

CHAPTER ONE

Friedrich – Fritz – awake, awake!

Friedrich von Berg, known simply as Fritz to his fellow comrades, stirred but refused to open his eyes. The room was freezing - the kind of cold that seeped through wool and bone alike. But no one complained; complaining wasn't a Prussian habit. Instead, he pulled the blanket tighter around his shoulders, pretending not to hear his friend's urgent whisper - more a warning than a wake-up call.

Too late.

The door slammed open hard enough to shake the windowpanes. *Stabskapitän*¹ Kurt - *Blinder Kurt*², as everyone called him - stormed inside. A musket ball had taken his left eye years ago, and his heavy boots struck the floor with a rhythm that made the young cadets flinch.

"Ah!" he sneered, "Monsieur von Berg ne veut point aller à l'école aujourd'hui³?"

His French was atrocious, and his accent betrayed his common birth. The story went that he'd earned his commission in a tavern fight, not a battlefield.

Before Fritz could even push himself upright, the Kapitän's whip sliced through the cold morning air and snapped across his leg. The strike landed with a crisp, merciless crack, leaving a vivid red welt blooming on his skin - the first lesson of the day.

Friedrich scrambled to his feet, the thin blanket sliding off his shoulders and pooling at his ankles. His eyes flashed instinctively toward his roommate, who already stood at rigid attention. The man looked carved from stone - except for the faint, unmistakable glimmer of amusement flickering in his gaze.

"This, Monsieur," Kurt drawled, stretching the foreign word as though it tasted sweet on his tongue, "is not your father's mansion. This" - he swept the tip of the whip lazily through the air - "is the Académie Militaire."

He stepped forward, boots creaking on the worn floorboards. His eyes raked over Friedrich with slow deliberation, taking in the young man's disheveled appearance.

1 A rank above Lieutenant and below Captain

2 Blind Kurt

3 Mr. von Berg doesn't want to go to school today?

Friedrich's brown, shoulder-length hair hung in sleep-tangled strands around his face, still damp from the cold night. His hazel eyes, normally sharp and steady, blinked as he fought to focus without appearing defiant. He stood tall by instinct, despite the sting in his leg, his bedshirt concealed the wiry strength built from long, honest labor on his grandfather's estate.

"Is He ill, perhaps?" Kurt asked, his voice syrupy with false concern. The whip remained raised loosely in his hand - just enough to remind everyone in the room that he did not need a reason to use it.

Friedrich drew a breath, straightened his back, and fixed his gaze just past the officer's shoulder, refusing to look the man directly in the eyes. "Nein, Herr Stabskapitän," he said quietly.

But his posture - chin lifted, shoulders squared - spoke a different truth: the welt burned, but his pride did not bend.

Kurt's single eye narrowed. "Excellent," he replied. "Then perhaps, Monsieur, He will do us the honor of reaching the parade ground before the sun grows old?"

"Jawohl, Herr Stabskapitän."

"Very well then."

With mechanical precision and a sharp click of his heels, Stabskapitän Kurt turned on his heel and strode out, the echo of his boots fading down the corridor.

Friedrich and his roommate, Wilhelm von der Wahl, burst out laughing. The tension shattered like thin ice under a boot heel.

He shook his head, still wincing as the welt on his leg throbbed, and reached for the shaving kit on the narrow shelf. The mirror - little more than a polished scrap of metal - hung from a bent nail hammered into the doorframe. It wobbled when he touched it, distorting his reflection into shifting fragments.

He lathered his jaw and leaned closer.

The face staring back at him looked nothing like the soldier he was expected to become. He had inherited his father's height - tall, a little over six feet - but not his father's hard, chiseled features. Instead, the smooth cheeks, the straight, slightly delicate nose, and the gentle curve of his jaw echoed the portraits of Otto, his great-grandfather. There was refinement there, a softness ill-suited to the brutal lines of military life.

No matter how sternly he tried to set his mouth, no matter how he narrowed his hazel eyes, the mirror refused to transform him into the warriors he was surrounded by.

Wilhelm watched him from the cot, arms folded behind his head, smirking. "You look like you belong in a salon, Fritz, not in the king's army."

Friedrich rinsed the blade, keeping his tone dry. "And yet here I am."

He scraped away the last stroke of lather, studying the clean-shaven reflection. No, he didn't have a soldier's face.

"Change to the cavalry while you still can," he said dryly. "We don't have..." He hesitated, searching for a word, then nodded toward the door. "... officers like *him*."

"You know I can't afford a horse - let alone another one for parade," the young officer replied. "And I don't ride very well. Truth be told, I don't even like horses."

Wilhelm's grin widened. "Oh, I know," he said, lowering his voice and slipping into an exaggerated tone. Then, with a theatrical sweep of his arm, he began to mimic Colonel Johann Friedrich Graf Bellinger, the sharp-tongued instructor of the academy - a man feared as much for his wit as for his temper.

"Monsieur von Berg!" Wilhelm began, his voice full of pompous indignation. "I cannot fathom how He managed to blunder through cadet school and stumble into *my* academy! He is barely a gentleman - barely, Monsieur! Yet, by some twist of fate, the Almighty and the General Staff of our King's army have decreed He shall be a Sekondelieutenant. Nobody, however, expects Him to advance any further. So, I would advise Him, not to sell His father's estate just yet!"

Friedrich couldn't help but laugh, though he quickly pressed a hand to his mouth in case the Stabskapitän was lurking around, trying to catch somebody off guard. "You're going to get us both in trouble," he whispered.

Wilhelm gave a half bow, still smiling. "Trouble is our middle name".