

He saw them before they even reached the wall.

It was about an hour before dawn, which meant his shift was almost over.

The family had five people: the mother, two teen boys, a little boy, and an even younger girl. Like most other families, the father had probably been working when the Berlin Wall was raised – another family that was separated.

Just like his family.

*“Practicing your shooting, lieutenant?”*

*I freeze.*

*“The best sharpshooter of Germany, with three gold medals. And yet you’ve missed every shot.”*

*I will for him to go away, to leave me alone, but he doesn’t. I’ve been careless, and now I will pay.*

*He walks over to the five paper targets, four of them with clipped ears, the last one clean of bullets. He circles them carefully, with his hands held behind his back.*

*“How is it that you’ve missed the forehead every single time?” He clicks his tongue. “A pity. If I didn’t know better, I would think you were aiming for a perfekte fehl.” A perfect miss – a shot aimed at the earlobes, so as to warn, but not to harm.*

*“You have not yet spoken a word to explain your ...” he casts a wry grin at the paper targets, “...rather unfortunate aim.”*

*He doesn't need me to explain, though. He knows. He knows why I haven't had a single kill on my record. Not even an injury.*

*He lets out a sigh, as if speaking with an exasperating child. "I know you have a family, lieutenant. But the people that are crossing over?" He gestures to the targets. "They are not people any more. They are insolent idiots who have no respect for themselves or their country."*

*The whole time, I've avoided looking into his eyes, but now I look – and immediately wish I didn't.*

*In truth, the captain is handsome – blonde hair, angular cheekbones, and bright blue eyes. But as of now, his eyes are cold and empty, and his cheekbones are harsh and mean, his white teeth bared and feral. He's pitying me, I can tell, not because of what he's about to do to me, but that I'm weak enough to let my family burden me.*

*In a flash, the cold tip of his gun presses against the side of my head, and his arm wraps around my neck.*

*"Now shoot, lieutenant. Where I want you to shoot."*

*I hesitate, and he senses it. "You know what I'm talking about."*

*I do. In an act of defiance, I could shoot another perfekte fehl. But I have a family, and the captain knows how to use that against me.*

*So I close my eyes, and shoot. Ten years of training gives me the ability to shoot without sight.*

*A loud bang pierces the silence of the forest, and I can feel the captain's smile against the back of my head.*

*Finally, I speak. "I did what you wanted me to do. Now lower your gun and let me go."*

*The chill from the cool metal of the gun disappears, and the captain lets me go. I let out a breath that I have been holding, but the captain and I both know it's not because of the gun.*

He counted them again. His family had three, including him, and they had five, not even including the father.

It was a hard decision. Five strangers, in exchange for his own family. Or, his own family of three for five strangers. The second comparison would save two lives.

A sick feeling hit his stomach when he realized he was counting them like animals.

*The guard tower looks different this time. It's always looked dark and dangerous, but now my stomach stirs so much it hurts.*

*I consider running back for a split second, but then the only life I'll save is mine, and only for a couple years, anyway. You can't hide from the Germans for long.*

*I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and imagine I'm in a dream. I have a family and am no longer a child, but I can still pretend. I can still pretend that none of this is real and I'm not really going to kill anyone and even if I don't, the captain won't kill my family.*

*It's not real, but I can always pretend.*

*When I open my eyes again, I'm not the dark-haired man about to kill innocents.*

*I'm just the wind floating above, watching and waiting for when everything is finally over.*

The largest boy crossed over first, no doubt to help lift the younger ones over. The wall is high and steep, but overgrown with weeds, so that the boy at least had something to hold on to.

One of the rocks that served as a foothold separated from the wall and tumbled down, and the family below moved forward, as if to catch him.

The radio in the guard tower crackled on, and the voice of the captain crackled through. "A family's crossing over. Perhaps you would like to do your job?"

And shoot the boy? Perhaps he would, to save his own family. But as the boy slowly scaled his way up the wall, the decision became harder and harder. It was possible for him to shoot a *perfekte Fehl*, but then it would be his wife and son that paid the price.

"Lieutenant?" the radio crackled again.

He closed his eyes and squeezed them until colors burst into his vision. Though his eyes were shut, he knew his hands were white and bloodless from clutching his gun.

"Lieutenant. *They are getting away.*"

They weren't getting away. The boy hadn't even finished climbing over the wall yet. But he knew what the captain was talking about.

*I am empty, void. But he is below me; I see his tears and his anguish and the way he is empty inside. He is empty because I am him.*

*I am that scared man.*

*I am that stricken guard.*

*I am just a heartbroken human.*

He aimed the gun outside.

The boy was over the wall, and helping his sister up.

The captain was yelling at him, and had no more time.

He could save the stranger family, or his own.

He could shoot a perfect miss, or a perfect hit.

He aimed, and he shot.