



Sweet Speed

david zane

They did what they were told.

And they did it well.

Is that a crime?

Since it was complicity or death.

Their Leaders needed to be sure they'd do anything.

Absolutely sure.

The World could only watch and shudder.

Chapter 1

An angry rumble that is always on schedule, unfortunately... Germany has never been one of those delicate spots in any way shape or form. Especially since beneath these well-worn loafers the ground starts to shake... really shake as if it wants to burst and burst hard - crazy thing feeling your balance just wanting to flee like that. In no time flat it's incredibly loud in here... loud and depressing in this chest-tightening damp underground tomb. I've got my place right here though, right where my feet are nailed to the floor place, right where this will all eventually end in thirty seconds and not a second more place. But what an awful thirty seconds it's going to be let me tell you... I wouldn't wish this on my worst enemy... not with those steel tracks screeching inside a long black tunnel that starts to show itself from a single light.

Each second is counted for sure, winced at on the inside only as every dingy-grey concrete wall tries to absorb that terrible screeching... just like Mr. Arno Klein the Passenger is trying to do. Standing there glued to the floor because this Statue swears he can feel voltage travelling through him... starting at those aging lace-ups! Steely trying to endure it all, steely yet helpless, if that makes any sense, while a mighty roar grows along with a faint light from a long black tunnel. A heart beating out of its' chest because of that awful sound that stirs deep memories that never want to leave, that never want to stop being triggered at this same damn time going back more than half of Arno's waking life! Arno tries to control his legs... but he never seems to control the quivering that travels through them like a virus. One would think that after having to perform this ritual at 7:25 of every work-day morning; the light beams brighter, and brighter, as the seconds feel like a sharp blade poking into his skin. Clenching his jaw because he can't stop those overwhelming memories - it is a horrible noise to stave-off; who says the mind adjusts? All those years standing straight as an oak at the farthest end away from anybody and anything, if he's lucky this is the only place Mr. Arno Klein can survive the horror.

Amazing what this place still does to him.

Mr. Arno Klein might hate having to utter any untruth; the man is a Saint when it comes to any untruths. What today's Arno really hates is that this damn fright is still in total and complete control! Seething that he's never gotten over this crap, or that he's never been given a choice, at least not a conscious one; the man is merely trying to survive from another lifetime ago.

Suddenly a blast of humid wind shoots through the tunnel... the train's single light follows, shining everything up like its 10,000 volts, or Dresden.

"It's almost over... it's almost over", padding down a soaked brow with a handkerchief that sits ready in his breast pocket.

The rumbling reaches its' absolute loudest.

There is always a spare handkerchief just in case. Like usual the Platform is full - rush hour in Berlin looks like any other working city of Europe.

The train creeps slowly to a stop.

Full of blurry-eyed humans ready to assume their ‘roles of routine’ in order to make a wage... “Pardon me”, to survive until, “Excuse me”, until it can be repeated, “Sorry about that”, and repeated. The German People are very organized in war or peace - unfortunately.

Thirty seconds pass and the whistle blows warning everyone to clear the doorways, the last few race-in... pushing-in just a few feet more despite the Mob’s apathy. Grabbing a piece of metal, and looking around quickly, making sure no one catches the curiosity; Arno’s extremely shy. The packed subway car does not care one bit if he is or if he isn’t, it must only start its’ very slow, and very jerky crawl towards the next station. A bead of sweat rolls down the side of Arno’s pale face from the metal-on-metal screeching... everyone standing grips a little tighter on whatever they can... while swaying back and forth.

The cabin periodically goes dark.

Rubbing shoulders as the speed tries to pick up; life cares little about one’s soul-destroying trauma. Arno made a promise... he just has to get across town by eight.

It’s been said that the war was won by British brains.

American brawn.

And Russian lives.

“ATTENTION! ATTENTION!”, blares the loudspeakers, “STATIONS EVERYONE! SCHNELL! SCHNELL!”, the Commandant yells in the most frightening tone for a twenty-year-old.

The noise of hundreds of scurrying boots responds immediately.

In less than ninety seconds everyone’s assembled in the courtyard in long straight lines, perfectly-groomed and wide-eyed to take in what comes next from their Aryan leader. Rigid Soldiers staring straight ahead with their hands by their sides show both fear & respect... as their Commandant paces back and forth in short deliberate squeaking steps... like he is alone. A pin could drop and everyone would hear it; it is an amazing silence. Arno and his fellow Soldiers are trapped in a very strange kind of obedience.

“You are the best and brightest of the great Aryan race”, stopping... and facing his troops, “you are the rightful custodians of the human race.” Starting-up again... his shiny stiff full-length black leather scares in the pre-dawn incandescent.

Twenty feet in either intimidating direction... only their eyes move watching him and his many medals go from side to side. Operation Barbarossa was what he was calling it - Lebensraum... or “Space for Life” was the reason why.

“EVERYBODY REACH IN AND TAKE OUT ONE PERVITIN!”

Everyone responds.

Then everyone waits for their next order from their Man-God; Germans have enough obedience to fill the oceans and more.

At the end of every perfectly-straight line is a Lieutenant, a raging blue-eyed Acolyte who finished his three years and was deemed the most competent by ‘The System’ - that invisible belief by a Military that one’s heart and mind are both in the right place, and therefore they can

and will follow every order regardless of any personal notion. Armies are formed with such ideology, have been since the beginning of time - but to win a war requires more... lots more! One only knows that if they've ever been in one, fighting that is... otherwise it's just damn Hollywood!

"IN ORDER WE WILL NOW SWALLOW."

Pervitin is going to make every one of these Soldiers as wide-eyed as litres of coffee - so incredibly zoned-in to each one of their many exacting responsibilities that they have been repeating and repeating at least twelve hours a day; it is a pill they take before each battle. Now it's Arno's turn.

All of life's worries have no choice but to just up and disappear within minutes of taking this miracle little pill... and Arno knows it. Disappearing into thin air... maybe even vaporizing, I am clear as a bell and I can repeat my training to a tee; German culture expects perfection in everything we do.

The Lieutenant keeps moving down every aisle... checking to see... checking to avoid a growing contraband market. "Well done Arno", without a hint of a smile.

None of us cared what was in it.

Whenever Arno rides the train.

Loud screeching heading into the next stop.

Which he has no choice in order to get to his well-respected.

Entering the station... and slowing down.

Yet modestly paid bookkeeping job across town.

Doors opening into a crowded station.

Never has his mind not wandered back to the past... and never has he been able to stop it.

Curtail its power - maybe if he's lucky that day. The memories Arno has locked-away in his mind seem to have their own weighty agenda.

Closing after a quick stop.

Now did Arno think going to war was going to be tough? Sure, he's no fool... guns aren't made for the supply depot.

Gripping the bar tighter as the train picks up speed.

It's just that these scars... well these scars run deep - patting down fleeing perspiration as this steel tube with little luxury screeches and sways... and goes dark for a few seconds at a time.

Arno's scars are the kind that will never leave, he's accepted that fact. All that's left is the daily battle - especially those first few agonizing stops. Arno's Philosophy is to merely take it one day at a time - *putting a used handkerchief back inside his breast pocket* – while trying to will himself to normal.

This Old Soldier has seen way too much.

Down time throughout the barracks is always a type of fun like no other, deep belly-laughs going through the rows and rows of double-stacked beds... as some play dominoes more loudly than usual... or cards for keeps with the odd sore loser... while a select few play a pensive game of chess. Germans love to prove that they can concentrate longer than the next guy.

Some lay peacefully on their bunks reading a good book, or penning an 'I-miss-you' letter back to their family, or that special fraulein waiting anxiously on her porch for the mailman to arrive. "Ah come on not an eight... that just cost me four beers."

A big-eyed crowd jeers.

Arno stands, and heads for the exit. The next one wastes little time pushing him out of his spot, so he can be the next one to attempt to dance with Miss Lady Luck.

Mrs. are not lucky at all.

After a hike up a mountain in twenty-five-pound combat gear that took a whole day, everyone's hamstrings are screaming. This Squad is only too-happy to be finished with another eighty-degree day in the Third Reich's Army - although Third Reich, Storm Troopers, Hitler's Army - whatever one calls it - the end of the day also means the end of everyone being Soldiers.

In their civilian clothes every one of them. "What I wouldn't give for a night with Marlene Dietrich instead of all you smelly mugs."

The group cackles.

"Yaaa right, like she would give you a second look." Hardly Ideologues. "You couldn't get her to notice you if you were dead on the street." This group could have cared less about natural selection... murder... rape... hate-filled rage... Jews - they were 18, 19, 22 tops in Arno's squad here, an age where mortality is nothing but an older person's problem. "Dead and on fire!" These fresh-faced kids were being trained like one trains to be an Engineer or a Carpenter - as crazy as that sounds now.

Guess that's why they made the best Soldiers.

When the doors open... people exit and enter with purpose.

Twenty-five... thirty seconds.

Then the whistle blows.

Grabbing... preparing amongst the many sullen faces; in fifty-six years Arno's only found a seat a handful of times, Berliner's don't have the luxury of riding to work in their comfy cars like in other parts of the world. And in those early days after the war there wasn't even a subway! It took a good two hours through the rubble and the stench and the many broken faces, it was horrible, worse than horrible.

"Arno... Arno...", slithering the crowd with a smiling face... "Good morning Arno."

"Good morning Emil."

"What a glorious day it is."

"It is that", faking all pleasantries.

Always an upbeat time summer is; makes all forms of small talk that much more palatable.

“Me and the Missus are going away this weekend... up to the country.”

Screeching.

“We stay in this wonderful bed and breakfast in Carwitz that’s so Kaiser-Wilhelm-Bavarian.”

Swaying.

“The schnitzel is to die for.”

Arno resents Emil’s habit of lightness, but always remains polite – it is only for a few stops.

“How are Celia and the kids... and the grandkids?”

Some of the seats shake something awful as the train moves, quality is not part of this ride... it’s merely transportation, with plenty of jerking.

“They’re good, everybody’s good thanks.”

Funny how when the train gets to top speed the seats stop their shaking, Arno has always noticed.

“We should go out for the festival?”

Every German knows what *the festival* means; Oktoberfest is the biggest birthday party anyone can ever experience.

“Just name the time and the place.”

Only with lots of alcohol and endless *sound of music* costumes.

“That’s great, just great, I’ll let you know”, moving closer to the door, “have a good day Arno”, Emil fights through the chaos.

He then turns back for one last smile through the glass. Arno returns the smile as best he can.

Emil was too young to fight.

Damn lucky.

Heart pounding and blood surging... possessing a feeling that can out-think and over-power anything that might choose to stand in their way; a few hours before dawn and four thousand of the absolute best from the ‘Master Race’ are feeling the same. “Squad 47 over here!”, the Lieutenant screams. God Bless Pervitin.

Arno’s Squad assembles in perfect formation in front of their barracks after fighting through the mayhem.

“We are crossing the border in three hours from now... everybody synchronize their watches... it is exactly 3:28 am.”

3:28 am on June 22nd 1941 – synchronized.

“Now stations everyone! Schnell! Stations!”, the Lieutenant yells like he’s on fire.

Today is officially unique.

Each Soldier moves like he is also on fire.

Operation Barbarossa has been sold to each and every one of us as the rightful answer to a ‘Master Race’ that needs room to expand its’ greatness, plain and simple. Arno and his Squad are running to their stations like a ‘Master Race’ with a Plan... a Plan that says that those Godless Cossacks to the east are standing in their way. “Schnell! Schnell!” Europe needs Nazi Leadership - The Thousand Year Reich is the answer... the only answer.

Breathing heavy... Arno does not even consider slowing down. "Europe would thank us later", they kept telling Arno and his Squad morning noon and night. Putting on his goggles... and then his hat - Arno is in the Panzer division that must blitzkrieg an awesome trail.

Jumping up... and then in.

Which is vital for providing a total and complete trouncing for the good of all those Soldiers who must fight this war on their feet.

Eyes quickly buried in a stack of papers... Arno's wisely moved the longneck light to exactly where he needs it; this is his job. Since the second he landed in this steel box he's been studying his job... studying like his Nazi family depends on it. Working the co-ordinates for his crew of three; numbers on a page have always been fine with Arno. Slim yet muscular Hans handles the driving... all twenty years and six-foot-two of him. While 'only' six-foot Klaus works the big guns... at nineteen. Every foot soldier follows a few kilometers back.

The engine begins to rumble.

Killing and destroying anything these lethal dogs might have missed.

One-hundred-meter sprint Champ Arno Klein and his crew are quickly preparing to get into their Squad's formidable formation. Nothing to the east matters to any Third Reich Soldier here... it's only collateral damage, 'things' in the way of meeting their goals, of getting their rightful 'Lebensraum'. How else is a kid to be sold such work? Remember this was Europe... where hatreds have been running deep for close to a thousand years.

As Hans moves the tank ahead with all the other tanks... there is a deafening roar.

Americans could never understand such things.

The smell of gasoline is strong.

Their job is to leave nothing standing but the bridges.

All the tanks start speeding-up... heading towards the open fields that go on forever.

This was vital... leaving all the bridges that is.

Little German girls were raised to be selfless to the cause... submissive to the required Paternalism of the task. Their Nazi Leaders spoke often, and forcefully, on the need for these women to do their duty and procreate often; boys were another story altogether. From birth they were reminded over and over that they were special - both physically and mentally - but most importantly they were never to be poisoned with the weighty entanglements of feminine emotions. Future of the Empire; these Aryan men were to be clear-minded and wholly pragmatic. Mothers were warned... and rewarded. Like vitamins and minerals for the body; this was Arno's only nourishment when his uniform was either on or off. What were his Peers suppose to do in such a place? And in such a mindset?

"Hindsight... huh", Arno always shrugged whenever he heard another patronizing opinion decades later. One needs to experience human hell to understand it... period!

Captain Klein was merely one piece of a Squad which - rumbling the countryside at close to forty kilometers - was being depended on to do a job. "Take a left at the bridge ahead... it should be there in roughly a thousand meters", buried in all kinds of paper.

"Ok, but I can't see shit in this darkness", Hans shouts above the noise.

"The sun should be up in less than ten minutes", Klaus pipes in.

The rumbling that 400 Panzer-4 Tanks creates is something that no human will ever be able to erase.

Rumbling.

It is a shaking that.

Rumbling.

Starting at your feet... permeates every fibre of your being without mercy; Arno knows it's the reason why those subway rides always release those god-awful memories. "Turn here", yelling over the constant rumbling. For almost two years now Arno's battalion has been fighting both day and night... but yet this battle was feeling different?? With one eye on the road... and one on his mess of papers. "Where to now Arno?"

He could feel this battle was going to be way bigger.

"I beg your pardon."

Whistle-blowing.

"Sorry."

Doors closing.

Smirks from new faces that happen to catch my random staring... I always project a forced happy grin in return. That's all anybody from around here has ever seen over the years, since I've become really good at controlling my emotions - that's what war teaches you. Unfortunately not all of my fellow soldiers were so successful in that area - no sir. Some never made it out between the ears; which is god-awful when it happens. Trauma does unspeakable things to the mind, to what the eyes think they see. Every morning without fail the vast majority on this always-crowded train look like they'd rather be somewhere else.

Screeching.

Somewhere else above ground of course.

Every single German back then suffered trauma.

Looking back into the horde thinking... wondering what these fellow Berliners must see when they look back. Arno knows they don't see a Soldier... a Soldier that was promoted four times for his spirited performance in 'The Greatest Fighting Force' the world has ever seen - at least for four long years it sure as hell was!

What they see now is a banal old man, not a decorated Soldier, not a War Hero, that man hasn't been alive for some time. War keeps some things alive forever... and kills other things right away; the sands of time can be confusing.

What was I before the war?

What was I after?

I am not the only one; everyone has a past.

"Bloor Station", blares the speakers.

By this point in his commute Arno has been able to negotiate with his escaping emotions... barter with his exploding phobias... and make friends with his inner catalogue from hell - but there are more stations to go. And as this train continues its' starting and stopping, with all kinds of uncomfortable jerking... Captain Arno Klein remains glued to the floor of the last subway car... perspiring. This ex-Soldier decided a long time ago that being in the middle of the crowd is never a good thing; catching his reflection in the glass.

This cute old man is far from banal.

Chapter 2

Blitzkrieg... shock and awe... smouldering landscapes everywhere... Arno was not wrong. Operation Barbarossa was turning out to be the largest.

BOOM BOOM.

The most destructive.

BOOM BOOM BOOM.

The most complete military assault to ever take place in human history.

BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM.

And it was making Poland look like child's play.

When daylight hit, Arno's Squad, and hundreds just like his, were itching to show the enemy that they were prepared and ready. Oh were they ready! Explosions all around... the constant whistling of the low-flying Luftwaffe above their heads, dropping their payloads up-a-ways to soften any resistance, which of course made every Nazi feel prideful. Those engines screamed impressive... especially when adding-in all those rumbling tanks. Arno's co-ordinates were rolling over anything and everything... enemy soldiers, animals of any kind, and buildings, lots of buildings, anything really with the unfortunate luck of being in the way of 'The Greatest Fighting Force Ever' - something every German Soldier was being told at least a hundred times a day. "Take the wheel", Arno yells at Klaus. Straight was the only direction this tank was going to go. "You hear me, take the wheel." Curiosity has taken hold over everyone in this stuffy tank... but for Arno it was more than curiosity.

Hans grabs a magazine after Klaus takes the wheel from Arno... and starts to read it in the corner like the war has already been won. Arno moves eagerly towards the opening... and sticks his head out of the top to see the Russian countryside. Instantly his eyes freeze, as does the rest of his body... that smell - spinning around to take it all in. To this day, and every other day since, this naive boy from East Berlin will never forget that stench... that utter devastation The Third Reich inflicted on those Godless Cossacks. Feeling like throwing up, but knowing he can't - Arno bites down hard against the urge... trying like hell to keep his stomach while staring into a landscape of burning fire... of putrid fire. I'd be a deficient Aryan if I lost my stomach now, Arno admits silently, only silently. These Storm Troopers would tease me forever and a day, clenching-down with stamina he never knew he owned.

"I want to see", Klaus lunges after Arno slides his shocked frame down the narrow opening.

When Klaus returns a few minutes later he says nothing. The best Soldiers must deny the undeniable, they must develop a chronic psychosis to do their jobs well - to conquer and conquer only. Twenty-five million out of sixty million lives lost during the war sadly belonged to Russia, millions more after the war, but that's another story - not 'our' fault.

Arno's Squad had to learn fast how to stay engaged while inflicting apocalyptic damage on the enemy... while firing massive 75-millimeter-high-explosive shells in such a way that it was easy for their fellow troops behind them to have an easy time of it. Hitler's Army loved pomp and circumstance like a hunter needs that damn trophy hanging on his wall... part of the insidious molding process Arno can now only understand as a man who's walked this earth seventy-nine years. The last fifty-five of which have been wholly remorseful - not like that naive twenty-year-old; that person had no god-damn chance at all!

By dusk their Squad had travelled almost a hundred miles into Soviet territory... a confounding number considering they'd budgeted for twenty-five... thirty tops. "Take that you Godless Cossacks", Arno's Squad would sing after setting up camp, and after the alcohol really started to flow. "Nobody messes with the Master Race", dancing in jubilation... twenty... thirty... sometimes fifty of them making all kinds of noise as their once-pressed uniforms were loosened, but always respected. Commanders included.

When the Pervitin wore off the bottles always seemed to magically appear ready to fly open. Cases and cases embedded in the supply chain along with bread, milk, coffee, meat, vegetables, and sweets... Germans love their sweets.

Logistically perfect; it did seem as if it was pre-planned or something.

Arno's eyes widen all by themselves.

The whistle blows.

Not him again.

Then the doors slowly close.

The mornings he enters this last car Arno's heart always gets an unwanted kick-start, forcing him to start all over again... to calm himself down all over again... to prepare once more for that unconditional hug that he's going to get in only six stops - which unfortunately feels like another world away this morning!

Growing anxious from watching his very lazy approach; the worst part about days like these is that Arno never knows when he's going to show up... when he's going to end up in this last car... in this last part of this last car. A pounding heart with each one of his steps... Arno feels his palm sliding on the metal that is supposed to keep him sturdy.

If addicts are anything... they are predictably unpredictable.

"I need a drink!"

"You need a shower is what you need."

Everyone is laughing at a celebrating Arno.

"And then another!", dancing, "and another!... and another!", as he continues singing verses that have become as much of a battle cry as any other amongst these well-tuned Warriors that need to blow-off steam. Speeding through nations encountering feeble, even downright cowardly defenses, has done wonders for these mounting egos. These were Epic Triumphs... Epic Aryan Triumphs... even the highest-ranking Officers in Arno's battalion drank and sang with his Soldiers under the stars.

"Danka Feeneshka."

Pervitin by day, alcohol at night.

"Feeneshka Danka."

Merry into the wee hours... maybe this was the Master Race.

Red-eyes and disheveled clothing getting closer by the step, the stench of alcohol fills the car... there is little doubt he spent the night in those rags. "You're almost there", Arno keeps whispering as the stranger stops only ten feet away. Turning away and grabbing the bar tighter as anxiety performs a complete coup d'état on his muscles - Arno forces a picture of her sweet face... of her angel face in his mind... it's been over fifty-five years since he's had a drink... a real all-night bender... thinking of her fantastic smile. Arno never counts the nursing of one beer an entire night in order to make everyone around him happy. And of her porcelain skin. Germans love their beer way too much to avoid alcohol completely.

And of her arms wrapped around him tightly.

Arno knows that he has gotten extremely good at spilling the odd one on the floor.

After taking a seat he doesn't move, not one muscle... Arno remains fixed at the glass window as that man in rags keeps looking his way.

Arno has hated himself for a very long time because he owns such a weakness.

Obsessed lately with writing letters home... everyone else owns the same obsession; Arno's Squad has been whining to the Camp's Doctor and all the Nurses about needing more Pervitin... plus anybody else who may be able to score more of those light blue pills. Anybody!

"We need to stop this madness", is what they should have been saying. Instead, amazingly enough, these once fearless Soldiers have now become hollowed-out Junkies.

Junkies with hallucinations.

Junkies with dizziness.

Junkies with sweating.

Some of these Junkies even shot themselves, fatally even, in their psychotic hazes.

"Perhaps you can get me more Pervitin so that I can have a back-up supply."

"If at all possible can u PLEASE send me more Pervitin."

Arno wrote home every other day like a crazed lunatic.

"Protect the lines! Make sure you protect the railway lines!", the Lieutenant would yell a hundred times a day during drills.

"Protect Pervitin", was all everybody really heard, "Protect the supply of Pervitin!", with their black zombie-like eyes.

How did this happen so quickly? Arno kept thinking for years after the war.

Only many years later did every German learn that the nation's top Medical Officers were warning, and warning often, about the serious and very debilitating side-effects of this drug. Hindsight... huh.

Those side-effects sure did creep up on all of us.

Padding himself down.

Screech.

Trying to repel this trigger that's now settled so close.

Swaying.

Making sure not to have any eye-contact with him or anybody else... all this steeliness matters little when matched against what's buried deep inside. Arno's body has never forgotten for one painful second that he too needed to drink every day to numb the pain. They all did. Pervitin to kill, maim... completely destroy beyond a reasonable doubt. Then like clockwork, copious amounts of alcohol back at barracks to forget; some greatest fighting force ever.

"Franzen Station", the intercom yells through the packed car.

One after the other these were the coldest days anyone had ever felt in their lives - not that the past few weeks were all that balmy. Trying to move deeper into enemy territory day after day... never will Arno ever forget the head-to-toe pain of those bitter wind chills. Sitting in his tank because he couldn't bear to go outside and face such unrelenting cold; the human body makes plenty of noise when it can't stop shivering. Every time he needed to exit the porthole to get a better look at the battlefield... he was slapped sober by that incessant wind. "This place is not fit for humans", he couldn't stop thinking, "and those godless Cossacks are tougher than I would have thought!"

From such spirited resistance these Aryan Soldiers got deflated seemingly overnight... every last one of them. At best their clothes were good for a colder than usual autumn - not this Russian winter from hell... this Arctic hell! Arno's body was shaking so bad his muscles ached from the fatigue. What were they thinking sending us into this frozen tundra without the proper gear?? Yet these damn Russians don't seem to mind.

For the first time since boot-camp Arno began to worry... I mean really worry that this Master Race might not be so *Master*. Last night, like so many others of late, but especially last night, was the last straw. An eerie noise that has nothing to do with the fighting filled-up the air all of a sudden - it felt like a million pin pricks on Arno's skin. Gunther was now running around camp yelling hysterically... "THE MOSQUITOES ARE COMING! THE MOSQUITOES ARE COMING!" Yes Mosquitoes.

It doesn't help one bit covering his ears.

Minus thirty degrees here on the eastern front and a foaming-at-the-mouth-feverishly-shaking Gunther is screaming about tropical insects!

It is a million and one sharp pricks, and growing by the hour.

When Gunther eventually does decide to sit down, or more like collapses, Arno can see his body shaking violently, not from the cold, but from the withdrawal. His pupils are black like saucers; Arno didn't think he'd make it to the end of the week. Arno was having his own battles too, as every man in the Squad did; but a once sweet and innocent blue-eyed blond named Gunther was now the poster boy for what was happening to everyone here. Hardly Aryan-like, even the Officers grew flaccid and unpredictable. Fighting a resistance getting tougher by the day, Pervitin was now being handed out every other day, and the alcohol was being distributed by the glass.

This continued for days... a few small skirmishes here, there... then quiet, painfully quiet. Running low on every type of supply that a fighting force needs to be victorious; Arno could see the fire leave everyone from General to Private. And he could hear the enemy getting closer.

A passing glance at the incoming herd... at the tall, short, the skinny and the plump... most waste little time racing to get the few seats that suddenly become available. Others simply plant themselves in a spot, and reach to hold firmly.

Whistle blowing.

Then fix to a newspaper folded small.

Packed like sardines; the train starts to budge. Arno's fingers wrap tightly around the metal. The air of discomfort fills this cold metal tube.

The doors close shut.

The first months of Cossack-routing gave Hitler's Army hundreds of miles of enemy territory - and with it a total dominion over millions of people. Tired, starving, disabled, and very sick people - their orders were crystal clear. Herd them into railway cars by the thousands... and then hear them scream for days. Arno had to force himself not to think about those constant cries, not for even one second, blocking-out how they were going to survive being packed in there like cattle.

“SCHNELL!”

His Squad was given the task of getting them into those reeking cattle cars... by leading them down to the station platform so they could be shipped to god knows where?

“SCHNELL!”

Wood batons swinging indiscriminately... plenty of bodies drop from the direct contact.

“SCHNELL!”

German Shepherds keep barking with their teeth dripping.

“SCHNELL!”

Some Prisoners are being shot trying to flee.

Arno and his eager-to-please Soldiers were ordered to round up the local population, and tag them under three categories... Worker - Jew - Extra... then send them back into Aryan-occupied land.

It took three years after the war for Arno to figure out what EXTRA meant - straight to the gas chamber. Is it a valid excuse to say he had no idea? All of them clearly heard their screams in the smouldering summer heat... seeing their hands reach out of the small barbed-wire opening begging for food... water... even air. Is it a valid excuse to say they were merely performing their duties as a Soldier?

“I said choose god-damn it!”, the broad-shouldered square-jawed Colonel barks.

“I beg of you... please”, the broken-down woman pleads with tears all over her face.

“Choose!”

“I can’t...”, sobbing hysterically.

“Choose or I’ll shoot one. I don’t care which one”, pulling out his pistol... a shiny Luger.

“I can’t... I can’t... I can’t.”

BANG.

Arno’s insides jump. The woman leaves her young daughter and races towards her son, crying over him as blood pours out of his head.

“Take him away”, the Colonel orders as if removing a sack of potatoes.

Chapter 3

He looks around the same age... they both would have been considered tall with a positive posture for back in those days. Their weathered faces from being outside too much, plus a lack of cranial hirsuteness; it is a glance of rare familiarity for these two.

The train starts to speed up.

The man grins half-heartedly at Arno's deep stare.

Screeching.

Swaying.

It is as if they've both shared the same burden of memories.

Flickering light.

The eyes tell all; Arno has just spotted a fellow Soldier from Hitler's Army.

Moaning in pain like a child that is unable to stand... these broken-down Soldiers are now galaxies away from the rapacious bunch that steamrolled the land only months earlier. Shaking wildly from both the cold and the painful withdrawals... thank god nobody can see that they could be over-run by a group of kindergarten kids.

As dawn slowly approaches something is telling Arno that, like back on June 22nd... this day was going to be unique. Bundled up in front of only embers; nobody cared about the fire.

BOOM BOOM BOOM... at first light the firing starts.

BOOM BOOM BOOM... piercing the quiet.

BOOM BOOM BOOM... and hitting from every direction.

"Incoming! Incoming!", the Lieutenant yells.

You'd think everyone would have cared enough to run for cover... especially with hot shrapnel flying everywhere. In the grips of a full-on offensive by their disrespected foe... plenty of Arno's fellow Soldiers were now screaming in pain from having their limbs ripped-off by that hot shrapnel. As choking smoke billowed... most just plopped down in the snow as if there was no fight left... the fight or flight response looked like it had been cut from their DNA.

Arno's tired eyes reporting back to a wayward mind that had already started its' own death grip... all of his fellow Gladiators were now preparing to die right here and now. I swear on my Mother's life the chaos seemed like it was happening somewhere else... these were Gladiators no more!

"Protect me God in heaven... I want to see my family again... please protect me." Cuddled in the immense amount of snow... for the first time in Arno's life he was feeling nothing, absolutely nothing. How could he ever explain to his kids that he was part of... excuse me that he'd become a whacked-out Junkie who had his Soul ripped out at twenty?? All of them hopped-up on 'Sweet Speed', they affectionately and very naively called them. Taking them like one would vitamin c or something - Arno keeps shivering in this frozen tundra and he can't get up at all. Those first few years on the battlefield made them feel like Aryan Gods - Arno cannot get up even to save himself!

"Being part of the Master Race was such an indescribable feeling", hallucinating better times. The night before battle everyone was so incredibly excited, not one ounce of trepidation, not anywhere in camp. These men all trusted the man beside them, and he trusted them... and

absolutely everyone trusted their Leader. Like clockwork they would assemble, synchronize their watches, then pop their little blue pills... and then they would proudly show-off an empty mouth to their mini-Eichmann walking by. Then they were off to conquer; they couldn't get there fast enough!

Arno is in and out of lucidity.

Those secrets have stayed with him... every god-damn one of them.

Hindsight... huh.

Continuing to stare intermittently, as if being pulled by an invisible string... Arno turns quickly into the tinted glass because he doesn't want to be uncovered for having so much curiosity in his eyes. Catching the interesting stranger a few more times in the reflection... who grins strangely... before going back to his reading; you see someone around your age, around your height - you can't help but wonder?? Ask any Judge or Policeman - they know how much people try, but the eyes never lie.

"GET UP EVERY ONE OF YOU! SCHNELL! SCHNELL! YOU ARE SOLDIERS IN THE THIRD REICH! GET UP! SCHNELL!" Hearing boots collide with the frozen earth in a surreal haze.

"SCHNELL! SCHNELL!" The sound gets closer. "EVERYONE GET UP!" And closer in these long trenches. "GET UP!" He is now in front of Arno, who cannot budge. "I SAID GET UP!"

Arno's eyes open... or at least they try. They look back at this raging face... or maybe aim is more accurate. Then they turn away. Then back. Then away. Arno is hollow; shame is not something an addict gets to keep.

"ARNO KLEIN YOU ARE GOING TO GET UP NOW!" Seconds before he feels a hand clamp down on his collar. "SARGENT ARNO KLEIN." Heaving him in a testosterone-fuelled rage. "I SAID GET UP!"

The Lieutenant then slaps Arno across the face.

Opening his eyes from the harsh reverberation... a skin and bones ragdoll... he slaps Arno again. Pitiful. And again. And Gutless. Guess Arno does not look like a Third Reich Soldier anymore.

"HERE...", handing him a pill, "TAKE THIS AND REPORT TO YOUR POSITION!"

With barely enough strength to swallow... a weak and pale Arno puts the Pervitin in his mouth, and washes it down with a fistful of snow.

Within minutes his legs return, and return hard.

He's able to put on his jacket, and gloves, and goggles and hat; the pain is now miraculously gone. Everyone is running to their positions. Arno can only imagine how big and black his pupils must be... *moving through the mayhem...* and how his ears must have smoke flying out of them. Slowing down because he has finally located his tank - he takes one last look around.

Even the sky looks different now.

“Glad you could make it”, Hans is already working.

Reaching for all his papers once he's settled.

“Gentlemen... two tickets for the war please”, Klaus slides in with overwhelming lightness.

Hearing the engine start... and getting a handle on their co-ordinates... Arno looks right at those two... reflecting back the fearlessness of Pervitin. Ten minutes ago these three were glued to the snow begging for death, and now. “Ok men we're off to kill us some Cossacks”, Arno feels great. “Fucking right because we are the Master Race”, Klaus replies.

“Yes, the Master Race”, Arno whispers, “the Master fuckin Race.”

After the war it was terrible for any man over six feet tall and fewer than thirty to be seen in any part of Europe, to be gawked at with such anger... treated with such extreme resentment.

Screech.

It was as if they'd been responsible for the Lebensraum policy all by themselves? Or the murdering of all those Jews?

Swaying forward.

Suddenly the train stops in the darkness between stations... the interior light stays on... but just barely... flickering with no pattern except frustrating. Unable to stop his aim because that face looks so familiar, any man over six feet tall, criteria for being accepted into Hitler's Elite Troops, has always drawn Arno's deepest curiosity. It's as if the shame can be transmitted through their stares. He's seen this man before, didn't he?

Who are you kidding Arno the whole thing was a blur, a logical mind screams.

Wasn't he on the eastern front?

Like an old fool he keeps trying.

After the awkwardness of his memory's runaway motor, these men with this type of burden usually end up staring at the ground in order to stop the pain; reticent doesn't even begin to cover it... not even close. It's deeper than merely being sad. What they saw. What they did. They were around Monsters. They became Monsters!

This is the time when Arno needs to forcefully stuff every last memory back into his deepest chamber marked - *War is hell* – because he knows it'll never stop.

Living in paper-thin timber shacks crammed with triple-stacked bunks... and not one damn mattress, not even straw! Those Savages! In freezing conditions on barely-starvation rations while working from dawn 'til dusk on back-breaking tasks as they laughed at every one of us.

“The Master Fuckin' Race”, cracking rocks in the quarry of the barbed-wire P.O.W. Camp, “The Master Fuckin' Race”, he cannot get out of his head with every exhausted swing of the mallet, “The Master Fuckin' Race.”

Blind obedience never ends well.

When it was over... really over, life remained a living hell - worse than the actual war. The complete physical ruins, the total gutting of the Aryan psyche, to say nothing of the deep emotional scars that had been left on an entire world. Arno can still remember the day - it was a

Wednesday, a cloudy dreary nothing special Wednesday. After the peace was signed... and after finally making it home from that god-forsaken Cossack land of crap and more crap.

Arno still feels it like it was yesterday.

Finding a private spot deep in the forest; he was hoping, truly hoping, that this was going to mean something... a type of healing. Taking his tattered uniform out of his backpack - unfortunately life's not that simple.

Once he got the fire going, he unfolded it... and threw it in, there wasn't any ounce of hesitation. "The master fucking race", sitting patiently... watching every fibre go up in smoke... all of it... turning it into nothing but smoke and ash. For the first time in his adult life Arno cried... and cried... he just couldn't stop.

"Remember absolute Patriotism is the domain of the bankrupt", a fellow Prisoner once said so nonchalantly. He was a former Professor.

Such shame has unfortunately never left Arno... now he just cries on the inside.

Swaying forward.

Finally this train ride is heading into the final station.

Sitting on the front steps of their broken-down barracks, Arno's pet vermin keeps him company as he begins to feed him tiny scraps. Arno's gregarious friend, Jan the Slav, is sitting next to him, whittling down a piece of wood that seems to have no apparent use in the real world. "I remember something my Grandfather once said", Arno blurts out in a rare mood for sharing. "You can remember anything in this shithole?"

Two emaciated Souls come and give them a small cup of putrid, rancid, watered-down potato soup. "Thanks." Their daily rations.

Arno takes a spoonful... and swallows reluctantly. He puts the rest down in disgust; seems he's not starving enough for this today.

"Aren't you going to eat that?"

"No... you can have it."

Within seconds it's added to Jan-the-talkative-Slav's rations. Uneducated... but ironically still a-know-it-all, everyone calls him 'Slippery' because he can get anything, anything you can possibly think of. Wandering-off on his many all-night excursions beyond the wire; Jan's never returned from the adjacent forest without the latest in seasonal berries, mushrooms, even dandelions for Arno. He's a good friend in a place with no humanity.

"Education means nothing when it comes to a man's loyalty", Arno's Grandfather once said.

In this hell these last two years Jan's been loyal - in return Arno has tried his best.

"Last night when I was out in the forest I heard shells going off. You think the war will be over soon?"

"After what we've done to the world I don't think it will ever be over for us", feeding his pet while Jan gorges.

"I do not know a more deplorable condition than that of a people unable to defend themselves... or provide for its' own wants."

"Your Grandfather said that?"

"No, he just quoted it."

“Sounds like our Hitler youth rallies if you asked me.”

“He was quoting the famous French philosopher, Alexis de Tocqueville.”

“Never liked the fucking French”, Arno’s toothless friend snickers.

Only now is Arno able to understand that Master Race indoctrination in such a different light; politics and hate are nothing but lethal.

It's been thirty-eight minutes of an emotional rollercoaster.

Screeching.

But finally Arno is here!

Everything is tingling from head to toe.

The train finally comes to a stop.

Some days are better, some are worse, Arno has come to accept.

The doors slowly open.

But he never wants to know a life without them.

“PAPA PAPA PAPA”, a lit-up face the second he exits the train.

Jumping up to wrap her little arms around his neck, her Angel face is glowing.

“And how is my Princess Victoria this morning?”, showering her with kisses.

“I’m better now that I’m with you Papa.”

Arno is always overwhelmed by her youthful optimism.

“Hi Susanne.”

“Hi Papa.”

It's the happiest he has ever been in his life.

“You ok? Did you get enough sleep last night?”, a loving daughter always asks without fail.

“I’m great”, reaching in with a loving kiss, “because I’m with my two favourite girls”, and a big smile to hide that daily battle.

Arno grabs both their hands on either side... and squeezes.

He then turns... and leads them up the stairs.

It's definitely all worth it.

He is leading them up to the light... to the light of the street while laughing together.

For this anything's worth it.

They make this Soldier's guilt survivable.