

## Der Einmarsch von Deutschland

Ava descended into the forest, landing gently. A few silver feathers fell from her grand wings. She gathered some snow into a snowball and threw it at a tree. *I love the snow*, she thought, watching the snowball explode into a million tiny droplets of ice crystals. She entertained the idea of falling back onto the frozen ground, stretching out her silver wings, and making a snow angel, but she decided against it and instead walked through the forest to Franz.

Mortar fire kicked dirt and snow up all around her. A bloody mist had collected on top of the white blanket that covered the forest. Ava heard orders from both sides as she walked – “Flank right!” *“Feuern Sie die Panzerschrecke!”* “Hold the line!” – and watched as bullets flew all around her and lodged themselves in the bodies of their targets. Ava was amused when the bright orange bullets lit her up as they phased through various parts of her body. She watched in awe as one soldier – perhaps an officer, judging by his uniform – spotted a grenade and threw himself on top of it, saving the men around him.

After taking in enough of the battlefield and its combatants, Ava walked briskly to Franz. She admired the way his comrades were trying to save him but she knew his time was coming to an end. Her eyes went to the medic’s hands that were tying bandages around what remained of Franz’s right leg to try to staunch the bleeding, for his body was pumping blood into the snow. Another medic was crouched, confused about what to do next – Franz had several holes in his chest and stomach.

*“Er ist ein hoffnungsloser Fall,”* the confused medic said before a shot pierced his helmet and imploded all the lobes of his brain. *“Scheiße!”* his fellow medic said.

Ava was grateful none of the blood from the battlefield would stain her gown or wings. She went to Franz's side, occupying the space that the medic had moments before.

Franz rolled his head towards her and formed a smile. "You're beautiful."

Ava smiled and pulled her silver hair back behind her ears. "Thank you."

"You speak *Deutsch*?"

"Dear, I speak everything."

"Who are you?" They always asked this, understandably.

"I'm your release."

"What?"

"Your release from life, from suffering," she said.

"You are an angel?"

"You could say that."

"But I'm not ready to die." The soldier used whatever strength he had left to raise his head and look at what remained of his body – his one and a half legs, his torso full of lead. "No, no, no, no. Not yet." He began to weep.

Ava let him cry. She didn't want to rush his last moments on Earth. She ran her fingers along his soft, cold cheek, wiping away tears. His face was that of a boy's. Traces of blonde could be found in his hair but the majority of it was darkened by dirt or plastered to his scalp by blood.

Ava had done this before during this war. Wiped tears away, stroked hair, held hands, released young men. Ava was starting to become numb to the horrors around her. The first soldier Ava released during this war held his intestines from falling out of his abdomen. "You look like my sister," he said before being taken away.

The medic that was working on Franz's leg gave up on him and went to another soldier not too far away, the one that fell on the grenade. He was still barely breathing, although a piece of shrapnel was lodged in his windpipe. Ava saw another angel descend to the battlefield and hover over him. The two angels looked at each other and exchanged frowns. "Too bad," Ava said under her breath before turning her attention back to Franz. He grew colder and his breathing slowed. Snow fell on his face and into his wounds. His complexion was turning purple.

"I never wanted to fight in this war," he said. "I don't believe in what we're fighting for."

"I know, I know," The angel said as she stroked his hair. "Now, you can do whatever you want. You don't have to fight any longer. But we have to leave, all right? You don't want to suffer any more, do you?" She took his hand.

"But my mother, she needs me to return! I can't die! Please! Please, *Gott*, please," Franz said, weeping.

"I'll take you to her, I promise," Ava said.

"Is she waiting for me on the other side? Is she already there?"

"Yes, she is. She told me she missed you and your brother too much and couldn't go on any longer." Ava grasped his hand tightly and dried his tears.

"Did Friedrich already die?"

"Yes, he did."

"Did you release my brother too?"

"No, only your mother and now you."

"Will I be able to be with them?"

"Yes, you will."

"What about my father? Is he still fighting?"

“Yes, he is. Your father is a very good *Oberleutnant*.”

Franz’s tears rolled into the dried blood on his ear. “He forced us into this war. I went –” Franz coughed, spitting blood into the snow. “I went to university to write and Friedrich was a painter.”

“I know. But you can still have a peaceful life. Friedrich has been painting for some time now. Don’t you want to see your family?”

“I do. Is it time?”

“Yes, it is time.”

Franz drew air in and exhaled a cold breath. He again looked at his poor excuse of a body and said, “I’m ready.”

Ava outstretched her beautiful wide wings and lifted Franz’s soul from the battlefield. His body went cold and he stopped blinking.

They flew upwards slowly enough so that Franz could watch the war unfold below him. So many of his friends – including his brother – had perished during the fighting. He had watched several of them fall right in front of him.

As they flew upwards, Franz noticed all of the other angels consoling hundreds, maybe thousands, of his comrades and enemies and lifting their souls up. A single feather fell from his angel and Franz let it land in his hand. Its soft silver barbs glistened in the sunlight. Franz remembered that the angel never spoke of where she was taking him. “Are we going to heaven?” he asked.

“If that’s what you want to call it, then yes, we are going to heaven,” Ava said. They ascended together into the white, snow-filled sky.

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While he was walking home from university, Ava followed Franz from high above, out of sight. It had taken some time, but Franz was well-adjusted and happy. Ava smiled at a job well done and ascended higher into the sky, leaving Franz to be with his family.

Walking on a dirt road, Franz flipped through his notebook and reviewed the story he was currently working on; a sentimental tale about the warmth of family. He considered himself a writer. A single flattened silver feather fell out of the notebook, which Franz was quick to pick up and place inside again.

As Franz grew closer to his home, surrounded by pine trees, he saw his brother on the other side of the road. His easel stood in front of him; a radio sat on the stool behind him. Their shepherd Senta was curled on top of his feet in front of the easel.

“Friedrich!” Franz yelled. Once he was close enough he saw that Friedrich was painting pine trees, a marvelous forest of various shades of green and brown. Red, purple, and yellow made the sky glow. “Beautiful painting.”

“*Danke*. I’m just testing out these new colors. I really like the way the red and purple stand out, *ja?*” Friedrich took a step back and admired his work.

Franz bent down to pet their dog. “Hey girl, how are you?” She licked his hand. The radio broadcast caught Franz’s attention. The announcer was giving a report on how the Allied troops were advancing further into *Deutschland*. “Is it almost over?” he said to Friedrich.

“If what they say is true, yes.”

“Good. Those poor people on both sides can stop dying for nothing.”

“Better them than us, no?” Friedrich said.

“Yes, I suppose so.”

Friedrich went back to working on his painting and Franz continued to pet Senta. The door to their house creaked open, drawing the boys' attention. "Franz, Friedrich, *meine Lieblinge!* Come eat! *Das Bauernbrot* is done baking," their mother said.

"Put down the paintbrush, Friedrich, and come on!" Franz said. The brothers crossed the road and entered their home. The radio broadcast continued, detailing the invasion of *Deutschland*.