

Excerpt 2 – Captured

When Stefan came to, it took him a moment to figure out what had happened. He was still in the pump house, though now lying on his stomach on the floor. A soldier holding a rifle stood in the doorway, framed by the sun pouring in behind him. Their own weapons were missing and the sounds of the fighting were long gone. Though Stefan couldn't see the man's face, he recognized the American uniform.

Stefan's head throbbed and one of his eyes was swollen shut. He coughed, trying to spit out the grit of dirt and blood that filled his mouth. Hearing the noise, a soldier came and stood over him, keeping the gun trained on him.

"Speak English?" asked the man. Stefan nodded. He could see the GI more clearly now. He was short and broad-chested, a sergeant who looked to be about 25.

"Get up," the soldier told them. Otto lay nearby and he nudged him with his foot to ensure a response. Though he was groggy and had powder burns on the side of his face, he seemed otherwise unhurt.

The soldier marched them at gunpoint, hands on their heads, up the ridge towards the farmhouse, where three others captured from their company waited below an elm tree next to the house. The GI motioned for them to stand and fall in next to Otto and Stefan.

"This way," said the American sergeant, and he swung his rifle toward the little village. Shuffling along single file, they spent the rest of the morning on foot, following the dusty country roads to Fontaine-le-Bourg, adding others who had been captured as they went.

At the village, the GI marching them stopped the group outside a barn, where two more American soldiers sat at a pair of field desks just inside the door.

"Okay," he said. "We need to get you registered." The first two POWs entered the barn and approached the desks.

Stefan waited, shifting his weight from one foot to another as the Americans worked their way through a stack of forms, asking the newly arrived Germans one question after another. When the prisoners finished, they moved farther back into the barn, and finally Stefan was called. He stood at the desk, waiting for direction. The prisoner already seated to his right looked up at Stefan and scowled. He was a man with jet black hair and burning dark eyes who looked vaguely familiar.

"*Setzen Sie sich,*" said the man sitting behind the desk. "Sit down." Though he appeared to be almost forty, the American was just a lowly private. He wore wire-rimmed glasses and carried the manner of a schoolteacher. Stefan thought he saw a bemused sympathy in the man's eyes.

As Stefan sat in the wooden folding chair, the man reached into the top drawer of the desk and pulled out a blank form. He licked the tip of the pencil and got started, looking at Stefan over the tops of his glasses.

"Your name?"

"Biermann. Stefan Michael Biermann."

"Date of birth?"

"November 17, 1912," said Stefan. He would be thirty-two next month.

"Where? What city?"

"Heidelberg."

The American scratched the information on the form.

"Do you live there now?"

Stefan nodded.

"Married?"

Stefan didn't say anything. He was thinking of Maria. He remembered the day he received his induction letter from the military. He figured they would get married at once. They had three days before he was to leave but Maria would have nothing to do with it.

"Married?" the man asked again, and it pulled Stefan back to the present.

"Um, no." he said.

"Civilian occupation?"

"I was a teacher at the university," said Stefan. The man looked at him.

"I taught, too," he said. Stefan had been right. "High school." He continued. "What unit were you with?"

Name, rank, and serial number. That's all they had to give, said their instructors at basic training. Back then, being taken by the enemy had a terrible mysteriousness about it. Stefan always imagined that he'd face heinous torture in an attempt to force him to reveal such information. This was like filling out a form at the doctor's office.

"Part of the 716th Infantry Division," said Stefan.

"Next!" came the command at the door. Stefan looked up. The German prisoner next to him with the jet black hair was finished. He scowled at Stefan again as he stood. His eyes narrowed as he remembered this "submariner" who with his fat friend stood quaking before him that day in the dining hall.

"Bastard," the man muttered. "You never wanted to be here."

The man spun on his heel with disgust and departed. Though the paperwork he carried still called him *Leider*, he was no longer an SS major. He had torn away his officer's rank and replaced it with a private's

grade. The Allies had a special interest in catching the SS men, but a set of doctored documents had allowed him to slip past. To the American GI's who had captured him, he was an ordinary enlisted man in an infantry unit.

"Wonder what's with him?" Stefan thought, trying to place where he had seen the man before.

"Last thing here," said the man asking the questions. He slid him a postcard along with a stubby pencil that looked like it had been gnawed on.

"Fill this out and address it to someone back home. Someone responsible for your affairs," said the American. "It tells them you're now a POW. Write that you've been captured but are okay. If you put down anything else the censors are gonna trash it."

Stefan took the postcard and pencil. The card offered about four lines in which to compose his message. He closed his eyes for a moment to think, then started to write in the limited space. "Dear Mother and Father; I am a prisoner of the Americans, but am in good health. I will write again. With love from your Stefan."

He looked at what he had written, flipped the pencil over and tried to erase his grandparents' names. How could he have been so stupid? Maria's name belonged in that spot. But the blasted pencil simply smeared the words. No matter how he tried, Stefan couldn't erase the dark smudge that filled the spot, couldn't add anything more.

"Sir, I've made a mistake," Stefan smiled at the man, pleading. "May I have another please?"

The GI frowned at the line of men stretching outside and shook his head sadly. "Sorry," he said. "That'll have to do."

Next to him, Otto leaned over. "I'm sure it'll be fine," he said. He showed Stefan his own postcard.

"Dear Darling," Otto had written. "It looks like I'm going to be the guest of the Americans for a while. Hope they're as good to me as you are. Except in that way. More later. Yours, Otto."

They sat and waited in the barn, and after an hour, one of the Americans called them to their feet. He spoke in German. "Who is the highest-ranking one here?"

A sergeant named Müller raised his hand.

"Okay, march these men to the other side of the town. A guard will show you the way. There's a mess kitchen set up, and there you'll eat."

"That's the most positive development I've heard in a while," said Otto. Stefan said nothing. His brain felt fuzzy and faint from hunger. He fell into the column behind Otto and stumbled through the dusk, following the ragged line marching toward the kitchen.

After a few minutes they reached the mess tent. Inside were the cooks, hired French workers who stood, ladles ready, behind great pots of steaming soup. Stefan didn't know what kind it was and didn't

care. All he could tell was that it was hot and smelled great. Large chunks of tender meat floated throughout and the men could have as much of the soup as they wanted. As the cooks filled and refilled his bowl, Stefan finally began to fully feel the weariness that had settled so heavily into his bones.

Finally sated after about his sixth helping, he and Otto and the other men staggered to an empty warehouse next door. Stefan curled up as best he could in an unclaimed corner, and plummeted directly into a deep and mercifully dreamless sleep, sedated by the past days of stress and a bellyful of hot soup.

The next few weeks were a blur. The prisoners moved through a string of holding camps, each one taking them closer to the coast.

The biggest annoyance was that with each move to a new camp, another group of Americans set upon them scavenging for souvenirs, eager to peel every button and patch they could find off the Germans.

“Cripes,” muttered Otto, rubbing his neck after a private nearly tore the collar off his shirt trying to get at one little patch. “I’ll be standing here naked before long. Hope they’re still not grabbing for souvenirs then.”

Another troubling thing was that as the days went on, Stefan noticed the man with the jet-black hair time and time again.

“I still can’t place him,” Stefan said. He and Otto stood in the twilight one chilly evening in a large camp near the coast, a collection point to send the prisoners overseas. “But it’s odd. He’s always staring at me.”

“Can’t say that I know who you’re talking about, Stefan. There’s what, a thousand men here?”

“Wait,” said Stefan, looking up. “Here he comes now.”

By chance the man had appeared down the way and the pair watched him walk across the broad gravel of the compound. He wore a cap and was too far away for Otto to see clearly.

“Let’s follow him,” smiled Otto, and before Stefan could respond, Otto had taken off after him.

From a distance, they trailed Leider to a remote corner of the compound. A campfire burned between some tents and several shadowy forms huddled around the flames. He approached the blaze and joined the men gathered there, taking his place at the center of the circle.

Stefan and Otto continued their approach, more stealthily now, wending their way around the back, creeping between the rows of tents to avoid being seen.

Moving in closer, Otto was finally able to get his first good look at the men around the fire.

“Those are the Nazis,” he whispered.

Stefan shrugged. Seemed like there were always a few around. Though the bulk of the soldiers in the army were mere draftees, ordinary citizens who loved their country, about 20% were true National Socialists, card-carrying members whose loyalty to the party and the Führer was fanatical and unflinching.

"That guy in the center, I can't believe you didn't recognize him," hissed Otto. "That's the SS major who came into the dining hall back at recruit training."

Stefan froze. This was something different. He remembered the fear that had gripped him that day as Leider stared him down while the shouts of praise to the SS had thundered through the great hall.

"Kameraden," Leider said, quieting the men around the fire. They leaned in closer as he began to speak in hushed tones. Snippets of the conversation floated over as Stefan and Otto listened.

"How do we influence these others...?" asked Leider and the others murmured in response.

The fire crackled and the wind picked up. Stefan shivered and tucked himself closer to the tent as he continued to listen.

"...too ambivalent about things...," said another, as the conversation continued.

"...make the traitors pay," said Leider fiercely, angrily smacking his fist as the others nodded their agreement.

"Let's go," whispered Stefan and the two crept back to their tent.

"How the hell did he make it through" asked Otto.

"Beats me," said Stefan. "But we gotta keep an eye on them. It's dangerous when they get together."

The men passed the days in the camps as best they could, waiting for an available ship to take them onward.

Meals were the only scheduled activity, and invariably they were a disappointment - usually got a single bowl and a crust of bread. It was enough to keep them going, but just barely. Certainly none came close to that grand introduction on the first night.

"What's with this?" Otto frowned one day at lunch, peering into his metal bowl. The cook had filled it with watery cabbage soup, one lonely bit of ham sunk forlornly on the bottom. He continually hoped for another go with the great pots of soup they had the earlier.

"What do you mean?" cackled a toothless French woman who was working the line. She looked to be about eighty, and so tiny only the kerchief covering her head rose above the pot. She had to stand on tip-toes to dip her ladle into the soup.

“It’s not like we had the first night. That had meat. This is barely more than broth.”

“You won’t get fed much like that,” said the woman, waving the ladle at him. “That was left-overs from the guards. One of them had hit an old donkey with the truck on the road the day before. That was what you were eating.”

Stefan felt like he was going to vomit. Otto stuck up his index fingers and put them behind his ears.

“Hee-haw. Hee-haw,” he brayed at Stefan and the French woman. Stefan didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

And so on it went, aimlessly for days. Stefan wondered how much longer this could last. Then suddenly one morning word came that a vessel had arrived in the harbor to take them on, and preparations to move the prisoners aboard a freighter for a long ocean voyage shifted into high gear.

“Word is we’re headed for America,” said Otto, nervously rubbing his hands together as they waited to walk up the gangplank.

“America! That’s crazy,” Stefan replied. “No way they’d send us all the way there.”

And he doubted up until the moment it became clear the ship was steaming right on past England and into the open sea. Turns out the rumors were true. With the camps in Great Britain already stuffed full of POWs taken earlier in the war, the Americans had agreed to take on the thousands more prisoners being captured each month simply because they had the space to keep them and a desperate need for their labor. And before they knew it, the pair had crossed the Atlantic, and were waiting in a New York rail yard to climb on board an old train car, beginning the next phase of a trip that never seemed to end.