

## Derailed

Ernst carefully caressed the golden ring upon his finger, as the love it represented helped ease his stress. It helped his eyes adjust to the beauty of his homeland, instead of the dark memories playing within his mind. He found himself studying every tree, pond, rock and animal from his rather murky window. Nature thrived, allowing Ernst's shoulders to relax. Even inside the warmth of the train, life flourished. People sat happily, talking and laughing as if the war had never occurred. Ernst liked this. He thought of Helga and a smile crept to his dry lips. It seemed almost wrong for him to be amongst such light; after all, hadn't he been an accomplice of darkness? To Ernst, war was no longer a proud voyage, it was a deceitful excuse to kill.

The constant chant of the train's steam engine transformed into wailing shells and explosions. Ernst's heart raced as the echo of gunfire drilled through his ears. His stomach churned, triggering the instinct to reach for his gun.

"Mr Holzman?"

Ernst was startled by the man's sudden appearance. The soldier was a mail runner, his army uniform stained. Ernst cleared his throat and unclenched his sweaty fists from the leathery seat.

"Are you Mr Holzman? Brother of Kurt Holzman?" The stranger's tone was impatient. Ernst nodded sharply, urging him to speak.

"Sir, I've been trying to find you since we boarded the train. These letters came late to the camp." He patted the papers in his hand. "They are for you."

Ernst accepted them gratefully. Relief cleansed his body of anxiety as he spotted the writing, a familiar swirl of delicately placed ink.

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“Helga.” He whispered, holding the banded letters close. “Thank you, young sir.” Ernst was overwhelmed with joy, but the soldier was gone. Nonetheless, he imagined Helga. She stood in their rose garden, the wind delicately brushing her skirt into her calves. The sunlight illuminating her features to highlight her cheeky but strong smile as the blond curls twined to lick at her slim shoulders. Her silky blue eyes intensely kind. In the future, Ernst hoped she’d hold a baby of their own.

He removed the rubber band, lifted Helga’s letter and revealed a piece of parchment, its black border bold and cruel. It was a death card, assigned to his brother. With the other letter disregarded, Ernst sat stiff, his eyes glued to the card upturned in his lap. Now and then his hands shook, while his mouth hung slightly open. The letters became displaced as his eyes blurred and beads of shimmering tears escaped him. Ernst’s bottom lip trembled almost continuously. Once again, gunfire echoed from behind whilst the ground shook and bucked. Ernst fell into the past...

*“How you going, Ernst?” Kurt yelled against the cacophony of sound.*

*“Still Alive!” Ernst laughed weakly. “Kurt, do you think we’ll make it home?”*

*He hesitated, then sighed. “I don’t know.”*

*At that moment, Ernst realised that Kurt was a changed man. He’d lost his optimistic charm and his features slowly darkened. Kurt never smiled anymore, while his eyes, always drowned in misery. His face was layered in a bloody grim and his blond hair flacked with sprinkles of dirt.*

*Kurt shuffled his feet, screwing his face into a knot of indecision. “Ernst, there is something I should have told you mouths ago.” He gazed upon Ernst timidly. “I... I’m a-”*

**BANG!**

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*A neighbouring soldier tripped to accidentally fire his gun, it's bullet slicing through the air silently, until it imbedded itself into Kurt's neck. Red showered in all directions, Ernst's face coated with hot blood. He gasped, startled and shocked. Due to the impact, Kurt's head whipped back, and he crumbled backwards. Ernst was frozen. He tried to move his feet, but they stood solid, as if concrete had been poured over them. Owl-eyed and terrified, he opened his mouth, yet the words didn't form, and dark sobs surfaced from the depths of his chest. -*

The train jolted and began to decelerate as Basdorf station gleamed upon the horizon. Ernst thrashed away the tear stained death card, wrapped his arms around himself and held his ring to his lips. His eyes clenched shut. Ernst dreamed of home, his wife, the farm and animals. He thought of his horses, galloping and throwing their heads as if delighted by the wintry weather, playfully kicking up little clouds of snow.

As sudden shutters shook the train, he reclaimed the letter stashed on the seat beside him, convinced Helga's sweat words would calm him down.

*My dearest Ernst*

*There is something you ought to know, but I warn you, it'll be hard to process.*

*I'm sorry Ernst, but I have been unfaithful to you. I wish to never hurt you, as I love you with all my heart, yet mistakes have been made and I cannot take them back. I have a daughter. I named her Gretel, after your mother. I can imagine how you must feel but please don't think any less of your brother when I tell you, he is the father of our child. I'm truly sorry Ernst but I will not abandon my child, she has no father now.*

*Please don't do anything rash, come home, we'll sort this out.*

*Helga.*

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He kept rereading her letter, shocked by its content. Ernst felt deflated, as if he'd been put out like the burning end of a midnight cigarette. He glanced down to the golden ring upon his finger, it was no longer a representation of love or light. The metal felt cold and foreign. The one thing left unscourged in his life, was fake. How could Helga do this? How could Kurt? Suddenly he was infuriatingly embarrassed. He imagined the shame brought upon his family, as the locals whispered rumours of deceit. He removed his ring and threw it out the window, if ever actions were displayed better than words, now would be it, because forevermore Ernst's heart was as cold as stone.

999 words