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Opening extract from **Eleven Eleven**

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CHAPTER 1

Tuesday, 11 November 1918, 2.00 a.m.

Close to the German front line

Axel Meyer was sleeping, his head resting on a black woollen scarf pressed against the train window. Lulled by the steady rhythm of the wheels on the rails, he had managed to fall into his deepest sleep for days, after a nightmare journey from Berlin. Soldiers had been waving red flags and when there were officers around they would whisper, 'Out with the lights, out with the knives.' He nearly saw a man shot in Hannover when an officer had pulled a pistol to restore order. He expected at least an arrest, but the man just melted back into the crowd of soldiers, and the officer must have felt it unwise to try.

Axel struggled to understand why this kind of behaviour was being tolerated by the greatest army on earth. He had never imagined he would fight in the war, but now the High Command had lowered the combat age to sixteen he had been able to enlist in the Imperial German Army.

Axel was bewildered by what he saw. He knew there was so little food at home that people were suffering from slow starvation, but Germany was winning, wasn't she? Hadn't the Russians been beaten? Hadn't vast swathes of territory in the east been given over to Germany? Hadn't Germany's submarines been sinking enemy cargo ships by the score? He felt a rising anger against these traitors with their red flags, these revolutionaries they called *Bolsheviki*.

He'd heard many of them were soldiers who had recently returned from the Eastern Front. Some had even been prisoners of war. They had been infected with communism, the dangerous ideology of the regime that now controlled Russia. These *Bolsheviki* carried the threat of anarchy – a word he had recently learned at school – burning, rape, murder. It was against everything a loyal soldier was supposed to do. He wasn't going to be like that. He was going to make his family – what was left of them – proud of him.

Hearing the men around him talk, he sensed the train was full of these traitors. So he kept his head down and tried not to catch anyone's eye. Especially after that old man in his platoon had picked on him before they'd even left Berlin. 'They're sending *kinder* out now. Look at him.' He pointed to Axel. 'He's

barely out of short trousers. You should go home to your mother, lad.'

Axel thought to tell him his mother was dead, but he decided not to reply. He could smell the alcohol on the man's breath and didn't want to antagonise him, especially in the cramped confines of a railway compartment, where he couldn't get away.

After that, Axel tried to make himself inconspicuous. He wondered why the man had singled him out. He wasn't the only sixteen-year-old in that carriage. The man must know this had been decided by the High Command.

Now here he was, heading for the Front, afraid of his own comrades. He told himself to stop worrying about them. It was the enemy he was supposed to be frightened of. Axel had heard all sorts of things about the Tommies and the Yanks. That was who they were up against in this sector. He knew he didn't want to be taken prisoner by either. He had read in the papers that the British dropped hand grenades into the pockets of German soldiers foolish or cowardly enough to surrender. He wasn't going to let anyone capture him.

As his head lolled against the carriage window, he dreamed of *schnitzels* with fried eggs on top, and potatoes coated in butter. Even in his sleep Axel was permanently hungry. He had hoped he'd get better food in the army,

but the boys he'd trained with were just as hungry as the villagers back home in Wansdorf.

Axel was jolted from his sleep by a great explosion. It swept over the train, rocking his carriage, followed a second later by the sound of shattering glass. Outside, night became day, and the countryside was flooded with a garish glow which slowly faded to a dull yellow. The man opposite him was screaming and clutching at his throat. A fountain of blood gushed from his neck. Everyone instinctively recoiled. A quick glance at a hole in the fractured window told what had happened. The train had been hit by debris from the explosion. 'Brace yourself for more,' said one of the other men, hurriedly placing his steel helmet on his head.

Another explosion followed, smaller than the first but still enough to shake the carriage like a hurricane gust of wind. Then they heard small-arms fire – spitting like fire-crackers.

In a carriage near to theirs there was a sickening thud. Something heavy had fallen out of the sky. The train ground to a screeching halt.

A steady rattling, like heavy rain, began to fall on the carriage roof. Fragments from the explosion. Some penetrated the thin metal but their force was largely spent.

There was more screaming. For a moment Axel was

gripped by a terrible urge to flee through the shattered window. What if the train caught fire? The thought of being burned alive brought a blind panic to his chest. But he breathed deeply and told himself to wait for orders. Besides, there were so many people in the train carriage it would have been impossible to move.

‘Are we being attacked?’ shouted one of the soldiers in the carriage. ‘Let’s get out . . .’

An older man – Axel thought he looked old enough to be someone’s grandfather – listened for a second then the tension drained from his face. ‘That doesn’t sound like any fire fight I’ve been in. I think they’ve hit an ammunition dump.’

The injured man was being attended to by a soldier sitting next to him, who was covered in blood too now. He had managed to apply a field dressing, but the wounded man’s ghastly, chalk-white complexion and vacant eyes suggested he did not have long to live. Axel had seen dead people before – but he had never seen a man die.

‘Disembark!’ someone shouted, followed by a piercing whistle.

Everyone grabbed packs and rifles and helmets and began to scramble for the exits. Axel felt he was being spat out of the carriage, disgorged in a tide of grey uniforms, with this ragtag collection of young boys and

older men. A *Feldwebel* – sergeant – was walking up and down, trying to create order from chaos. Axel stumbled to the rail side, grateful to have escaped, especially when he saw what had hit the carriage behind them. A great steel axle, with a heavy wheel still attached, lay half in and half out of a compartment. Above the pandemonium of the disembarking men he could still hear the cries of those trapped inside.

The train had come to a halt between stations. Axel could see a terrific blaze further down the line and the outline of a town beyond the flames. He could also see star shells floating down to the west, and guessed that was where the Front was. Maybe an hour or so's march away. He felt a stab of fear, but pushed it aside when a boy his own age came over. Like Axel he was wearing a uniform that was too big for his skinny frame. Like Axel his blond hair was cropped short, a style that accentuated his pinched features.

‘What’s happened?’ he asked.

‘Something blew up.’ Axel shrugged, trying to sound nonchalant. ‘Now we have to walk.’ Hearing his own voice slightly surprised him. He had spoken to no one for the entire journey.

‘You’re a Berliner?’ said the other boy. ‘I know that accent!’

Axel smiled. 'No. But I live close by – in Wansdorf. It's a few kilometres to the west. My parents come from Berlin. And you?'

'Kreuzberg.'

Axel nodded. He had often visited family in that part of Berlin when he was younger.

'It's a madhouse there,' said the boy. 'Red flags. Soldiers' councils. They're turning into Russians – they're even calling for a Soviet Republic.'

'And what d'you think of that?' said Axel warily.

'I don't know,' said the boy. Axel didn't know whether he was being honest or whether he'd decided it was not wise to talk to him about the *Bolsheviki*.

An awkward silence hung between them until the boy fetched an oatmeal biscuit from his pocket and offered it to Axel. 'I'm Erich Becker,' he said, and put out a hand to shake. 'My *Mutti* made these.'

'Thank you,' said Axel, and ate the biscuit at once. He had eaten nothing since breakfast the previous morning. 'As soon as we get to Tommy, we can have our fill of his bully beef, *ja?*'

Axel had heard the British soldiers were well supplied with foods that had become scarce in Germany, especially meat. And he really liked the idea of finding some British chocolate bars as well. Cadbury, Rowntree, Fry – those

were the names to look out for. The navy blockade the British had mounted around the coastline had put a stop to any luxuries reaching Germany. Now everyone had to make do with turnips and acorn coffee.

Axel had decided it was his duty to encourage his fellow soldiers – even boys his own age like Erich: keep their spirits up so they would have the courage to fight the enemy. Erich smiled at him but his eyes were dull with fear. Axel hoped his own courage would hold up. His father had sent him off with stern words. *Uphold the good name of the family. Don't bring disgrace on your village. Make your mother proud. She will be watching from heaven.* Axel thought he was a bit old for that now, but he would have loved to believe she was watching over him from somewhere.

A company *Feldwebel* lined them up and they began to march towards the flaming wreckage ahead. The fires were burning bright enough to scorch the skin on their faces. As they marched past, Axel turned to Erich. 'An ammunition truck?'

'A lucky shell, maybe,' he replied. 'Or maybe a Tommy or a Yank flyer dropped a bomb.'

The scene around them was like an image of hell. Whatever had blown up here had set rolling stock alight and ignited several piles of ammunition and shells. Axel

wondered if they had all gone off, or whether there was more to come. A few wounded men were being attended to, but most of the casualties were dead – burned to a crisp shell or mutilated beyond recognition. Axel stared straight in front. As they marched towards the town, he wondered what else lay ahead.