

CHAPTER 20

0800 hours

Conrad Mundt stood inside the concrete bunker watching the ceaseless carnage on the beach below. The roar of distant naval guns rolled across the shoreline like thunder. More boats surged through the surf, their ramps yawning open to disgorge men into waist-deep water only to be shredded by the waiting German guns. The sea foamed red as waves of men were dumped unceremoniously on the sand to be rocked by the gentle swell before being sucked back and toyed with by the tide. Mundt held his hands over his ears to try and mute the echoing coughs of the machine-gun as it spat death, vibrating through the bunker floor. Brass casings clattered and piled around Mundt's boots, rising almost to his ankles. Distant cries and screams carried up the beach on the breeze, accompanied by the hot metallic tang of blood.

The death outside gnawed at him, the futility of it. It made him hunger for his family. He pulled a photo from his breast pocket and reacquainted himself with his parents and his siblings. Their faces were as familiar to him as his own and he felt the gulf of space between them very keenly. His mother's last letter flashed through his mind. His brother's U-boat had been overdue and reported missing. She also spoke of the bombings and the food queues. That would end

soon, when this pitiful attempt at a landing was crushed. The Allies would seek peace and it would be all over, the Fatherland victorious.

Gunfire snapped him back to the present. He shouldered his rifle and began firing through a narrow vision slit. His shots cracked across the beach, picking off men scrambling for what little cover existed.

Emerging from the smoke, he noticed a group standing upright on the sand, unusually still. For a moment, they seemed to stare directly at him. He was sure he saw a woman. How was that possible?

“Do you see those crazy civilians on the beach?” Mundt asked, lowering his rifle a fraction.

“All I see are dead Americans,” Baum said, glancing over the top of the muzzle.

A pall of smoke drifted across their vision and when it had cleared the civilians had disappeared.

“Help me to reload, Stein,” Baum ordered. “You see, I told you the stupid Americans would be slaughtered if they tried to invade us.”

Stein, dazed, his cheeks streaked with soot, fumbled another belt of ammunition from a metal box. “Why d-don’t they j-just give up?”

“Yankee pride and stupidity against German superiority,” Baum said, as he fed the fresh belt of ammunition into the machine-gun and opened fire again. “A perfect equation for a massacre.”

“Must you delight in this butchery?” Mundt asked, not hiding his distaste for the Gefreiter.

“Just taking pride in my work, Hauptmann,” Baum said, smugly.

Stein was feeding the belt, his face wet with tears. *For himself?* Mundt wondered, *or pity for the Americans.*

A sudden movement caught Mundt’s eye. An American soldier was rising from cover to throw a grenade. The Hauptmann reacted instantly. His rifle cracked, the bullet grazing the man’s arm, but it wasn’t enough. The Marine hurled the small round projectile with frightening precision. It sailed in a perfect arc, landing inside the adjacent bunker.

The explosion was muffled. A gout of smoke billowed from the slit as the neighbouring machine-gun abruptly fell silent. They could hear the men inside screaming. Mundt tried to fire at the American again, but he had dodged back under cover.

“Concentrate your fire in the area over there,” Mundt ordered the machine gunners. “They have just taken out the bunker next to us. We will be their next target.”

Baum inched his machine gun around and fired but his bullets passed harmlessly over the heads of the Americans.

From the same cluster of rocks, a cylindrical canister tumbled through the air and burst at the base of their bunker spewing a plume of thick dense smoke. Choking fumes poured upward, filling the firing slit and seeping into their lungs.

Bullets followed, sharp cracks and metallic thuds as they punched into the concrete, sparking off the walls. Some rounds tore through the slit and embedded themselves in the back wall, sending stone fragments whistling across the room.

More grenades detonated at the base of the structure, erupting in showers of sand and concussive blasts that shook dust from the ceiling. Through gaps in the smoke, they glimpsed a lone American crawling toward the barbed wire, cutters flashing in his hands.

“Shoot him!” Mundt ordered.

Baum tried but the smoke made aiming difficult and the machine-gun wouldn't depress enough to bring it to bear on the soldier. He cursed, shoving the tripod forward to gain a better angle.

More shapes crawled through the smoke, two men hauling lengths of explosive tubing. Baum fired again, striking one, his body acting as a shield for the second man, who continued feeding the tubes through the sand towards the defense wall with grim determination.

“They are trying to blow the wall,” Mundt warned. “Keep firing at them.”

A huge explosion rocked the bunker. Chunks of masonry and fine sand rained down. Where the wall had been was now a huge yawning cavity, with rods of black iron protruding from the shattered concrete like fat worms.

More incoming fire from the Americans ricocheted off the walls, and another smoke canister erupted close to the bunker. The machine-guns continued to fire

blindly through the dense black fog, but Mundt felt the inevitable closing in. He retreated deeper into the bunker.

He heard a warning shout from one of the gunners as two grenades came sailing through the slit and bounced across the floor with hollow metallic clinks. Mundt flipped over the metal table at the back and took cover behind it as the explosion ripped through the compact space.

One of the gunners' legs was cut from beneath him in a spray of blood. The shrapnel continued on through the other gunner's skull killing him instantly. As the second grenade pirouetted across the dusty floor, Baum shoved Stein's trembling form between himself and the blast. The explosion tore through the youth's stomach, spilling his guts across the floor. His shattered body absorbed the worst of the shrapnel. Baum survived, thrown against the rear wall like a rag doll.

Both guns were destroyed.

The Americans had broken through.