in his hands.

For all the hurry, they dropped in to Fedorka's house so she could pick up a few of her things, and stopped by Olga's house, but the house and farmyard were empty except for a whimpering dog that had been left behind.

On the main road, they overtook a group of women, among them Olga's mother who was out of breath as she could barely keep pace with the wagon loaded with bundles and bags.

"Wait for us on the spit!" she shouted to the girls.

Their truck also rushed down to the sea. It looked like every living thing from all along the seacoast was rushing to the spit on foot and by wagon. Even a tractor was pulling a combine harvester in that direction.

When the girls arrived at the spit with the wounded, they were taken aback by what they saw: by the sea stood a fleet of tightly parked tractors and in between them men armed with crowbars, Olga's father included, were walking around and wrecking the engines. The column of tractors had failed to reach Mariupol, so it turned back halfway, and lest the booty fall into enemy hands, the new Kharkiv-made tractors were being smashed.

Farther away, from the depths of the spit where the ships of the fishing fleet lined the coast, came the noise of a milling crowd of agitated people; chairmen of the waterfront village Soviets filled out evacuation papers and stamped them on their knees right there by the sea.

Flour and staple goods were loaded on the feluccas and barks, and a booming voice was shouting:

"Where are the sails? Find the sails!"

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The sails, it turned out, were in the storeroom which was shut with bolt and key. No one knew, however, where the key was.

"Why are you standing around and doing nothing!" Fedorka intervened in the course of events. "Are you going to kiss the lock next? What are the windows for?"

She grabbed the first oar she could lay her hands on and smashed in the window. Shortly after the window and door were broken open and the people began dragging the canvas out of the storeroom. Tania and Olga also joined in.

Some of the boats which had engines were already chugging out into the sea. The girls took a long time rigging the sails under the command of Fedorka, who seemed to be able to do anything. Hoisting the sail, she boasted to her young helpers:

"I've been fishing since the day I was born. Once my father and mother went out far into the sea to catch fish; there I gave a good stir in my mother's womb and my navel cord was cut amid the waves..."

They were just finishing setting the sails when a nazi plane appeared out of nowhere and began dropping bombs on the spit. One seemed to be falling right on their felucca. Tania took cover under the sails, and crouching there she saw from the corner of her eye how an invalid teacher was frenziedly tearing at his shirt-front. He seemed to be choking, and apparently just like Tania believed the whistling bomb would kill him. Fate, however, ordained otherwise — the bomb dropped into the sea a short distance from the felucca and flung a spouting fountain into the air without harming anybody. On the spit horses neighed wildly and a woman, either from fear or perhaps of a wound, screamed madly. Fedorka, her face noticeably paler now, ordered in her authoritative voice:

"Get the nets and spread them out!"

The girls jumped out of the boat, dragged the fishing nets across the beach toward the felucca, and started spreading them out to make the pilots see that down here on the beach there were peaceful people — she still hoped that something human would stir in those bandits...

After the raid the girls carried aboard the wounded men from the truck. Olga's mother joined them as did a fussy co-op store manager with a briefcase. The last passengers to catch the boat a terrified woman and two children. Her husband, apparently a functionary from the district center, had driven up in a wagon. He helped her on to the felucca, passed the children on to her from

hand to hand, jumped back onto the wagon with a painful look on his face, and galloped furiously back into the steppe, probably to remain in this area with the partisans.

The felucca was ready to cast off when a big-faced fireman from the local brigade came wading through the water toward the boat. Fedorka got into a furious battle of words with him. He tried to clamber on board but she would not let him. He muttered something by way of explanation, which only fanned her rage.

"I won't let you in!" she yelled. "What the hell of a communist are you anyway? How many times have you been called on the carpet for drunkenness, eh? Now my husband who's fighting out there is a real communist. Or take that wounded commissar covering our troops at his machine gun in the steppe — now that's a communist in the flesh for you! You've been hitting the bottle today as usual, you drunken rat! We don't take rats on board!"

She pushed him into the water in the end, and he, realizing that Fedorka would stick to her guns, made for the other feluccas.

They sailed out into the sea toward evening. Fedorka took upon herself the part of skipper, for she knew where to take the boat.

"We'll go to the Kuban to the Dolzhansk Spit."

Tania, settled with Olga between the fishing nets in the stern, could not take her eyes off the receding shore.

The seacoast was of fantastic beauty.

Walls of milky-white light flooded with gold girded the horizon over land and sea, and resting on these walls of gold was the lofty sky they were bidding farewell to. They were leaving this tiny Ukrainian Hellas with its melodious dialect and the quiet of its beaches.

Out on the sea, near and far, the boats were sailing to shores that had not yet been occupied by the enemy.

The Bilosaraisk lighthouse on the spit could be seen for a long time. When darkness fell, the lighthouse did not wink to them as it had winked to the fishermen for many a year. Instead of its light, they saw the fearful glow of the blazing seaport and the Azovstal Steelworks in Mariupol.

Night overtook them out in the open sea far away from the shore. The boats lost sight of one another in the darkness. There was only water all around.

Tania and Olga froze still from the wind and crept down below to take cover among the wounded lying under the protection of a heavy tarpaulin. This did not help much, though. The cold made them shiver all over, while deep in their hearts alarm did not subside. The wounded men moaned. One of them raved in delirium ever since they had set out; he kept crying out all the time and calling for some Martinov until he suddenly fell silent.

"His misery is over now!" one of his neighbors said from under the tarpaulin.

Fedorka, assisted by Olga's mother, put him on a plank. Both of them drew a sigh and then tipped the body overboard by naval tradition.

"Did you take the documents off him?" the co-op store manager asked.

"That's been taken care of," Fedorka muttered in reply.

Shortly after, probably to dispel the depressing after-effect of the sea burial, she started telling somebody loudly about her lieutenant husband and his invincible artillery, after which she switched over to her fabulous father-in-law:

"He lived for ninety-nine years and hadn't been ill a single day. The only thing wrong with him were the veins on his hands which got all knotted from hard work. The day he was ninety-nine he called me and said: 'Tell my sons on land and sea to come to me quickly. But tell them I've already died.' 'But you're still alive,' I said. 'That's none of your concern. Tell them I'm dead.' I did as he said, because there was no use arguing with him. The sons arrived toward evening, and there was their father pulling hay out of a haystack in the farmyard. They went after me for having taking them away from their work for nothing. 'No, it wasn't for nothing,' their father said. 'It was me who told her to call you.' We sat down for supper, while he lay down for a rest. 'Where's Fedorka?' he asked. 'I'm here, Father. It's me.' The old man already did not recognize me. 'Give me some cold water.' I gave him some from a pail

kept inside the house. 'No, get me water from the well.' I brought it to him, he drank of it, and the rest of us continued our supper. Suddenly one of his sons got up and said: 'Father's dead.' We put down our spoons and got up, too. That how people used to die. They lived out their years and then passed away as if they had just gone to sleep. It's not the way people die now when they're in their prime. Death claims them not at ninety-nine but at nineteen."

Under the tarpaulin near Tania lay the wounded lieutenant who resembled Bohdan. He was shivering with the cold from loss of blood. When everybody had calmed down and dozed into slumber, she suddenly felt his timid hand at her breasts which she had allowed only Bohdan to touch. It sent a painful and pleasant tingle through her body. Without moving away from him she shamelessly warmed him with her body.

But then she carefully removed his hand.

"Why?" he asked in a low whisper.

"You mustn't," she replied softly.

"But why?"

"You mustn't, that's all."

"You bandaged me today and looked at me in a way nobody had ever looked in my life before... Tell me... could you... ever fall in love with me?"

"No."

"Why?"

"I love someone else."

He did not touch her any more.

On the receding shore a cold, fearful glow stood over Mariupol and planes droned in the sky. The feluccas sailed without lights, drifting across the water like black shadows.

Most of the passengers were asleep. Fedorka stood guard by the mast from which direction came her voice as she was telling somebody that in Dolzhansk lived her husband's brother who worked in a fish factory. The Kuban would be a safe refuge.

On hearing the word "Kuban," Tania remembered that Bohdan's mother lived there somewhere. Tania had never seen her, but from Bohdan his mother knew about Tania just as Tania knew about her character and how much she loved her son. Bohdan's mother was

working in a school at some state farm. If only she had her address now! She would have found her and introduced herself: "I'm Tania, Bohdan's bride..." She would try to find her, and once she did, they would work together and wait together for Bohdan.

On the other side of Tania, Olga was lying under the tarpaulin, crouching from the cold.

"Life originated from the sea once," she whispered. "And now the sea is our savior, Tania. My fright is over now, because alarm isn't the same as fright, isn't it? For some reason I am sure I'll meet Andriy by all means, and then I'll tell him about this night on the open sea, when we were like some ancient seafarers and the only lighthouse we still could take our bearings from was the blazing cloud over Mariupol."

"I just recalled the commissar who stayed behind to cover our retreat. Will he get out of there alive? How many of them are thus scattered throughout the steppes..."

From Tania's tone Olga realized that she was again thinking about Bohdan.

"But we agreed to have faith, Tania. The night will not hold for ever. The university will call us yet..."

"And your lighthouse of Bilosaraiska Spit will blink again..."

Carried away by their dreams, the girls diverted their thoughts to the future when the war would take a radical turn and everything would be different and sooner or later they would reunite with their boys.

It was already long past midnight when they heard a hoarse voice shouting out of the darkness over the sea:

"Hey, people! Help! Help!"

As it turned out, they were sailing past a little island of which there were quite a few in the Sea of Azov. On the barren strip of sand with ragged fishermen's shacks, a lonely figure was running up and down the beach, yelling his head off into the night. They sailed closer to pick up the hapless Robinson Crusoe. He rushed headlong to the boat and fell into the water several times until he reached it. When they pulled him on board winded and soggy wet, there was a strong smell of vodka on his breath. Fedorka recognized him as the

purveyor from Melekino. He had left with the first motor launch which made a halt at this island for supper; the men had a good drink, he fell asleep, and in the bustle of departure he was forgotten. Even after he was sitting in the felucca clear-headed he still shivered with fright, not believing he had been rescued.

"You should've been thrown back into the sea," Fedorka said. "Be grateful we took pity on your kids. Maybe you'll grow fully sober in the Kuban at long last."

After he had recovered his senses, he told them how he had been running up and down the beach and calling to all the boats that passed the island in the dark. But they sailed by without hearing him, and he thought he'd be left there alone among the ragged shacks and swarms of hungry sea birds.

Before dawn, when the barely perceptible line of the Kuban coast appeared on the horizon, the breeze freshened and the felucca began to rock on the waves. Exhausted after the day and warmed under the tarps, Tania dozed into slumber. In her sweet dream, she clearly saw Bohdan and felt the touch of his warm hand. It was such a wonderful sensation that she awoke. But it proved to be somebody's else's warmth not his, and the realization of it neutralized her pleasant sensation. She moved away, curled up in her loneliness, and suddenly she wanted to see him intensely but for a fleeting moment, to see the one and only man for whom she was saving her passionate tenderness and her purest affections. She could not fall asleep after that, thinking about him all the time. Was he alive? Or was he perhaps lying somewhere in the steppe among men as young as the ones they had picked up by the stand of Sudan-grass? The war spread inexorably to the east, ruining everything in its path. The wind billowed the sails of the felucca, driving her somewhere under the cold stars, while the one she was waiting for receded ever farther into the murk of the night. Perhaps he was not among the living any more, yet in her mind she seemed to hear his voice over the distance and see his smile flashing through the clouds of war.

LETTERS FROM THE NIGHTS IN ENCIRCLEMENT

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We are not dead. We are alive. Ahead of us spread the empty steppes as they did before the Scythians. Only the warplanes in the sky reminded us of the 20th century.

The sky over the steppe was enormous as nowhere else. The nights were dry, studded with stars, and filled with the smell of human sweat, dust, and wormwood. From evening till dawn we tread through the dry grass and wormwood rustling under our feet.

We were surrounded by the enemy on all sides.

We were people deprived of the protection of the law, people with severed links, who were under the threat of death at every step.

We walked the whole night through without any rest. Birds fluttered up from under our feet. We wished we could also take wing and lift into the air our bodies, wounds and heads that had not yet been smashed by bullets, and fly out of this ill-fated desert called encirclement, a dreary vacuum we could not fill.

There was only a handful of us. We were but one of the many groups who were breaking out of the steppes to the east after our army had been routed and the staff of its headquarters, along with General Smirnov, killed in action at Chernihivka. We had carried on the fight till we were utterly exhausted, and it was not our fault that the outcome was fatal.

On our way across the steppe, we came upon traces of Dniprohes everywhere — pylons that rose into the sky like some remnant of an extinct civilization. The torn transmission lines hanging down from the pylons snaked through the wormwood. Occasionally, we stopped at a pylon rising like a monument to a different life that had known electricity, free labor, the hum of electric engines on the collective farm stackyards in summer, and the brightness of country homes to which Lenin's electrification program had brought the electric bulb. Previously these pylons carried electric current as powerful as lightning, but now there was not a spark

in them as they drooped listlessly into the wormwood like veins drained of blood. How long would they be standing without any use like that? How long would they be humming in the steppe wind! They would cover with rust, and by the time we saw them again they would probably be overgrown with wormwood.

Our situation was worsening with every day. We were plagued by thirst and weakened by hunger. What made us desperately depressed was the fact that no one of us knew how our predicament would end and whether we would succeed in breaking through to our troops, die in a skirmish, or — the worst thing of all — fall prisoner and be thrown into a concentration camp. We were more afraid of captivity than of death. Men like us were hunted down by the nazis, herded into sheepfolds, and driven beyond the Dnieper to the west from where there was no return.

One of us, a Siberian from a rear security unit, said to me:

"If anything happens, shoot yourself. Otherwise they'll ask how you managed to survive?"

But I didn't want to shoot myself. I wanted to fight to the last breath — didn't I have the right to that? I decided to dodge, feign, hide when necessary so as to come to life suddenly and attack the enemy.

You might ask what has changed me, since you knew me to be kind, gentle, openhearted, and forgiving.

Yes, we had been kind. Books and learning had been our banners. One of us had been a student, another had grown grain, still another had been building ships in Mikolaiv, and the Siberian had hunted game in the somber taiga. Each of us found his spiritual values in his work, creative activity, thoughts and dreams. But the only thing we had now was our weapons — instruments of death in our hands and hearts filled with raw hatred. But how little this is for man's fulfilment. I knew that the Siberian kept a razor in his gas mask bag. When we realized that we had been surrounded completely, he had contemplated suicide, but now he was ready to slash the first enemy sentry that came his way with that razor.

Yesterday one of us had lagged behind. He had done it deliberately. While we were asleep, he had crawled

away from our group and hid in a sunflower field, waiting till we moved on. But before we did, we searched for him all around. We found him just as he was burying his documents. The red star on his garrison cap was gone. It had been there but an hour before, but now there was but a faded spot where it had been. Without the star, the garrison cap seemed to have faded just like its owner. We searched his pockets and found a *Passierschein* in it — a yellowed leaflet pass he must have picked up in a field. It was a pass to a world different from ours, a world of concentration camps and sheepfolds where injustice and the overseers' bludgeons held sway. We started kicking him. He got down on his knees, begging for mercy before our court of justice in the encirclement. He groveled in the dust, pitifully whining for us to spare his life and did not see how behind his back the Siberian had drawn the razor out of his bag, while our vacant eyes were fixed on the traitor's adam's apple.

We moved on and his body remained lying among the sunflowers for the ravens to feast on.

That's what we had become. And hence our horrible and unequivocal reaction to Hitler and the war he had unleashed!

We knew that there were still people who lived beyond the reach of bullets, people who could still sleep and drink their fill of water.

The steppe tortured us for lack of water. When the dew fell at dawn, we dropped on our knees and licked it off the grass like dogs. But the dew fell scantily in the steppe. How deliriously we had dreamed of drinking our fill and quenching our thirst just once! We recalled the mighty Dnieper, and in our dreams drank its water with our thirsty, cracked lips. Once at night we saw something white glimmering through the darkness. Was it a steppe lake or pool? Throwing caution to the wind, we rushed to it. Presently we ran up to the lake, expecting its water to be splashing but instead our boots tread on something white and hard that rang like concrete. It was a salt pan!

The grass rustled under our boots, just like our tongues rustled in our dry mouths.

It is difficult to describe our strong urge to move on

and get out of the encirclement. Every step we made, all the reserves of our energy were centered on breaking out to reach the front line at any cost.

The dawn did not bring us any joy, because its light made us hide like some nocturnal creatures till nightfall.

We kept out of sight throughout the day which chased us into weeds, prickly shelterbelts or sunflower fields like some steppe animals; while we slept in our hideouts, the sun beat down on us mercilessly and the wind did not stir in the thickets, which made us drip with sweat. When we woke up, we saw the sky over us and occasionally eagles wheeling in it.

We didn't know who of us would survive. Maybe all of us would turn into dust, wind or grass. Maybe those eagles would pick out our eyes. But should we have turned into grass we would be happy when all of this was over, when life would bloom again and the revived furnaces of the Zaporizhstal Steelworks would roar, melting the smashed nazi tanks and guns into steel for peace...

Can you hear me from here, Tania? What if nature really has some mysterious magnetism, some yet unstudied impulses and currents which transmit human thoughts from brain to brain over a distance?

"Write to me in your thoughts at least..." That's what you asked me to do the last time we met at the Chuhuiv camp, and presently I am sending you my unwritten letters and my thoughts which will not go through any field post office.

You are as far away from me as a star, so let my heart speak freely to you as to a remote, unreachable star. Tania Krivoruchko — that's what this star will be called from now on.

How often have I penned up my feelings, being stingy with endearments and ashamed to say sweet words to you lest you take me for being sentimental. But now I give free reign to everything that wells in my heart — let it say all it wants to say. From here I love you even more than I thought possible before. I love your hands that embraced me, I love your eyes that smiled so radiantly at me. Your whims, jauntiness, and jealousy — all this I love about you. When I remained alive after the withering mortar fire during our first engagement

in Kiev Region, I saw a tall hollyhock by a cottage that had survived by a miracle. To me you seemed like that sun-flushed hollyhock, beautiful, radiant, dreamily striving to the sky.

You are the dearest person to me in the whole world, but at times I am horrified to think that it would have been better if I hadn't known you and you weren't waiting for me, so I could be just a soldier who wouldn't care for his life but carried only hatred in his heart. I'd be alone in this world, without any relations and dear ones, as lonely as a bayonet. Wouldn't it be easier to fight and to die in battle without love? This is but a momentary frame of my mind, so don't take it seriously, Tania. For it is precisely love that gives us strength and enables us to endure everything.

Dukhnovich is lying at my side. He is the only one from the student battalion with me. You wouldn't have recognized our Miron now. His face is overgrown with a red beard, there's dirt in his ears, and corn cobs stick out of his gas mask bag. The commission at the District Party Committee who accepted his application have no reason to be ashamed of him, because he's made a real soldier. During the battles on the Dnieper and later on in the steppes beyond it, I saw his intrepidity; at times there was something fatalistic about it, but nonetheless it was intrepidity. War transforms man to its purposes incredibly fast. The verses of the *Iliad* were still ringing in our ears after we were already prepared to kill. Just imagine that the very same Dukhnovich who back in his university days hadn't learned how to walk on an azimuth and how to shoot properly, has learned how to kill. I saw how he did it, after which he confided to me:

"You know, Bohdan, I have a growing urge to kill my own species like, say, some fellow countryman of Schiller or Goethe. At times I have an unconquerable urge to snuff the light out of him. How can that be explained?"

What a long time we have been fighting! How the war has aged each of us! It seems that not months but years and decades separate us from the lecture halls, libraries, student dorms, and the happy days of youthful studentship. Trudging through the steppe, we

conjured up in our minds our dear university, the ferro-concrete State Industry Building, and the cherished door at the District Party Committee through which we had entered this tempestuous, roaring world of war. Other generations will succeed us, they will have different lives and customs, and their lives will be perhaps easier than ours, but given the new conditions, will they experience the purifying power of self-sacrifice and know the feeling with which we left the District Party Committee? Here in the flatlands of the Scythian steppe, the tall State Industry Building looks like a beacon to us. The highrises of new industrial Ukraine live on for us somewhere beyond the horizon and attract and call to us in a symbolic way.

However, it's time to move on. We get up groggy from sleep and angry. I chew some salty buckwheat concentrate. After we had been routed and wandered about the steppe, we would come across Soviet division transports at every step. Ripped sacks with rusks were lying around everywhere. There were heaps of sugar, canned food, and all sorts of concentrates in oilpaper packages. At that time neither Dukhnovich nor Vasya or I took anything of the army rations left behind on the battlefields. We didn't think we would need them. How would we ever eat after what had happened? we reasoned. It was only the thickset artilleryman Hrishko, who had been in charge of a storehouse at a collective farm before the war, and Private Novoselets who stuffed their knapsacks with the rations. All of it is now our collective property, and before we move on, we receive each his scanty rations — a handful of salty buckwheat we should have otherwise used to cook soup — out of the horny hands of Hrishko.

The marches are especially taxing for Hurtsilava who hails from Kahetia in Georgia. He is a fat shortwinded man, and, consequently, barely keeps up with us. We take pity on him when we hear him breathing heavily during our nightly treks. Throughout the day he is gloomy, and though the Kahetian hadn't been much of a talker before that, he is altogether taciturn now; the only sounds we hear from him are his breathing and his humbly munching the buckwheat that is supposed to augment his strength for the nightly trek.



As I take my handful of black concentrated buckwheat, I see a different buckwheat — the one that was blooming at Chuhuiv when we were leaving for the front line.

"Could it be the same buckwheat we saw blooming white at Chuhuiv?" I asked Dukhnovich.

"It's the same; only it has turned black."

Before we move on we get up and look around.

The blazing red sun sets over the steppe. It seems to be smoking, as if it had just formed into a ball out of those red vortices and furious hurricanes raging around it in the west. Here and there ancient barrows loom in the steppe. My love, this is the steppe we had intended to study with you. In it, my father once chased after the steppe pirates from Makhno's band.

The age of machine-gun carts has been replaced by the age of tanks. We hear their distant rumble as they come pushing out of the red sunset in a long column and roll on to the east to meet a similar column and form a steel wedge. Standing amidst the dried, blackened sunflowers, we see the tank turrets appearing one after another out of the sea of red haze that seems to be drifting from the west along with the tanks. O Germany of the Minnesingers, O Germany of Beethoven, Schiller and Goethe, look as yourself today! Previously, it was the creations of your philosophers, poets and great humanists that made their way to the east, whereas today it is young Aryan beasts clad in steel, the wreckers and murderers who are set on destroying our country, our culture, and us.

We look on the tanks in silence, our teeth clenched in rage, because we cannot stop them. Back at the Dnieper, we had at least incendiary bottles, but here we haven't got even them.

The beasts of steel rumble on, enveloped in dust.

"We'll have our own tanks yet," Vasya says through his teeth. "We will, by all means. Even more than they've got!"

We, the ragged and tattered troops caught in the enemy encirclement, feel that victory will still be ours in the battles to come. Our army will yet deploy a thousand artillery pieces to every kilometer of the front line. Our warplanes will dominate the skies. Thousands

of tanks and first-class armored personnel carriers will advance to the west and Berlin will tremble and tumble to the ground under the blows of our artillery. Some of us who are now surrounded by the enemy now will live to see Hitler in a cage, as well as the wrecked Reichstag and the liberated Belgrade and Prague.

We move on, and the red hurricanes in the west recede behind our backs.

51

Last night it was Columbus who led us.

He joined us only recently and was the only civilian among us. To me he looked very much like a Zaporozhian Cossack — a mighty bulk of a man who could easily pick up two men by their collars, bang their heads together, and just as easily put them down on the ground again. For all that, he was of a humble disposition and had a broad face and lovely blond mustache, and was dressed in an embroidered linen shirt and a canvas raincoat. We knew practically nothing about him. When I checked his documents, the only thing I remember was his name — Christopher. Dukhnovich added Columbus to it, and from then on the name stuck. So we had a steppe navigator with us.

We met him right after we came out of the sunflower field where we had been hiding through the day and had seen the German tanks. Dusk hadn't descended yet when we came upon a bunch of abandoned tractors by a shelterbelt. They looked like a herd of horses that had stampeded off the road and frozen in their tracks in the stubble. Before that, we had seen cattle and herdsmen lying dead in the steppe. And here were tractors that had been shot up. We had heard nazi strafers rattling over this field during the day but had not paid much attention to it then. Now we saw the result of their attacks — a steel graveyard of tractors. On the tractor that stood the closest to us, a young man with a shock of blond hair lay with his head on the steering wheel as if he had dozed off after an exhausting trip. His sleeveless vest was red with blood around the place where a bullet had gone right through his heart. On another

tractor the driver was hanging out of his seat, probably having attempted to get under the tractor at the last moment. Two pools — one of blood, the other of oil — spread in the dust beside the tractor. Farther away, another two corpses were lying in the stubble. We thought no one had survived the raid when the huge man suddenly appeared among the tractors by the shelterbelt. He was standing absorbed in thought among the tractors and the dead drivers and didn't seem to hear us approach.

"Who are you?" the Siberian asked him right away.

The man gave him a long, wearied look.

"Don't you see I've come with them?" he said.

"How come you're alive?"

"It's fate, I guess."

"Isn't that strange that so many of your friends are dead while you're not? The eagles will be picking out their eyes, while you're alive?"

"That's the same question I'd like to ask you!" the man rejoined angrily.

"You're not the one to question me... All right, get your hands up and we'll search you!"

The Siberian rushed over to frisk him, but the man wouldn't let him come close.

"Keep off!" He raised his fist threateningly.

It was a rocklike fist that seemed to be almost the size of the Siberian's head. There were traces of blood on the fist — either his blood or that of someone he tried to help.

Later on he showed us his evacuation papers from which we learned that he was an agronomist with a machine and tractor station. A district Party committee had put him in charge of this column of tractors. During the air attack, some of the drivers had scattered throughout the steppe, so he didn't know whether they were lying wounded somewhere or had simply fled. As to the others, we saw for ourselves what fate they had met.

Vasya called to us from the tractors he was inspecting:

"There must be some water in the radiators!"

Water! The lack of it tortured us.

But as we found out, the radiators had been riddled by bullets, and what remained of the tepid water in them was enough just to wet our lips.

Columbus joined our group. We had a compass to take our bearings from; then there were the stars in the sky by which we could tell east and west; but Columbus was no less useful to us, since he had a good knowledge of the locality. He had to lead us in a roundabout way lest we come across the Germans who must have occupied all the settled areas in the steppe by now. The Spanish Columbus had had to brave high seas, whereas ours had to lead us through a friendless steppe in which we moved warily between the fires of oil tanks at the machine and tractor stations, and the blazing elevators at distant railroad stations and strawstacks. We could not move in a straight line. We had to give a wide berth to villages from which came the rumble of tank engines. The main roads were also off limits for us. We were people of the dark side roads, as Hrishko put it. Danger lurked at every step. Any moment we could be challenged by a "Halt!"

We plodded cautiously through high wormwood in fallow fields. All our clothes smelled of wormwood, its bitter taste was on our lips and in our mouths, and its bitterness penetrated our hearts.

After the rough wormwood we felt something soft and fragile under our feet.

"That's buckwheat," Columbus explained. "We're walking through buckwheat. It's a delicate crop. Once you trample it, it won't rise any more — that's no grass for you."

Not far from the highway, a flare hissed into the sky; we dropped to the ground and crawled on. The thin buckwheat stalks broke under our weight, and each of us left a trail of crushed stalks that would never straighten up again.

Then we moved on through something that rustled — it was millet. The full-eared stalks rippled like water. A night bird that had found refuge in the millet rose right from under Dukhnovich's feet, scaring him out of his wits.

There were no flares any more but darkness everywhere; we could get up on our feet again. Suddenly Hrishko called out cautiously:

"Come here! There are beehives around this place!"

Yes, it was really a collective farm apiary that must

have been brought here before the outbreak of the war when the buckwheat was blooming in June. The frame hives resembled miniature village cottages hugging the buckwheat like a forest. The whole region was ravaged by war, but here was a peaceful colony of bees it had spared and forgotten.

But it did not remain forgotten for long. Minutes later, there followed the cracks of breaking frames. The men shook out the bees and quickly divided the honeycombs among themselves. The startled bees buzzed over our heads and stung us angrily for the plunder, probably because we smelled of bitter wormwood instead of honeyed buckwheat.

Since I was the commander, I should have stopped and forbidden all that, but I knew how weakened we were from hunger and what a lot of strength we still needed. Presently the Tatar broke off a piece of honeycomb and gave it to me; I took it and greedily sucked the nectareous honey which smelled of summer, of the prewar sun and the steppe flowers. To me that honey smelled of distant ages and the riotous Cossack steppe. Everyone took part in the feast except Columbus. He stood to one side as a living embodiment of reproach and conscience.

"Help yourselves, boys!" an elderly voice suddenly said out of the darkness.

Someone appeared beside Columbus. It was the beekeeper. Carried away by our rape, we hadn't noticed how he had approached us. He was a little old man holding a staff in his hands; he wore a shaggy fur cap and was dressed in winter clothes as if he were prepared to spend the winter here in the buckwheat field by the apiary.

"I've got separated honey there in my shack, so why did you have to ruin the hives? This is a collective farm apiary and maybe our people will come back for it, because the farm chairman told me to wait."

"There'll be nobody here but the Germans," Hrishko muttered thickly. "We're the last of our people."

"I'm not so sure about that. The front lines might change."

Once more he invited us to his shack for a treat of separated honey, but none of us moved. The hot wax

of the honeycombs seemed to have stuck in our throats and sealed our tongues. We were embarrassed, and so step by step we backed away from the beekeeper and the hives. Once we were beyond the grounds of the apiary, we bolted off back into the darkness of the steppe.

We were deeply disgusted with ourselves. It would have been better if we had begged the old man to give us the honey instead of plundering it like we had done. What did Columbus think of us now? To him we were probably no more than a gang of steppe marauders.

"I think it doesn't really matter," Columbus said gloomily, as if he had guessed our thoughts. "The Germans will get it anyway. They'll drop in here and smash up the apiary." After a pause he added: "So this year's honey harvest is over."

We trudged along through a valley. It looked like the crooked valley was leading us not to the destination we intended to reach. It was late already. The sky was overcast; a waning moon glimmered from behind a distant cloud. The moon looked like a bloodshot eye sternly watching us from under frowning brows with a query: All right, so who are you? Where are you bound for amid the nightly fires? What makes you roam through the night steppes, gaunt and shaggy like animals? Why can't you find yourselves a refuge in this big land that was friendly but the day before?

"Where are we?" I asked Columbus. "Didn't we swerve too much from our course?"

"No," he replied calmly. "There must be a poultry farm around this place somewhere."

Shortly after we saw a cottage on a hill slope and a faint yellow light shining in its window. Moving warily along the bottom of the valley, we suddenly came across a pond. Throwing all caution to the winds, we rushed to the pond and started greedily scooping up and drinking the dreadfully warm water that smelled of mud and something else. The banks were covered with chicken feathers all over.

We quietly surrounded the cottage, our rifles at the ready. Presently I saw a white wall feebly illuminated by the moon; right under the thatch hung what looked like an exhibition of the steppe's generous gifts —

golden corncobs, red peppers, and long strings of onions.

The strings of onions dispelled our wariness right away: war had not yet visited these parts, nor had the Germans or stragglers like us been here either, because otherwise the thick golden strings would not be hanging like that on the whitewashed wall.

We stole up to the cottage and looked into the windows. There were people inside—a lot of girls kneeling on the floor, their eyes fixed on one corner, like a religious sect at prayer. An electric bulb hanging from the ceiling was dead and the only light in the room came from an oil lamp flickering before an icon in the corner. A sad looking woman stood by the stove, leaning against its vent. She was tall, with a swarthy, handsome steppe complexion. Crescent ear rings flashed in her ears, although she herself was past her prime. She stood over the girls like a steppe bird guarding her nestlings. A stamp of deep sorrow was on her face, but she was not praying like the rest.

On hearing a noise behind the window, she started with alarm, said something, and the girls all turned to the window; their faces, which but a moment ago had been concentrated and inspired, were instantly distorted with terror. In the windows, they saw the dirt-grimed faces of bearded savages with noses pressed flat against the panes—just the image their minds had pictured of the invaders. The cottage was already surrounded, they thought, and now they would be grabbed, raped, tortured and killed.

“Open up!” the Siberian shouted, banging his fist against the door.

The door opened, our gloomy troop filled the room, and one of the girls cowering in a corner, suddenly cried out joyously:

“Look, they’ve got stars on their caps! They’re our men!”

In an instant, the girls’ faces beamed with smiles as if the whole Red Army had returned to these parts and everyone could go on living as they had before.

“You’ve been praying, haven’t you?” the Siberian said, coming up to the girls, his face swollen from the bee stings. “Aren’t you ashamed of yourselves? I guess you’re Young Communist Leaguers besides!”

"What else have we got to do, even if we're YCL members?" answered one of the girls, who bore a striking resemblance to the woman by the stove, although she was slender, much younger and had a long braid. "Since you couldn't protect us, maybe God will, if there's one up there... in the stratosphere..."

"Today, AA guns reach that part of the heavens, too," Vasya said emphatically, and turning to the woman, he asked: "Are they all your daughters?"

"This one is," the woman answered, nodding to the slender black-haired girl who had spoken to the Siberian. "The rest are her school friends, all of them ninth-graders. They came here from the village. Where else could they hide from the nazi tanks but out here on the poultry farm in the steppe?"

The icon behind the lamp in the corner looked more like a picture; it showed a platter on which a severed human head crowned with thorns lay.

"Who's that?" I asked the women.

"That's the head of John the Baptist. I got this icon from my parents."

"I wonder what prayers you say?" Dukhnovich asked from the threshold where he was washing his hands and face over a basin.

"We manage without prayers," a young, round-faced girl said. "We recite verses."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said. Instead of prayers we recite whatever comes into our heads—something from Taras Shevchenko or Lesya Ukrainka..."

"Today I recited from Ivan Franko's *Moses*," the daughter of the house's mistress said. "It was from the Introduction: 'My people, tortured and defeated...'"

"Do you really think they're religious?" the woman said. "They haven't any idea about the church; the only thing that was on their minds was dancing and the movies at the club. But when calamity struck, they started this sort of praying as a way out."

"It's to make our troops come back," a girl with thin eyebrows admitted bashfully.

"We were taught in school that there was no God but only atoms and matter and nothing else," the daughter of the mistress of the house chirped excitedly. "But sud-

denly we wanted some force, some kind of stratospheric god to be up there and help the Red Army."

"That's really funny," Novoselets said, although it did not seem funny either to him or to us.

The woman asked the girls to go kill and pluck some chickens for our supper, but we had to deny ourselves such a luxury, because we had no right to remain there any longer. We washed ourselves; some of us even managed to scrape off their stubble with blunt razors. After we had spruced ourselves up as much as we could we looked like a battle-trim unit again.

"When will you come back? Which direction are we to expect you from?" the girls asked us as we were leaving the house. "They say the nazis will take us to Germany in trainloads and sell us on the slave market..."

And seemingly out of their future, we heard the moans of girls from Chernihiv, Poltava and Kiev who were driven to the west for slave labor, while in Lublin, on the threshold of the "great Reich," they were chased under the showers and SS witches cropped their hair and lopped off their braids. Many years later, one of us would hear: "My girl had such beautiful braids, but the nazis got hold of her and lopped them off!" Could they have belonged to this young steppe girl who had recited Franko's *Moses* instead of a prayer that day?

Soon we were over a knoll, and the cottage disappeared from view.

I couldn't get Franko's poem out of my head. It had been Stepura's favorite. Many times, even on the front line, he had recited its measured verses, especially these lines:

*All that he had in life he sacrificed
For one spiritual ideal
For which he burned and flamed and suffered
And toiled to make it real...*

Or:

*And they will walk into the ages
Filled with affliction and dismay
To build a highway for the spirit
And die along the way...*

But we did not want to die! We were moving on to live! We were determined to break out of the steppe where we felt as if we had been under a huge glass dome from which the air had been pumped.

The high stubble rustled under our tread as did the weeds under the blow of Columbus' stiff raincoat.

The fires on the horizon raged with greater force.

The sky was packed with restless, eddying clouds blanketing everything high above except one windswept moonlit wisp which looked like the huge beard of Michelangelo's Moses.

52

We knew that we were not the only ones stealing through the steppe. There were a lot of such larger and smaller groups trekking eastward. They chased away cowards who wanted to join them, put traitors to death, and pushed on, accidentally united that they were by one fate and one desire to break through. At times we came across such groups. We approached them warily, distrustfully, each bewaring of the other. They would get to their feet from the weeds and so did we, ready to fire our guns. "Halt! Who goes there? — Friends!" — the response instantly took a load off our hearts. After holding council and exchanging rumors to warn each other (what places were unsafe and where ambushes might be set up), we broke up again into smaller groups, which made it easier to break through. Many of us would die or stray into captivity, but others would get through in the end, rejoin the ranks of the Red Army, and then recall many a time their wanderings through the steppe.

It had been a summer of retreat, a summer of dogged defensive actions, encirclements, quick summary courts along the way, persisting attacks that had gained us no victory. In our hearts we carried our first and ever lasting pain of the battle on the Ross which had cost us so much blood. The Ross was now deep behind the enemy lines where we had buried Drobakha. We remembered the white country cottage we had so admired. To us unseasoned troops, it had looked particularly impressive, probably because amid all the

forces of destruction it stood there unscathed like a symbol of the spirit of life itself, of someone's wise concord and familial poetry. There had been a flower-bed by the house, and on the roof a stork with nestlings. At this moment I had the feeling you would come out of this sunny field cottage and stop in the dense growth of the tall blooming hollyhocks. But don't stand there, don't Tania! Any minute a shell might burst there and ravage the cottage with flames and make the stork wheel over it in wild despair.

Tania, it was here amid the full-eared grain fields of Kiev Region that our Spain began.

Then there had been a Dniprohes. Now it was behind us, and of the nine savage cataracts that had been buried under the waters of Lenin Lake, the breached dam roared more thunderously than the Insatiable Rapids of the Wolf's Gullet Rapids. After the dam had been blown up, the Dnieper wildly overflowed its banks, flooding the lower reaches. Anyone who had been caught in this impetuous flood was doomed. Our troops in the reed-covered flats scrambled up the trees, and we, in our attempt to find a ford there, also had to climb the trees like monkeys and stay there until fishermen came in their boats to save us. What if we simply had to go through all this? What if the bitterness of senseless losses, the battles to the last man when you didn't get the order to withdraw, and this encirclement just had to be experienced so that we would become different and win in the end? Some say that we shouldn't have hurried blowing up the dam, but what they forget, though, is that if we had left it intact, the enemy would have used it right away, crossed onto the left bank, we wouldn't have had time to dismantle the factories, and there would have been considerably more of our troops cut off from their units than there were now. Oh no, the destruction of Dniprohes had played its part, as did our clumsy counterattacks on the Ross and the seemingly hopeless skirmishes we had waged in encirclement. Since nothing in nature ever disappears, so no effort, even the smallest one of our troops, would disappear without leaving a trace.

We met the dawn in a shelterbelt far away from the roads. What is comparable to the quiet of dawn in a

steppe unaffected by war? What is comparable to the softness of the air and the calm that settles over nature with the first silvery tinges of autumn? A mist drifted over the steppe, and the heady fragrance of autumn wafted from the grasses. How drenching the dew was in the shelterbelt we had entered! We walked through it like through water. Spangled and heavy, it glistened blue on the flowers, on the leaves of prickly hawthorn, and pearly every cobweb entwining the weeds. We came across traces of stragglers just like us who had spent the day there. The prickly thickets which previously had guarded the collective farm wheat fields against dry winds were now guarding us against enemy eyes. Turtle doves looked down on us in surprise from the treetops; they were our guards, and we felt much safer in their presence.

Today we had a decent breakfast. Hrishko had a string of beautiful seed onions hanging down his neck. The woman at the poultry farm must have given it to him at the last minute. He took a loaf of white bread — also the woman's present — out of his knapsack, plucked the onions off the string and gave one to each of us, while the Tatar shared out the bread. Everyone ate his slice carefully lest a crumb fell on the ground.

The steppe, level as a soccer field, spread before our eyes up to the horizon. Whirlwinds of dust rose from the plain like explosions of shells.

"I haven't seen a crop as rich as this year's for a long time," Columbus said, looking around the steppe. "The wheat was wall-high. When our combine harvesters went into action, their cutters broke for the dense stalks."

Columbus proved to be a wise and interesting man. I could pretty well imagine how he would have gotten on with Stepura who liked to delve into the character of such country people. Columbus always seemed to be speaking not of himself but of somebody else, but in our mind's eye we clearly pictured a Sunday morning, the grounds of the machine and tractor station, the agronomist getting up with the first blush of morning, shaving meticulously as if for a holiday, putting on a clean embroidered shirt, and going to the field to have a look at the wheat that had to be taken in soon; the combine harvesters and tractors stood ready for action,

the stackyards at the field camps had been swept clean and leveled, and everything around was spick and span as if on the eve of great holiday. Columbus recalled famine-stricken India, the effects of erosion in other parts of the world, and the indiscriminate destruction of forests elsewhere, while here there was a flood of grain nature had bestowed as a gift upon those who had sown it. We saw in him a kindhearted man for whom growing grain and fruits was a calling, a man who above everything else loved to watch spring rains falling on the fields and the luxurious growth of the crops thereafter. On that Sunday morning the agronomist knew nothing of what was about to happen; his heart was singing for joy and he was in such a mood he wanted to plant the whole world with wheat and feed all the people.

"Yes, that's what I had been like then," Columbus said. "I saw happy fields on that black Sunday of June twenty second — the day of summer solstice, the longest day of the year which was fated to become the blackest in our history. What fine tractor and combine drivers we had! Now they lie dead in the ground. This steppe will overgrow with weeds and people will derive no joy from it..."

After we had posted a sentry, we went to sleep and so did Columbus. He lay down without taking his stiff raincoat off and only unbuttoned it a little at the collar to breathe more freely.

Novoselets was the first on the sentry. He was a quiet, disciplined soldier, almost a teenager with a little pallid face that always wore a mysterious smile with regard to everything, even death. He was absolutely reliable when a serious job had to be done, but in little things he was not too delicate and given to sneak-thieving, which made Hrishko keep his knapsack farther away from him. This didn't hinder them, though, from being good friends, and just then I heard them talking. Hrishko, as was usually the case, was talking about his five-year-old son:

"He bites into a sour apple and then gives it to me: 'Here, take it, Daddy, and become sour yourself.' Or he says: 'I love Daddy, I love Mummy, I love me.' When he goes to bed, he asks me: 'Daddy, tell me how the wind in the forest winds the trees.' This is to mean how the

wind rustles in the trees. That's what having kids is like, Novoselets. And you, poor fool, even aren't you married yet..."

When everybody, me included, was asleep, Novoselets roused me.

"Comrade Commander."

"What's the matter?"

"Well, nothing really, but..." he quietly reassured me. "There's one thing I'd like you to have a look at. Come, I'll show you."

I followed him into the bushes where the agronomist was snoring in his sleep.

"Look what he's got there."

Something red showed from under his shirt front. It was a banner blazing red in the sun. So that's why he hadn't let us search him and never took off his raincoat.

We stood there and looked silently at the fiery red of the cloth. Such a banner had stood out vividly over barricades; brave men had hoisted it on snow-clad mountain peaks; and perhaps astronauts had already been born somewhere to carry it into the unexplored expanses of outer space in the future.

As if sensing our presence, Columbus twitched his mustache and opened his eyes.

"Is that you, CO? What's the matter?" Darting a glance at his open collar that had a button missing, he guessed the reason of our curiosity and it looked like he had blushed in embarrassment. "It's a challenge banner our machine and tractor station got for first place in a socialist emulation drive. It was awarded to my tractor column..."

After this incident, the agronomist grew even more in stature in our eyes. When evening fell and it was time to move, even the Siberian who distrusted everyone and all, said cheerfully:

"Lead on, Columbus!"

On the way I heard Dukhnovich complaining, or so it sounded, to Columbus:

"We've got such a little planet and, essentially, not too many people on it. I wonder whether they will ever be able to unite for peaceful labor, because, in the end, everything, absolutely everything depends on labor..."

"The Krauts say they haven't got enough living

space," Columbus said deprecatingly. "Do you know that India alone, with its warm climate and abundant rainfalls, could feed all the people of the world. But let the people of India get on their feet first. I think they're a fine people, and for some reason I've sympathized with them since long..."

"Me, too," Dukhnovich admitted.

After some time we came upon another bunch of abandoned tractors and combine harvesters. We stole up to them with utmost caution, because we had taken them for tanks at first.

In another place, something kept getting tangled around our feet.

"Telephone wires!" Dukhnovich said in the excited voice of a discoverer.

"That's not wires but melon creepers," the agronomist corrected him.

We had walked into a melon patch. Everything in it had been swept clean, trampled and crushed. It must have been visited by a group similar to ours the night before. So we could only be content with rinds, some rotten melons, and green little fruit the size of a child's fist. Thanks, steppe, for this at least. We crawled over the creepers that really seemed like a tangle of wires and thirstily sucked the juices from the trampled melons, blessing in our hearts the people who had planted them.

Crawling through the tenacious creepers, Dukhnovich came across a real piece of telephone wire. How had it gotten here? Either it had been left behind by our troops or it had been laid by the Germans and the stragglers must have torn it. While we were standing in a huddle, examining the wire and weighing all sorts of possibilities, a light suddenly flashed on the steppe road and the clatter of a motorcycle reached our ears.

"Germans!"

The motorcycle was heading straight toward us, the driver hardly suspecting that somebody else except him might be in the steppe.

We could have picked him off like a duck, but we decided against it.

Columbus suggested to stretch a wire across the road on the level with the German's head and take him alive.

We didn't want him to be cut to death when he drove into that wire, but that's exactly what happened. The wire sliced the driver's throat and we who had been holding the wire cut our hands badly; the other German at the machine gun in the sidecar fell into our hands alive. We took him along as a prisoner.

53

Dawn blushed and the sun resembling a huge projectile appeared on the horizon somewhat suddenly. Where were we? There were no forests around, only sunflowers which replaced the forests for us.

We dragged ourselves along through a huge field with sunflowers the leaves of which had turned a blistered black here and there. The prickly, hard heads hit our faces. The seeds, wherever the birds had not picked them yet, were falling out. Hrishko and Novoselets crushed them out of the heads as they moved along and cracked and ate them, which surprised our prisoner quite a bit. So far he had been obedient, complying with whatever he was told to do. Whenever we sensed danger, we went down on our haunches and so did he, and whenever we were in a hurry, he quickened his pace as well without waiting for somebody to nudge him in the back with a rifle butt.

"There's dust on the leaves," Columbus warned. "A road is nearby, so watch out."

With the sun up, it was already dangerous to cross the road. Backing farther away into the sunflowers, we made a halt. Here in the dust we intended to stay for the rest of the day under the dome of the motionless sky. Tired after the trek, the men sat down and took off their boots to rest their legs. The German also sat down and following the example of the others, pulled off his officer's boots.

The Siberian burned with impatience. Nodding at the German, he asked me what my instructions regarding this character would be.

"Interrogate him," I told Dukhnovich.

Dukhnovich had the best knowledge of German among us and eagerly took upon himself the part of interpreter.

From the interrogation and the documents we took from the prisoner, we learned that he was an officer of a chemical warfare service unit attached to a mountain division which was presently engaged in offensive operations in the Nogai steppes. Dukhnovich and I were surprised to learn that our prisoner also had been a student not so long ago and hadn't finished his studies just like us, because he was called up during Hitler's French campaign.

"A colleague," Dukhnovich said derisively, turning to me. "So we might as well sing *Gaudeamus igitur* with him."

Singing was the last thing on our minds, though. Dukhnovich turned serious again and continued asking the prisoner details that were important to us. Columbus and I understood bits and pieces of the German's answers, but — goodness gracious! — what words we were fated to hear from this man! *Lebensraum... Blitzkrieg... Yprite... Lewisite...* And this was the language of a descendant of Goethe, a descendant of the German humanists, the language of a *Bursch* of today.

He talked eagerly about gases:

"History's first gas attack which we launched on April 22, 1915, when we blanketed the French and British positions with 180 tons of choking gases, put only 15,000 men out of action. That was a childish attempt at chemical warfare compared with what we have today. Right now our laboratories are developing an agent which is incomparably more toxic. Also, it will have neither color nor smell and it will be practically impossible to detect in the air, even in lethal concentrations. The agent causes blindness, paralyzes the nervous system, and will wreak instant death on whole armies — instant death, mind you!"

His eyes took on a mad gleam when he spoke about it. He evidently derived pleasure from overwhelming us with Germany's chemical might. Looking at the gas masks some of us still carried over their shoulders, he shook his head sceptically as if to say that they would not save us.

But there were no gas masks in those bags any longer — we had thrown them away a long time ago. I recalled the rubber coveralls we wore at university

during chemical drills when we decontaminated imaginary places affected by chemical agents. Such protective equipment was also supposed to be ineffective.

"The world doesn't know of any protection against our new chemical agents. There'll be millions of people gassed."

Were we hearing this from a human being?

"You viper, you creeping filth," the Tatar said, raising his rifle butt over the prisoner's head behind his back. But I stopped him.

"I haven't given any order."

"Why fuss with him?!" the Siberian shouted. "What are we waiting for?" His hand shot to his gas mask bag we knew what for.

"Hold off," Dukhnovich said, pushing his hand away. "*Mein lieber Genosse*, that wouldn't be humane on your part."

The remark made Vasya bristle with anger.

"Dukhnovich, don't forget the rules of our humanism: if the enemy doesn't surrender, he's destroyed."

"But he surrendered, didn't he?"

"My foot he did!" the Siberian shouted sinisterly. "We took him by force and cunning. Like hell he would've surrendered otherwise. So he's to be destroyed. Look how he tries to have his life spared by being sly. And you, Cadet" — that referred to Dukhnovich — "have been fooled by him like some toothless sissy!"

"See, I've already been tagged with a name," Dukhnovich said with a crooked smile. "But you won't scare me with that. I'd like to remind you that we deal with the life of a good for nothing but still of a member of the human race."

"How can you call him a human after that?"

"What else is he? A gander, or what?"

"He's a two-legged animal! Just as cracked as his Führer! Why fuss with him? I'd bump him off so quick he'd have no chance to squeak!"

As the commander, I had the final say. But I thought that such things should not be done in haste.

"Now stop arguing. Let's pass the day here and then we'll see."

The German must have realized that his fate was being discussed. Speechless and intimidated, he looked

questioningly at me with his blue Aryan eyes until I told him:

"*Schlafen*. Go to sleep."

Dukhnovich and the German lay down side by side. Moments later all of us, except for the sentry, were lying amid the dry sunflowers like in a prison cell which instead of stone walls and a low ceiling had a vaulty sky that was open to our thoughts.

When I thought everybody was asleep, the Siberian suddenly crawled up to me.

"Now tell me why are you against him being bumped off? You feel sorry for him, or what?"

"Not at all."

"So what's the matter then? Is it a question of principle?"

"Maybe."

"Oh, Kolosovsky..."

"You might as well keep your Ohs to yourself."

The Siberian crawled back to his place, displeased.

While we slept throughout the day, one of us stood sentry and watched over the German, taking in his mortal enemy as much as he pleased. He was young like most of us. He had short-cropped blond hair and rose-tinted cheeks. The immediate shock of his captivity must have been the reason why he was sweating so profusely now and again and why his hands were so stickily clammy. When it became hotter, he took off his field jacket, shirt and breeches, and with only his trunks on exposed the well trained muscles of his legs and shoulders to the sun. He kept turning about frequently, first on his back and then on his stomach, for his troubled thoughts about his impending fate must have robbed him of sleep.

When I stood guard, he seemed to have dozed off, but then I noticed that he was only pretending to sleep while his blue half-shut eyes watched me vigilantly all the time. What was he thinking about? What was he hoping for? Probably he was just waiting for the moment when I would trail into sleep and he would bolt off toward the horizon where the war was rumbling.

Not far away from us, a railroad ran through the steppe; when you stood up you could see through the sunflowers the crossing with the black and white barrier.

Who had lowered that barrier? Had it been the enemy or the last railroad man after he had left his hut and closed the road to the east behind his back?

There wasn't any sign of movement on the railroad.

Nazi planes flew overhead now and then. No barrier could block their way. The prisoner followed their heavy flight to the east with screwed-up eyes.

"Junkers?" I asked.

He nodded in affirmation — they were Junkers bombers.

"I wish whoever invented them would see his hands wither," Hrishko said, waking up, and turning to Dukhnovich who wasn't asleep either, he asked: "Who invented the first airplane?"

"Whoever it was, he hardly thought of war."

"And what about the inventor of the bomb?"

"He'll deny wanting war either."

"What about the inventor of gases then?"

"That's something you should ask him," Dukhnovich said with a frown, nodding toward the German. "What a mess, darn it," he continued, after a pause. "Scientists invent dynamite and do it with what looks like good intentions; then they invent the bomb, assuring us they don't want it to destroy anything; the designer makes an airplane also with the very best intentions. They invent, build, and — here you are, please yourself! — give all that to a raving maniac who makes the fruits of human genius feed war, while the scientists probably think they haven't got anything to do with it and are no accomplices to the crime. Who must be brought to book for all that?"

Columbus, also roused from sleep, looked at the German closely.

"I'd like to know whether he wanted war? Let him answer that one," he said to Dukhnovich.

After hearing out the question, the German shook his head — no, he didn't want war. His father had been an officer in the Kaiser's army and had choked himself on the gases in the previous war.

"So what brought him here then?"

"He says that his will is nothing compared to the will of the Führer."

"Tell him that his Führer will regret the day he started

the war," I said to Dukhnovich. "War has the property of a boomerang. Sooner or later they'll turn into ashes. Tell him that."

"Oh, that would be horrible," the German said after listening to Dukhnovich. "*Mein Gott!* I simply cannot imagine the Gothic architecture of my town destroyed. To see the ruins of our medieval cathedrals, town hall and ancient buildings which are known the world over from the engravings of famous German masters! May that never happen! I saw Warsaw and Lviv. I saw your Zaporizhya in ruins. Your Dnieper station really impressed me. It's a modern structure I hardly expected to see in these Scythian steppes. Tell me, is this Scythia?"

He was obviously sinking into melancholy. His voice took on a sad ring and sounded somewhat strained. He propped himself up into a sitting position and looking warily at the acrimonious Siberian who frowned even in his sleep, shared his impressions on how these awesomely boundless steppes depressed a German soldier who saw them for the first time.

"We Germans are used to short distances and small areas, but here everything has no bounds. That has an overwhelming effect on the psyche. We're not used to thinking in categories as vast as your expanses, and the sight of the oceans of steppeland give me a feeling that's almost mystic. Maybe I'm too impressionable, but lately I've noticed that your steppe ruins my energy and destroys my military ardor."

"It's not the steppe that does it..."

"We Germans were told that we are a people of rulers and have come here to rule. But when we were still on the far bank of the Dnieper during our advance on Zaporizhya and went up a hill and saw before us the grand panorama of the Dniprohes and the metallurgical giants in the steppe, I thought then: *Mein Führer*, we'll have a tough time here!"

"It's strange that thugs from the *Hitlerjugend* could be tortured with such doubts," Vasya said as he rubbed sunflower leaves between his palms to roll himself a cigarette with.

"You must be thinking that I'm begging for my life," the German said, casting a glance at the political officer's stars on Vasya's sleeves. "But, believe me, I'm

being sincere. We were told that Germany's destiny would be decided in Ukraine by the battle for the Dnieper beyond which we wouldn't let your armies retreat. But here you keep on withdrawing to the east, while we are getting ever farther away from the Reich."

"Pshaw, he's gotten too talkative," the Siberian said, getting up and giving Novoselets a reproachful look. "Why is he still alive? Are we waiting till he makes a break?"

Getting ready to set off again, we pulled on our boots. The German put on his uniform and carefully combed the dust and sunflower chaff out of his hair, his eyes watching how Hrishko handed out each his rations — now only half a handful of dry buckwheat. When everybody had gotten his share, Hrishko raised his eyes at me as if to ask whether the German should be given something, too.

The prisoner understood quite well that his fate depended on what I would say. If I ordered to give him the food, that meant he would stay alive. If it were denied him that meant *kaput* for him. His blue dust-filmed eyes looked at me anxiously and with what seemed like a stamp of doom: would I give him the food or not?

Indeed, what were we to do with him? Take him along? But he would give us away at the first opportunity and destroy all of us. His presence would make our trek the more difficult and dangerous than it already was. What had we left to do? Shooting him was certainly out of the question. I could imagine his muscular body resisting and struggling when the men would bring their bayonets into play and the Siberian would finish him off with his razor. We'd leave him to rot in the dust among the sunflowers without any qualms of conscience, because he had come here to exact death and his head was crammed with formulas of new weapons of mass destruction.

The prisoner kept looking at me until his eyes suddenly fell on the Siberian who was fixing the bayonet on the muzzle of his gun with a grim expression on his face.

"Poof, poof?" the German said under his breath, tapping his forehead with a finger as if he were asking whether we were set on killing him.

We kept silent.

"Poof, poof?" he repeated again, awaiting our decision.

"Well, what shall we do with him?" I asked my comrades in a deliberately casual way as if something altogether ordinary was being considered.

"Bump him off and be done with him," the Siberian said with affected indifference lest the German be put on guard.

Hrishko was of the same opinion.

"Why fuss with him? We'll have one mouth less, what with the scant rations we have."

"But still he's a 'tongue,' Vasya said.

What an odd word "tongue" our military parlance had for identification prisoner. We had captured a "tongue," and it wasn't the man who mattered nor his intellect or human essence, but only the information we could squeeze out of him.

"We'll have our peck of trouble yet when that 'tongue' shoots off," the Siberian stuck to his guns, and I saw that both the Tatar and Novoselets were at one with him.

The prisoner was intently listening to us. It seemed he understood everything we said by the pitch of our voices and was all tensed up.

"Dukhnovich, translate what I tell him now," I said. "He told us about a new gas their scientists had invented. Does he know the formula of that gas?"

Dukhnovich did what he was asked, and a faint smile curved the German's lips for the first time since he had fallen into our hands.

"He says it's a secret; the formula of the gas is the property of the Wehrmacht."

"But he, does *he* know it?"

The German's face broke into a wrier smile that was to say: figure that out for yourselves; I won't tell you for anything, because the secret you want to know so much will guarantee my life.

"I don't think that lousy *Hitlerjugend* cur knows any formula," the Siberian snapped out with contempt. "So let's tick him off and move on."

"All the formulas will fly out of his skull along with the brains and all the gases will get mixed up," the Tatar said.

They wanted him dead. All of us wanted him dead. Dukhnovich and I were no exception. The war had shown how easily the beast could be awakened in a man. But taming that beast later on would probably be much harder than now.

I exchanged glances with Vasya and ordered to Hrishko:

"Give that Teuton his share as well."

"It's really a waste. That extra mouth is the last thing we need now," Hrishko grumbled, but nonetheless gave the German his ration.

I had decided to take him along. As an officer of a chemical warfare service unit, he surely knew the important secret of the terrible new agent. But the reason I did not let him be bayoneted was not only because of him being an important identification prisoner, nor was it because of the existence of international conventions on prisoners of war — the nazis had trampled on those conventions and we knew how many of our POWs they had strangled in the sheepfolds, shot on the roads, and buried alive in antitank ditches. The principles of humanism and justice did not exist for them, yet I did not want to be like the nazis! The German had surrendered to us. The gun had been knocked out of his hands. Could I condemn him to death after that? If I did, I would be putting myself on the same level with the nazis. Hungry, ragged, surrounded by hostile troops though we were, we intended to be different from those murderers, builders of concentration camps and death factories, and wreckers of our happy life!

We got to our feet. Beyond the sunflower field and the railroad, the steppe was flat and open, and we had a feeling that once we got there, we would be seen from far and wide.

"Today the setting sun is red with prominences," Columbus said. "See those big wisps sticking out of the sun? That means it's going to rain."

Shortly after we set off. We walked through our native steppe in the dusk, almost prisoners ourselves, yet taking a captured enemy officer along with us. He walked with us all night, experiencing hunger and fatigue just like we did and seeing our firm deter-

mination to get to the east. An invisible chain seemed to have bound his fate to ours, and ours to his. We could not let him loose. We could not kill him. He would follow us all the time like a curse.

54

At night, when the stars showed through the depths of outer space in a faint glimmer, we had a feeling that we were not simply treading earth but walking across the entire planet. The boundless expanse of the steppe must have been the reason for this sensation. We were deeply convinced that of all creations of nature and of all the worlds wheeling in the void of outer space, there was nothing better than our warm, green planet that was so brilliantly created for flora and fauna and the remarkably intelligent beings on it. It had oceans of water, sunlight in abundance for everything to grow. We were walking through a part of this planet where life had teemed since time immemorial. Once it had been the habitat of mammoths. Greek seafarers strove to its shores and wove golden legends about it. It had once been the kingdom of steppe nomads, the Scythians and Polovtsi, who left behind them barrows no rains, winds or the remorseless march of time could obliterate. The barrows we had intended to dig together with our professor contained Greek amphorae of exquisite beauty and representations of gods and poets who were mute witnesses to the life of bygone generations.

The enormity of the sky in daytime was the more overwhelming at night. It hovered over us with all its darkness, stars and depths of outer space. Not so long ago vernal rainbows had graced that sky; endless grain fields had steamed in the sun after the rain; and amid the fields, like in an ocean, man had stood, rejoicing in his labor and in the fecundity of the earth. But now elevators packed with grain were blazing in the steppe; the sky was not lit by rainbows any more but by searchlights and flares; here and there it was littered with the bodies of dead herdsmen and tractor drivers; and in one place we came across a group of murdered students from a vocational school in Mikolaiv. Just like us, they

had been retreating to the east and had been machine-gunned by Messerschmitts in the open steppe. The children's bodies lay scattered on the stubble; each of them had a travel bag across his shoulder, but we did not dare touch what was inside.

That's what had become of our land.

"I wonder whether up there it's like it is here?" Dukhnovich asked me, pointing to the night sky where we saw the red planet of Mars. "Do those highly developed creatures there know no peace, joy or happiness either? How much I'd like to see the day when man will send his spaceships to other planets. Tsiolkovsky believed it would be possible in our century. How rapidly mankind advances. Not so long ago the wooden wheels of the nomads' carts creaked through this steppe, the Polovtsi pitched their tents here, and man was a child in his development, whereas today he is a demi-god; but what a hideous demi-god when you think about it. Take the Germans, for instance: like anybody else they were a civilized people, but now the whole world hates them."

"They hate them not because they're Germans, but because they're fascists who want to live by plunder alone," the agronomist corrected Dukhnovich.

"If this character were to be believed," Dukhnovich said after a pause, "they are inventing or have already invented a new monstrous weapon. All right, so we'll invent it, too, and so will others. But for what purpose? For mankind's self-destruction? No, until this tribe which inhabits the earth and calls itself mankind does not realize it is one entity, nothing good will come out of it!"

"This war must be the last one ever waged on earth," Columbus said. "So far everything has been invented for war, so it's high time to invent something against it once and for all. The earth isn't a firing range. It must be a plowland for crops..."

We wanted to believe that all our sacrifices would not be in vain, and we would be the last generation on earth to be forced to take up arms.

"They don't spare even children," Hrishko said, apparently recalling the children who had been machine-gunned by the nazi planes. "Eagles hunt hares, hawks hunt field mice, but here man-made birds of steel hunt

people. No, that can't go on forever. Our children at least must see a different, sensible life..."

"I find myself in a blind alley," Dukhnovich said with a sigh. "I'm an impious redhead of an atheist, but when I looked at the girls back at the poultry farm and saw their inspired faces turned to heaven, I wanted to shout up to the skies myself to hear the answer to the question: What's the purpose of all this wanton destruction?" He lapsed into silence, and then continued after a pause: "As for me, I've been an object rather than a subject of war so far. I haven't made a good soldier, it seems. But still I have to do my job. Like any insect I want to live, of course, and I want to fuss around on this planet for a while, but if I were called upon to destroy all wars once and for all — forgive me my florid way of putting it — I wouldn't spare my little shifting life to this end. As I see it, every man must reach his zenith at least once..."

"What do you mean by that?"

"The ability for self-sacrifice, if that's what is expected from me."

Hour after hour there was the rustle of the corn through which we moved, and of the sunflowers that had been abandoned to the mercy of the autumn rains and winter snowstorms. These fruits of labor of thousands of people had lost their value now and were of no interest to anyone but such stragglers as us who sought cover in them. In one place we came upon an antitank ditch. After we had crossed it, we looked around to make sure the German had not been left behind in the dark.

"Step on the gas, fellow," we heard the voice of Novoselets who urged on the Gasman, as we had nicknamed the prisoner, with the butt of his rifle. A moment later, the prisoner was far from the thought of giving us the slip. He was an obedient sort, and although he was not cut for such a trek, he tried not to lag behind and kept close to me, either because he was pushed about less at my side than elsewhere or because he wanted me to see him so that I'd know he had not escaped.

"Say what you like," the Siberian mumbled, "but I can't stand that Aryan horse phiz of his."

"I think he's got a wheel unhinged in his mind," Hrishko said from behind. "Could we have really

frightened him out of his wits? Take a good look at his eyes during the day. They're the eyes of a nut whose brains have been poisoned with gases."

"Maybe his brains will clear one of these days and he'll become a human again," Columbus said.

"Hardly. Those gases must have made his reason snap."

"A fine identification prisoner for you," the Siberian added malevolently. "By the time we bring him to our troops, he'll turn from a quiet nut to a raving psycho. Here you are and enjoy yourselves — we've brought a cuckoo for you. The only thing left is to put a strait jacket on him!"

But the German seemed to be quite sane, because on hearing a Columbus we mentioned in our conversations, he became animated and even was amused at the name. He even ventured a joke on that point to please us, but Columbus turned on him so fiercely that he wilted right away.

Indeed, as the bitter irony of fate would have it, we had a Columbus among us. The billowy sea of war had swept us up and was tossing us from one danger to another, carrying us to the shores of uncertainty. Our fate was similar to the fate of seafarers whose ship had been wrecked on the high seas. Our native shores, which we called the front line, were constantly shifting in space, and much as we struggled to get there, it did not draw nearer but, on the contrary, was moving farther and farther away from us into the depth of the night in the east. The front line was somewhere over there where flares streaked into the sky among the stars from evening till dawn. We called them "chandeliers" and hurried to them every night, because there, as we reasoned, was the front line where the two warring sides were in contact with each other.

The German must have realized what made us hurry in that direction and laughed in his heart: Go on chasing them! You'll never catch up with them much as you try!

But you're in our hands for all that, I thought with hatred, and as long as we can stand on our feet you'll be going with us and you'll live as long as we do.

"Communist?" the German asked me suddenly.

"Yes, I'm a communist," I said. "So what?"

He asked Dukhnovich to explain his curiosity:

"We were told that your army was falling to pieces and that commissars were forcing you into battle under gun point. But now I see that they're not forcing you but leading you."

Then he pointed to Columbus.

"He a communist, too?"

"Yes, he is."

"And that one?" he asked about Vasya.

"He too."

"Tell him," we suddenly heard the labored voice of the tight-mouthed Hurtsilava, "tell him that we've all been communists since June the twenty second, nineteen-forty-one."

"Tell him also," the Siberian said, "that we're going to win this war by all means, and his Reich will be turned into a pile of rubble."

"We're going to win the war whatever it takes to win it," Columbus added. "But we'll never stop hating it. Tell him exactly that."

We marched on without speaking for some time.

"Just imagine, Bohdan, how people of the distant future will regard us," I heard Dukhnovich at my side. "There'll be marvelous sunlit cities and free people. Wars will be something only archeologists will know from their digs. Now imagine those people looking back at us from the centuries and wondering: Who were those ragged, exhausted savages walking in the darkness with guns and leading one of their kind at gun point? They had deep rivers but died of thirst. They built for decades only to have it all ruined in a matter of minutes. For how long had they been burning and ruining, and why didn't they take care of their wonderful planet called Earth?"

We walked into a dense growth of stalks as tall as bamboo. It was sorghum which the steppe dwellers used for making brooms. While we were cautiously pushing our way through, radio music suddenly fell upon our ears. It was a song sung in a foreign tongue. We bent low and saw a light, probably a flashlight, moving across the open field ahead of us. The music was coming from a tent. We heard laughter and the merry chatter

of men. Farther on there were some strange dark bulks ranged across the dark field.

"Warplanes! It's an airfield!"

We had run into a German airfield. The light was really a flashlight a sentry was carrying, and those who were inside the tent didn't so much as bother to camouflage it. They were listening to the radio and enjoying their evening meal. They had posted a couple of sentries by the planes and didn't seem to have any reason to worry about their safety.

"What a brash bunch of bastards," Vasya said to me under his breath. "If I had a tank here, I'd crush their Heinkels under the tracks." He got to his feet suddenly. "You know what, I'll go there. I've still got some grenades. I'll crawl up and..."

We put our heads together and decided to attack. The Tatar volunteered to join Vasya. He had a sword bayonet hanging from his belt, and no one could handle it better than he. Vasya and the Tatar would be covered by us from our hiding place in the sorghum.

They crawled away along a furrow to the place where the sentry was making his rounds.

"What about him?" the Siberian whispered at my side. He had in mind the German who was lying on the ground between us. "To tell you the truth, I'd love to gog him so he wouldn't squeak. But the bastard's got a pair of long legs. If he breaks loose, he'll reach his buddies in two bounds."

The prisoner did not stir. With my elbow I felt how his body was tensed up for the burst to freedom. But just let him try, I thought. Presently he stirred on his elbows, but the next moment somebody's bayonet was pushed against his back and he was made to hug the ground as before.

Merry laughter came from the tent pitched in the steppe where the hordes of Batu Khan had once stopped. The flood of time had swept away the hordes, but now the peace of the steppe was again disturbed by outlanders. We took aim at the tent with its light, laughter and music. Our eyes strained, we firmly clutched our guns in anticipation. This would be the first time we had revealed ourselves in enemy-held territory. But we simply could not miss such a chance and were ready

for battle no matter how it would end. Our comrades disappeared into the darkness; the sentry was still walking his rounds. Suddenly he collapsed without uttering a sound.

"That's it," the Siberian whispered.

When the first grenade blew up a plane, we opened fire on the tent. I emptied my disk magazine in one uninterrupted burst. While I was fixing a second one to my gun, a flame leaped up between the black silhouettes of the warplanes, followed by two explosions in a row. The quiet steppe changed instantly: panicky shouts, firing, and flares hissing up into the dark sky here and there. We held the planes, tent, and sentries under fire, determined not to budge until our comrades returned.

A moan reached our ears out of the darkness. Dukhnovich and I rushed there to see who it was. It was Vasya.

"I'm wounded. Don't leave me..."

We pulled him quickly back to our hiding place.

"Where's the Tatar?"

"He's over there. Dead."

We had no time to ask for details and scurried back into the steppe through the sorghum and sunflowers. Looking back, we saw the planes going up in flames.

Behind our backs we heard the sound of alarm. The sky became lit up with the deathly pale light of flares and tracer bullets ripped the darkness again and again. Galvanized by the attack, we moved quickly away from the battle scene, while the Germans kept sending flares into the sky which could no longer reveal our whereabouts.

Vasya was carried on a waterproof cape by four men including the German who held one of the corners of the cape as he breathed heavily on the run.

Vasya moaned ever louder and was bleeding profusely; we had to bandage him immediately. We made a halt on a rise by a strawstack. From this vantage point we clearly saw the blazing airfield and the tracer bullets being pumped into the steppe at random.

"Who's got first aid packages?"

We ripped open a number of packages; Dukhnovich and I took to bandaging Vasya's wounds as best we

could; come day, we would bandage him better. He was wounded in the back and legs. We had just finished bandaging Vasya when Hrishko suddenly stunned us with the news:

"There are bombs here! A whole strawstack of bombs!"

From his excited story we learned that while he was pulling a sheaf out of the strawstack, his hand had come upon a crate in the stack and behind that crate were a lot of others with bombs. We rushed over to the stack and threw the sheaves aside. Indeed, there were bombs in it, a whole mountain of TNT.

"They've got our markings on them," Novoselets said on closer inspection. "Exactly such bombs were manufactured at the plant I worked."

The bombs must have been brought for a steppe airfield not so long ago and hurriedly camouflaged. Our planes had failed to use them, so it was a certainty that they would be found and used by the nazis. The flares going up into the sky from the airfield seemed to fall closer and closer: we had to get out of here fast.

"Pick up Vasya and let's go."

The order was meant for Dukhnovich as well, but he did not budge. He stood before the strawstack all hunched up and said suddenly:

"This has to be destroyed."

If these black bombs packed with death would be left behind like that, sooner or later they would be dropped on our heads as well as on our troops, railroad stations, and evacuee trains. The bombs certainly had to be destroyed, but how?

"Have any idea how to do it, Cadet?" the Siberian asked. "To blow them up we'd have to have a blasting cap and at least a couple of meters of Bickford fuze."

"I've got a grenade," Dukhnovich said stubbornly and with what sounded like arrogant anger. I knew he had a grenade in his gas mask bag, the last grenade between all of us.

Yes, a grenade could explode one bomb which would make the rest go off. But who would throw the grenade? What would happen to him? Even if he were a bird, he wouldn't be fast enough to get out of the reach of the explosion in time. Suddenly we heard dogs barking



from the hollow over which flares were flying up with increasing frequency. The Germans had set their dogs on us.

"Withdraw! I'll cover you!" Dukhnovich said, the grenade already gleaming in his hand.

I tried to make him come to his senses.

"Give me that grenade."

"No. You must go. You've got to lead the men. Go! I'll catch up with you!" he shouted at all of us. To jolt us out of our daze, he pulled the safety pin out of the grenade right before our eyes. Now only his fingers checked the brute force his grenade would call forth.

The flares were hissing closer and closer and the baying of the dogs came louder from behind the rise.

"Pick Vasya up!"

Four of us took hold of the corners of the cape and moved off. When we looked around, we saw the lonely figure of Dukhnovich against the dark background of the strawstack. Why did he have to say he'd catch up with us? He knew pretty well that it was impossible. I looked back once more to see Dukhnovich's stooping figure which didn't have much of a soldierly look about it. That stoop of his reminded me for the last time how many days he had spent hunched over books in libraries.

After we had scurried down the rise into a valley densely overgrown with wormwood, we put Vasya on the ground and halted to rest. We waited for the explosion, but none came. From here we had a good view of the strawstack on the rise and the stooping figure of Dukhnovich lifted out of the darkness by the flares again and again. Oblivious to the flares and the mounting baying of the dogs, he stood out sharply against the huge strawstack which was packed with bombs instead of golden sheaves.

"My God, what a fantastic boy," Columbus said at my side. And I thought, what a lot of good things I wanted to tell him at that moment! I'd probably never have another friend like him as long as I lived.

That instant the strawstack blew up and the detonation jolted the earth vehemently. We didn't see any flares after that nor did we hear the barking dogs but only flames and detonations following one after another out of the bowels of the earth.

We dropped into the bitter wormwood and clenched our teeth to hold back our sobs. Still, we waited for a miracle to happen, hoping to see Dukhnovich walking out of the raging flames and columned smoke. We kept on waiting, although we knew Dukhnovich would never reappear.

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We were back on our trek again.

The pain of loss, the smell of the wormwood steppe, the blue of the Dnieper waters, and the rosy dawns as fresh as the blush of youth — all this we had taken along with us and were carrying to the east now.

I kept thinking of you, Tania, wondering whether you had really existed. Yes, you had; and you did exist now on the other side of all these horrible events separating us. Wait for me. We might break through yet.

Everyone of us carried in his heart an undestroyed and even growing charge of love and tenderness which had to lead us to our goal in the end. People strong in spirit — remember that expression? Previously we had had a rather bookish idea about such people. Since then I'd seen a lot of them in real life. They threw themselves on nazi tanks with incendiary bottles on the other side of the Dnieper; they defended Dniprohes to the last man, and held defenses that seemed simply impossible to hold. But the power of human spirit was perhaps the strongest when the enemy had surrounded us in the steppe and we were subject to no one but to our own resources. We seemed to be moving outside the notions of time, without any knowledge of what was happening on other fronts. Our goal was somewhere beyond the murk of the night, but it seemed we were prepared to walk all our lives to reach that goal. We were poorly armed, but the keenest weapon was within us — in our will and in our hearts.

The night wind rustled in the shelterbelts, and for the first time in so many nights, a distant rumble reached our ears. It was the rumble of the front line. The sky glowed on the horizon; against its background the strawstacks rising out of the steppe here and there stood

out clearly, and all of them seemed to us to be dumps with bombs, mountains packed with bombs. To the north, boundless corn fields rustled in the wind. Suddenly we saw silhouettes of people in the corn and in the stubble field nearby. No sooner had we seen them than they disappeared. They had dropped to the ground. We did the same.

Then, after a torpid pause:

"Hey, who's there?"

"Friends."

"Who are you?"

"Trench diggers. And who are you? Friends?"

"Yes, friendly troops."

A forest of people rose before us. We came closer to them. All of them had shovels. A whole army of trench diggers surrounded us. Interrupting one another, they told us how they had been digging antitank ditches and building an airfield in the steppe, working on it to the last minute until they received orders to report to the nearest call-up centers; when they arrived there, the centers had been evacuated.

"How many of you are here?"

"A lot. Take us with you. We see you've got a compass."

The men in the front ranks looked at the luminous dial of the compass shining on my wrist.

"Are you taking us along?"

They waited for our answer.

I thought that without them it would be easier to break through, because a little group courted less danger. Well, but could we leave them in distress? Could we leave men who tomorrow would be soldiers taking part in offensives and victorious battles?

"All right," I said, "we're taking you. But mind you, we've got strict discipline."

"We're not afraid of discipline. You can rely on us."

When we moved on, the whole field rustled behind us. It was hard to tell whether it was the wind or people plodding through the darkness.

The rumble of the front line grew louder, and the fires raged with increasing abandon. Nowhere had I seen such fires as on that night. The whole earth seemed to be ablaze from horizon to horizon.

Through a breach in the clouds I saw Mars, the bloody red planet Mars that had seen so many wars. How many more would it see yet?

What if this is the last war? A time has to come when no wars will be waged. Maybe at this moment a happy generation is already coming into this world not to die in wars but to land on other planets and plant there the banner Columbus carries under his raincoat.

We pushed on and on. We wanted to burst through the steppe, the enemy airfields, ambushes and all the dangers that would be lurking along our way. It seemed that once we got out, there would be no more war, and before us, as if from a high mountain range, we could see the farthest communist ages beyond the horizon. Which of us would break through the encirclement? Which of us would perish in this steppe engulfed in flames? What if death were waiting for all of us behind the next rise? Or would we yet take part in many a battle, be reported as missing in action, drink water from marshes, or die in concentration camps, remaining everywhere the soldiers of our country?

But even if we die, we will believe that after us everything will be different and none of this will ever happen again, and the happy man who removes the fuse from the last bomb on the sunlit Victory Day will say: the last nightmare on earth is over!

ОЛЕСЬ ТЕРЕНТЬЕВИЧ ГОНЧАР

ЧЕЛОВЕК И ОРУЖИЕ

Роман

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