

Die Soldaten

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He stood, shoulders slumped against the freezing, pelting rain. He suppressed a violent shiver as an icy droplet traced its way down his temple, cheek, and neck to pool at the hollow of his throat.

His cold, stiff hands were clenched into fists, half to ward off the cold, half in a small show of discomfort. Before him loomed the imposing gates of Auschwitz - a black silhouette against the dreary grey sky.

He swayed slightly as a train, huge and lumbering, barreled past him to rest at the station. Faint through the driving rain and moaning winds he could hear whimpers, retching, and screaming.

He briefly caught sight of pale limbs, sodden clothing, and yellow stars before wrenching shut his eyelids and turning his face away. He willed away the sounds, focusing on the soft tattoo of falling rain. A sick sensation bubbled up from the pit of his stomach.

“Halt!”

He spun on one mud-caked, black-booted heel, wet blond hair flopping into his eyes. His stomach twisted, almost afraid to see what he would find before him.

A short, trim man with cropped hair and a severe expression stood beneath a black umbrella, tan uniform splattered with mud and water. A red band was displayed proudly on his left arm, black swastika centered in the middle.

“You. Eduard Wagner. You are the new recruit, no?”

Eduard snapped to attention, mentally taking stock of his own damp uniform. His own red band felt too tight on his arm.

“Jawohl! *Yes, sir!*”

The man eyed Eduard critically, before nodding. He turned abruptly, and began walking at a fast pace.

Eduard stood still, unsure of himself, diligently ignoring the rain pouring down around him - like any good soldier would.

“Komm mit! Mach schnell! *Follow me! Hurry up!*”

Eduard followed The Short Man past the looming gates, past the train station and the Jews tripping over themselves and each other in their haste to avoid the guns of his fellow soldiers (“Aus! Aus! **Get Out!**”), past the growing pile of belongings, to a line of bald, naked, women.

They stood in a line, twenty or so in total. They were shivering, tremors making their ways down their bodies at irregular intervals. Their arms were folded over their chests in a vain attempt to

cover themselves. Their tears ran with the rainwater.

Eduard's blue eyes traveled over their faces, noting their lips - blue from the cold, and their skin - pallid and pale in fright.

His own eyes locked with the doe-brown eyes of a tall woman about halfway down the line. The burning hate in her smouldering eyes forced him to avert his gaze.

The Short Man knowingly stepped toward the woman. His eyes raked over her pale, shivering body, defiling her with a triumphant smirk.

She held steady as she could in the cold. Her chin was held with a defiant tilt. Her eyes still smouldered with unmasked hate.

Faster than the lightning occasionally streaking over head, The Short Man whipped out his gun, the butt making a soft *swoosh* as it cut through the air, audible even through the rain. The end stopped mere inches from her nose.

The Woman with the hateful eyes never flinched, even as the women around her jumped and shrieked.

The Short Man dropped the gun back into his holster and stepped closer still. One calloused hand lashed out, grabbing her face in a vice-like grip. He twisted her head left, then right.

One sharp flick-of-the-wrist sent the Woman sprawling on the ground, face down in the mud.

“Schwein. *Pigs.*”

Eduard watched wide eyed as the Woman slowly returned to her feet. The rain washed the mud from her stoic face and stubble-covered head.

“Schwein.” The Short Man repeated. “This is why the Führer wants these... creatures exterminated. They're poisoning the Fatherland. The swine.”

Eduard didn't reply. He wasn't sure he could.

“Kill her.”

Eduard froze. He met the beady black eyes of The Short Man. The Short Man looked at him with an expectant gaze.

“I- I do not have a gun.” Eduard replied softly. His stomach twisted itself into knots, forcing him to stutter. He did not want to harm this Woman - Jew or not.

The Short Man and the Woman both eyed him critically.

The Short Man sighed, and scowled. One quick motion and his own pistol was held out before him.

Eduard hesitated, then took it slowly, turning it over in his hands. The cold metal was biting against his already frigid fingers.

“Kill her. Jetzt. *Now.*”

Eduard brought the gun level and took a deep breath of moist air.

He locked eyes with the Woman one more time. His hand trembled and the gun wavered.

He pretended not to notice the hope that had entered her eyes, dulling the fierce burning-hate.

He took aim and fired. Just like any good soldier.

Eduard watched her fall. Listened to her cough and choke. He watched her hope-hate eyes slowly dim and gloss over.

“Gut gemacht. *Well done.*”

Something inside him shattered. The Woman’s rage, her fury flowed into him, all directed at The Short Man and his perversely gleeful smirk. His hand trembled again as the adrenaline rushed through every vein.

With his thumb, he cocked back the hammer, ready to take aim.

From the corner of his eye, he caught sight of a billowing cloud of smoke pouring from a crematorium, surprisingly visible against the blackening sky, still strong despite the pounding rain. He swayed, watching it reach out in soft wisps toward him, beckoning him, daring him. A numb feeling spread across his chest like blood from a bullet wound.

Disobedience was not tolerated. Especially not from a good soldier.

His thumb fell back.

With a shiver that had nothing to do with the cold, Eduard motioned for the frightened, cowering women to take away what remained of the Woman.