

CHAPTER 18

0630 hours

The bombardment from the ships seemed like it had gone on forever, but Mundt had survived enough barrages in Africa and the Eastern Front to know that the mind could be deceived. Fear made minutes feel like eternities.

Even now, the air outside the bunker shook with explosions, each detonation hurling jets of sand and splintered metal skyward. Smoke curled and rolled across the narrow firing slits, turning the world beyond into a shifting grey void punctuated with flashes of intense light.

Inside the cramped concrete chamber, Baum stood with his back to the wall, stealing quick, nervous glances through the observation slits whenever the smoke thinned for a heartbeat. On the floor, Stein sat curled in a foetal ball, his hands clamped over his ears as he rocked gently, whispering some broken mantra under his breath. Praying for what little good that did.

Mundt knew that the prayers of soldiers went unheeded. Russia had destroyed any religious convictions he'd harboured. He'd seen enough repentant souls on their knees in a trench, their hands clasped together searching for God in a Godless landscape. The next minute their eyes would be staring unseeing at the sky above them as the angel of death answered their pleas of salvation.

This beach would be no different.

A fresh barrage rippled across the coastline. On the horizon, the muzzles of the Allied ships flashed in relentless succession, each bright flare followed by the distant thump of another shell carving a crater in the sand.

Abruptly the guns fell silent. An uncanny stillness descended over the beach.

Baum glanced quickly through the slits. "They've stopped."

Mundt moved beside him and stared out at the rolling tide. The beach was a pitted wasteland, carved up by hundreds of impacts. Beneath the roar of the surf, he picked up the distant throb of many engines churning steadily closer, labouring against the rough water.

"The landing craft are nearly here," Mundt said.

German artillery further along the coast began to respond, their big guns barking sharply as they fired out toward the incoming armada. One shell struck a landing craft amidships. The fragile vessel erupted in a violent bloom of flame and splinters, bodies pitched skyward like broken dolls before crashing into the sea.

The Gefreiter's training kicked back in and he yanked an ammunition belt from its crate, feeding the first rounds with hands that trembled with eagerness rather than fear.

"Stein! On your feet, boy! Move!" Baum barked. Stein stared at him blankly, as if awakening from a trance.

"Help me set up the machine gun!" he snapped again, more urgently this time.

The youth lifted himself to his feet, and almost zombie-like began to set up the weapon, going through the motions that had been drilled into him, unseeing and unfeeling.

Behind them, a heavy pounding rattled the steel door. Mundt snapped out a sharp challenge before pulling it open. Two more soldiers from the nearby town pushed inside, lugging another MG42 and boxes of ammunition. Mundt pointed to the second slit and they moved swiftly to the position.

The sun was fully up now and Mundt grabbed the binoculars off the table and stole a look through the slit. The sea was crawling with landing craft advancing in staggered formation toward the shoreline. And behind those, filling the horizon, were the vast silhouettes of the Allied invasion fleet. More ships than he had imagined possible. For the first time that morning he felt the chill of fear trickle down his spine.

He watched the first landing boats reach the shoreline, their ramps slamming down into the shallow surf. Dozens of American soldiers leapt into the thrashing waves, rifles held high. Their shouts were lost beneath the thunder of German guns.

The MG42 roared to life, spitting bursts of fire down the beach. Moments later, the second gun joined the staccato rhythm. Mundt watched, mesmerized as the ammunition belts rattled through the machine gun, the tracer rounds flashing through the smokey air. Men fell instantly to the irrepressible torrent, tumbling backwards into the sea or crumpling onto the sand. The Hauptmann felt

a momentary twinge of pity. The Americans were being torn apart by the onslaught.

"I told you we'd destroy them," Baum said, triumphantly, seeing the bodies falling into the sea to be swept in with the tide.

"Don't be too hasty, Gefreiter," Mundt cautioned. "This is just the first wave. There will be plenty more in those ships."

"We'll wipe them out too," Baum growled, leaning into the weapon as though willing it to fire faster.

More landing craft reached the shore, spilling soldiers out by the hundreds, scattering in every direction desperate to escape the killing zone. Some leapt over the sides of the landing craft rather than face the remorseless fire directed towards the ramps, others used the bodies of their comrades as grim shields.

The Gefreiter reloaded his machine gun and began pouring more fire down on the beach with a sadistic relish, laughing with the madness of the killing.

"Why d-do they k-keep coming?" Stein asked, bemused. "So m-many are getting k-killed."

"Because they have plenty to waste," Mundt said. "If this becomes a war of attrition, the allies will undoubtedly win."

Some of the bigger German artillery situated higher up the coast was brought to bear on the larger invasion ships. A shell slammed into a destroyer. A white-hot flash erupted along its flank, followed by a plume of smoke and screaming

metal. Through the binoculars Mundt saw men leaping overboard, some already ablaze. The ship groaned like a wounded animal as it split and began to sink.

The Hauptmann tried the field phone again and finally reached someone. "We will need reinforcements," he shouted down the mouthpiece.

"Normandy is not the main invasion," the voice at the other end told him. "It's just a diversionary tactic."

The line went dead again and Mundt stared at the handset in disbelief. A cold, creeping dread crawled through his gut. Slowly, he looked through the slit again at the thousands of soldiers pouring down the beach, the countless dead already strewn across sand and surf.

"Madness," he whispered. "They've been completely fooled. This is no diversion. This is the invasion."

And as the horizon burned and the machine guns rattled on without pause, he realised they were standing in the early moments of a tide that Germany would never be able to push back.