

CHAPTER 1

“It’s another beautiful day at Auschwitz-Birkenau.”

It was possible that Hans, being fairly intelligent as men went, saw a little irony in what he said, but he was brainwashed with Nazism, and besides, had a mean sense of humour.

Hans had said it in a whisper to himself. Hans, tall, blond, his hair melding with the light of the oncoming sun. The sun itself was the colour of a natural blond and to the Germans it must have looked like a truly Aryan dawn. Hans thought so. It was dawning in a quick-seeming way, as though eager to roll and flex its colourful warmth over that place, as though it had a conscience itself, as sometimes nature does, or appears to. The sun appeared to want to make friends with Auschwitz-Birkenau, to embrace it, to hold it in a moment of time where it could give itself to the deep and dark rat-maze below the towers and the buildings like a mother’s kiss. Behind the guard tower that Hans stood in the bird’s nest of, what drew the eye first was a brick chimney continually exhaling fragile white smoke against the stark, strong colours of the sun. You know what this is. It’s the chimney of the crematorium that breathes out its souls into the sky like a cigar held casually in death’s hand. And yet, despite all this, it was, to Hans, another beautiful day.

There were two guards in the guard tower, so it’s possible that Hans might not have minded if Fritz had overheard. Fritz was a small man, malnourished almost by his own preference, with a moustache the colour of mouse fur and a way of finding his way in and out of situations without being seen, heard or noticed, which was exactly the way he liked it. He was a bachelor, and felt that bachelors were far more masculine than married men, and so he remained one, though it is doubtful that he could have changed his situation even if he had liked to. Men who are undergrown and unpolished were known in the Reich for not being as smart as your blond, tall fellows, and, by chance, it happened to follow here. Fritz had heard the statement, but before he could find a reply, his concerns returned to himself, which, as it follows with Fritz, put him out of humour with conversation in general. He had entered a realm where he was wondering why his boots were scuffed, without remembering that he passed things that could scuff them a hundred times a day. He was quickly emptying a small tin of soup.

“Mmn,” he said, “this soup is thin.”

Hans had very little to say about the soup that someone else was drinking, having no way to know whether it was thin or not, and since he also cared not about the thickness of soup in general, thinking it rather a little thing for a man to care about, he did not reply. Instead he gazed down at Fritz, who was crouching and blowing on the soup. The soup had to be cold already, since he had had it for half an hour, so he had to be blowing on it out of habit and not need. Fritz and Hans didn’t know each other very well, since Fritz didn’t like or understand conversation for pleasure and Hans did. Hans wondered how Fritz had ever come to be in the SS at all, but instead of lapsing into philosophical silence, he replied, wanting to socialise where he could. He had stood for four hours and Fritz hadn’t said a single thing. Hans looked

at his watch. He was stiff and cold. He had an excuse to leave, but inexplicably found himself talking to Fritz.

“I’d better look for Herr Doktor Mentula,” said Hans, stretching and turning his head away from the sun. Herr Doktor Mentula was his particular friend, but he tried not to make that too obvious to any of the staff. Nobody else liked Mentula. “There’s a new doctor arriving tomorrow. Did you know?”

“No. I had never thought about it.”

“Well, he’s...”

“It really doesn’t concern me.”

Fritz let out a long burp which a sparrow listened to with a cocked head, sitting on the railing; when his burp ended with a flourishing sound, it took off and flew with frantic determination in the opposite direction. Hans watched the bird, and then looked down his nose at Fritz to make him appear even smaller. Before he could comment, Fritz said,

“Nothing like a burp at the start of the day.”

Hans sighed. He took the soup can roughly from Fritz, tearing it from his relaxed hand, then threw it out over the barbed wire in a high arc. Then he tossed the spoon Fritz had used over his shoulder and it made little tinkling sounds as it fell through the structure of the guard tower. Fritz watched it all with his mouth hanging open. Hans, disliking the silence and feeling he had been rude, considered asking whether thin soup made one burp more than thick soup. But if that happened, they would be devolving into a Fritz-like conversation and they would end up in a huddle on the ground drinking soup and burping instead of speaking soon enough. He reassured himself by thinking that since he didn’t look like Fritz, he couldn’t become anything like him, and added that humans could never become apes again. Fritz talked determinedly, thrown off by Hans’ trickery.

“It’s fine that you threw the can, but I could have used the spoon. It was funny about that bird. I suppose I was loud,” said Fritz nervously. It is appropriate to know at this moment, that Hans was a rank above Fritz, and the throwing of the soup can and the spoon, as well as licking the soup off the can, might be taken as quite intimidating. A few seconds passed before Hans remembered the sparrow. Birds didn’t like the camp very much, and you didn’t see them around; they sometimes perched on the fence in seeming curiosity, and sometimes you saw a row of them, but one by one, they always flew away. The doppelganger dogs that lived in Auschwitz-Birkenau that were trained to be aggressive seemed to become so more quickly than seemed likely. Hans thought that it all depended on who trained them, but he was wrong about that. It wasn’t a matter of like dog, like master; it was the atmosphere that sent the dogs flying a bit, like people turning mad from standing in the cold.

Hans had a private laugh at imagining how something like a bird would view Fritz, but the joke became weaker when he realised the bird would see him, Hans, to be no different at all. He wanted to be talking about this new doctor, but at the same time he wanted to leave; wanted to find someone more interesting,

but like most intelligent people he found something amusing in conversing with someone so absolutely boring.

“The doctor,” said Hans, “is a *hauptsturmfuhrer*. You ought to be more interested.”

“People come and go,” Fritz slowly stood up and slid his palms down the front of his greatcoat, which had a spot of yellow soup on the lapel. Hans could hear Mentula’s voice in his head saying:

Lick that off. Augh! Yes – he really thought that Mentula would say that. In a shy way, lying naked before him, with a splash of soup on his thigh. And how horrible it was! – being Mentula’s friend, thought Hans, came with it this strange tinkle-piss of imagination about him being homosexual. But he isn’t, thought Hans. True Nazi men, thought he, would admit to each other if they were homosexual, since honesty was the cornerstone of Germanness. He didn’t know what a cornerstone was. He asked Fritz. Fritz gave an absolutely accurate answer. *That* annoyed Hans. Especially since he only realised it was accurate because he had forgotten it, and Fritz had happened to daydream it up.

He often daydreamed in this way about Mentula and he had no idea why. Mentula was a mysterious person; *thoughts* came into Hans’ mind that Mentula might say or think, rather than thoughts *about* Mentula. But time continued: as if dropping a needle down on a record, he picked up the conversation exactly where he had left it.

“Yes, I know,” said he in frustration. Then, in a brisker tone, “you know the pathology laboratory...”

“Yes, but I’ve never been in there. That’s your patrol.” The light suddenly struck Fritz in the face and he blinked and wiped his face with the back of a hand, then emptied his nose over the side of the railing.

The halo encircling Fritz’s turned head amused Hans very much indeed. The man had suddenly gone from lowly to holy in one twist of the shoulders. Hans wasn’t vain enough to reflect on how *he* looked against the sun, but only because only Fritz was there to see him looking so, and Fritz did not appreciate beauty. He really did not. Hans lowered his voice in frustration.

“I have. I oversee Men – Herr Doktor Mentula most days. Do you know – he doesn’t do anything in there, just fiddles about with instruments. The sort of science teacher nobody wants. I hope the new doctor will do something more entertaining. I’ve got to have something to look at,” Hans knew nothing about science. He liked to see things cut up, and blood, and all that sort of thing – he was a young man – but Mentula kept even a bloody wound so spotless Hans couldn’t enjoy it. “Have you read *Frankenstein*? I hope it’s going to be something like that – with the new doctor. I had a dream about it.”

Fritz listened to all of this with half-lowered eyelids, and played with a nail that was sticking out of the wood. He snorted twice as he listened. He was more awake in the mornings.

“I hate reading,” said Fritz, “but I know what you mean. What’s the name? The new doctor, - I suppose I’d better memorize it.”

“Josef Mengele.”

“Josef is such a common name.”

“So are Fritz and Hans,” said Hans, wondering if Fritz would ever make a point. “Mengele isn’t, though.”

“I know a Mengele,” said Fritz thoughtfully.

“Really? Who? Here?”

“The one who works in the laboratory,” said Fritz, looking him directly in the face.

“...that’s Mentula,” snapped Hans after a moment of reflexive thought, “not Mengele. Mengele’s going to be working there *with* Mentula soon, and get their names right, because Herr Doktor Mengele’s a *Hauptsturmfuhrer*.”

“It’s strange enough that someone’s named Mentula,” said Fritz, derailing the conversation again, “because it means...”

“I know what it means.”

“Cock in Latin.”

“Yes. Please be quiet. Let me think.” Hans lowered his head and shifted his body about. Fritz was conversant enough that he forced one through banal chat day after day, rather being the sort of slack-jaw that you could completely ignore or grunt replies to, but he was enough of a clown to confuse Hans.

Mentula’s name was an old joke by now, but it had never ceased to surprise anyone.