
Tote Soldaten®

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Erik and Hans ran at full speed through the darkening forest, dodging trees, brush, and the occasional dead soldier. They gave particularly wide berth to the corpses.

Behind them, other members of the squad ran, stumbled and occasionally fell. Those that fell usually died screaming.

At least I hope they're dead, Erik thought. Bitte Gott, lass' Sie bitte tot sein.

A few brave, or brainless, souls fired back at the enemy, the rattle of MP-40 sub-machine guns or bark of the Karabiner rifles always ended abruptly, followed by gurgling and shrieking.

A light plane buzzed overhead, and the German soldiers clenched their shoulders awaited blazing death from above.

No bullets rained down on them, but the few that had dropped to take cover died anyway.

Their pursuers hadn't stopped for cover.

They didn't fear death.

They were already dead.

Erik and Hans and their squad had stumbled upon the Amerikaner soldiers while attempting to make it back to their own line. Before the Germans could respond, the Americans attacked, howling and shrieking.

Only a few Amerikaner held guns, and their shooting was erratic. Some carried knives, and they cut like buzzsaws through the stunned Germans. Most tore at their victims with bloody bare hands, or ripped into them with ragged crimson teeth.

The Americans' uniforms, ratty, mud-caked and blood-encrusted, bore the unmistakable signs of bullet holes. Most of one soldier's chest was missing, and yet he dragged two Germans to the ground and tore them like a dog savages a rag.

Some staggered like sleepwalkers, others moved as fast as wolves, leaping upon hapless prey.

No matter the speed, they just kept coming.

And killing.

The squad had panicked and ran, leaving a trail of the dead in their wake as the undead soldiers pursued.

Erik pulled ahead of his brother, running up a short rise, and leapt across a narrow spot over the river. He crashed to the ground at the other side, tumbled, and landed on his backpack. For a brief moment, he panicked, imagining himself a capsized turtle. Then gaining his mind, he struggled, and rolled himself over.

Hans made the jump, smashed against the edge, and began sliding backward, down the slope toward the water.

Erik scrambled forward, grasping for his brother's hand. Catching hold, he pulled himself back, trying to drag Hans up.

All around them, other soldiers crashed to the ground after making the leap. Most found their feet and continued running. A few dropped prone, aiming their rifles back into the woods.

With a last desperate pull, Erik hauled himself backwards, and dragged Hans over the edge onto the ragged grass beside him.

Both men lay panting.

"You finally pay me back *Kleiner Bruder*," said Hans. "For all the times I helped you up."

"*Ja*," Erik responded.

"But," he continued, looking back into the wooded darkness. "I'm afraid I'll die still in your debt."

Hans rolled over, patted his shoulder, "*Nein*. Not today."

Hans stood to his knees and pulled a potato masher from his belt. "We barely made that jump."

He pulled the ring from the grenade's handle and lobbed it back across the creek bed, then dropped down covering his head.

With a loud *whump* the potato masher blasted a large chunk of the cliff edge away.

"Let's see them make an even longer jump," Hans finished.

Standing, Hans pulled Erik to his feet.

Brush crashed across the river, and the Germans saw shapes rapidly approaching. A few grey-skinned and rotting bodies staggered into sight, groaning and shrieking. A few others sped around their slower brethren, and quickened their pace when they spotted the Germans.

"But, in case," Hans added. "We should keep going back toward the line."

Erik nodded, and the brothers turned and ran.

As he reached the tree line, Erik heard the crack of rifles as some of their comrades chose to stand their ground.

Several men yelled in triumph.

"Perhaps your plan worked," Erik said to Hans.

The shouts turned to screams.

"Perhaps not," Hans said.

The brothers, along with the few remaining men of the squad, continued running, pushing through more woods.

Then the German soldiers broke from the tree line at the base of a steep hill. Still running, they forged ahead and up.

As they crested the hill, Erik stumbled and fell.

Hans reached down to pull him up.

Erik raised his hand. "Wait. Look, the plane."

Hans followed Erik's finger, and saw it.

The light plane they had heard throughout their run still buzzed overhead. Hans had tuned out the noise during the struggle up the hill.

"Is it following us?" Hans said.

Erik clambered to his feet. "It's following them," he said, pointing back into the woods.

"Leading them?" Hans said. "Giving them our position?"

Erik shook his head. "I think it's watching them."

As the first American soldier appeared at the tree line, Erik said, "I think they *made* them."

Hans shook his head, "They couldn't have. They're dead. How could they do

that? Sorcery?"

Erik shrugged, and aimed his rifle. "I don't know. But, I can't run any farther."

His first round caught an undead soldier in the chest, staggering him.

The second drilled through its throat.

The third punched in just under the helmet, throwing the tin pot and much of the soldier's head back into the woods.

The soldier collapsed, sagging to the ground. The creature's blood-crusting hand twitched among the dead pine needles, & then lay still.

As more of the undead soldiers reached the base of the hill, Erik waited for the rise of the one he'd shot.

"Erik!"

Erik kept his rifle trained on the soldier.

"Erik!"

Stay down, Erik thought. Bleib' liegen!

"Erik!" Hans screamed again. "They're coming!"

Erik heard some of his comrades running away, but he kept his eye on the dead soldier.

"Erik!" Hans bellowed, pulling at Erik's shoulder.

The dead soldiers had made it nearly halfway up the slope.

Erik shook off his brother's hand, swung his rifle toward another Amerikaner and fired. Its head rocked back, and the creature tumbled back down the hill.

"The heads!" Erik screamed. "Destroy their heads!"

"Was?" Hans said.

Erik pointed at the undead soldiers, then shot another. The soldier's helmet tumbled away, along with most of its brain.

"*Verdammt,*" Hans whispered.

Hans brought his rifle to his shoulder and squeezed the trigger.

Several more soldiers fell as the brothers fired into them. A few of the remaining Germans stood beside Erik and Hans, shooting at the swarming creatures that advanced up the hill.

"Reloading!" Erik yelled to Hans.

Hans continued to fire, but paced his shots more carefully.

As Erik fed the bullet strip into his Karabiner, he looked up at the plane. It remained overhead, but now circled the battle.

Erik finished loading his rifle, and aimed down at the creatures.

He saw the unending flood of them pouring out of the woods, heard the click as several of the German soldiers' weapons reached empty.

"Reloading!" Hans yelled.

Erik slowly squeezed the trigger, preparing to blast another of the creatures to whatever hell awaited it.

Then he swung his rifle upward, and fired into the plane circling overhead. The small craft staggered in the air, veering off course.

Erik pulled the bolt on his rifle, sighted and fired again. As he continued to shoot, a trail of black smoke sprouted from the engine.

Erik's final round punched through the cockpit window, and the plane plummeted toward the ground like a wounded bird. The Germans cheered as the plane crashed amidst the undead soldiers, shredding several, and drenching others in burning fluids.

Hans swore as his rifle clicked empty.

Many of the creatures lay burning or destroyed. Others, whose heads burned as brightly as candles, stumbled around, as if lost or blind. When they collided with their undead brethren, the flames danced from one to the other, increasing the number of stumbling, stinking, blazing monsters.

Several burning soldiers continued up the hill, but with less ambition. They seemed driven more by inertia than conscious decision.

Erik looked at Hans, who nodded.

Screaming like savages, the German soldiers descended the slope swinging bayonets or waving their rifles like clubs. The Germans swarmed into the cluttered grouping

of their enemy like wolves among sheep, hacking, slashing, and shrieking the names of their dead comrades. The undead soldiers, now apparently without direction, fell easily to the maddened Germans.

Soon the men stood drenched in the smoldering gore of their enemies, panting like dogs. The remains of the undead soldiers lay thick at their feet. The stench of the decayed and burned bodies hung in the air like a noxious fog.

Wiping his dripping hands on his pants, Hans said, "They are all dead."

"Dead *again*," replied Erik.

"*Ja*," Hans said with a nod. "Again."

Erik nodded toward their radioman, who shared the name of *Der Fuehrer*.

"Adolf," what are you doing?"

The wiry little man crouched in the gore at his feet, then withdrew something glittery and metallic. He wiped it on his pants leg, and said, "Not sorcery."

Hans blinked. "*Was?*"

"*Ein Maschine*." Adolf held up a small device, a glossy cylinder about the size of a vacuum tube.

"Correct," said a voice above them.

The squad looked up the hill and saw a tall, lean man in a Nazi uniform, but not quite like those of the SS or the Gestapo. Even without recognizable markings, the soldiers knew him to be an officer.

Behind that man stood a squad of soldiers who also wore the odd uniform. Each held a Karabiner or MP-40 trained on the men in Hans and Erik's squad.

"It is a transmitter, and much, much, more," said the man, as his soldiers moved around him to disarm Erik, Hans, and the others.

"It made those soldiers live again," said Adolf. "*Die Amerikaner*."

The officer shook his head. "They merely 'functioned.' They still remained dead." Then he smiled. "Perfect field soldiers. Obedient, free of pain and fear, unable to die."

"Not entirely," said Erik.

The officer sighed. "True. If you destroy the brain implant, they shut down. And

as you've proved, without direction, they become easy prey."

He sighed again. "Perhaps members of the master race will do better."

At his nod, his soldiers opened fire.

When the last of Hans and Erik's team fell, the officer raised his hand. "Not too much gentlemen. There must be enough left to fight for *Der Fuehrer*."

End

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