

CHAPTER 22

0830 hours

Inside the bunker, Albert Stein's screams dwindled to a wet gargle before fading altogether. His blood pooled on the dusty floor of the bunker, thick and dark. One of the other machine gunners had died immediately, body bent backwards over a crate. The other lay mewling softly like an injured animal. Only Mundt and Baum had escaped serious injury.

One of the Americans shouted through the slit, his German rough and broken, but Mundt understood. He stood and went to the large metal door to open it.

"Don't open it!" Baum shouted.

"If we do not open it, they will throw more grenades inside," Mundt said.

"I will gladly give my life," Baum said.

Mundt rounded on him. "If you want to throw away your life on some stupid sense of honour then I suggest you shoot yourself. I, for one, don't intend on dying needlessly. I've already seen too much of that in this war."

"You are a German soldier. You gave an oath to serve the Führer," Baum shouted. "You dishonour that Iron Cross and all it stands for."

The Gefreiter tried to pull out his pistol but Mundt reacted first, pulling his own gun and levelling it at Baum.

“Take out your pistol slowly and throw it across the bunker now, or I swear I will shoot you myself,” Mundt said.

With hatred in his eyes, the Gefreiter cast his weapon across the floor. Still pointing his pistol at Baum, Mundt tore the medal from his uniform with his free hand and threw it at the soldier. “Take it if it means so much to you. I have no use for it anymore.” He was sure Baum would have shot him had he reached his weapon first.

Mundt went to the large metal door and slid the bolt aside and opened it. He reversed his pistol, offering the grip to a tall black American soldier among the flood of infantry pouring into the bunker. He was surprised to feel a sense of relief that it was all over for him, that he might survive this war.

The American soldiers were shouting in English, waving their weapons frantically as they tried to gain the cooperation of their new prisoners. The black soldier spoke to Mundt in crude German, “Hande hoch.” He twitched the barrel of his gun to emphasise the command. Mundt and Baum complied with the request and raised their hands.

Another American soldier shouted through the open door. “All clear, sir.”

A Sergeant entered, tall and muscular.

“I am Sergeant Brogan, American Marines,” he said. “Does anyone here understand English?”

“I speak a little,” Mundt said.

The Sergeant nodded. “Billyboy, get a medic in here to check out the others.”

Another soldier entered the bunker wearing a uniform with the red cross of a medic on one arm. He went over to Stein's body and touched his neck. "This one's just bought the farm, Sarge," he said. "The shrapnel tore out his guts."

"What about the others?" Brogan asked.

The medic cast his eye over the first soldier and just shook his head. The second soldier had stopped sobbing and was staring up at the medic, his mouth moving but saying no words. Then he coughed blood over the front of his tunic and died. The medic waved his fingers across his own throat. A gesture that required no translation.

The prisoners were taken outside. Mundt was glad to be out of the bunker. He was becoming sick of the stench of excrement that had flowed unhindered from the dead boy's body. As they stepped into the brisk sea air, the sights and sounds of battle flooded Mundt's senses. Heavy choking ribbons of smoke drifted across the beach, robbing the air of oxygen. They were taken to a holding area where several more bedraggled German soldiers sat on a dune with their hands on their head.

"Sit," Brogan ordered, pointing towards the other captives.

Baum and Mundt slumped onto the sand.

The Sergeant's attention was drawn to a small group of civilians standing a distance away on a dune. They were the same ones he'd seen earlier and he was aware the German Hauptmann could see them too.

"What the fuck!" Brogan said.

“What is it, Sarge?” a soldier asked.

Smoke drifted across the dunes and when it had cleared they were gone.

“I think I’m seeing things,” Brogan said finally, wiping his eyes. “Did you see them?” he asked Mundt.

“I saw them,” Mundt said.

“At least that proves I’m not going nuts,” Brogan said.

At the shoreline more landing craft were delivering fresh troops onto the corpse-littered sand. It was clear to Mundt that the Americans had managed to capture the beach and were establishing a foothold. He looked at the hundreds of bodies in the sea, like wallowing seals, bloated with gas and seawater, bobbing obscenely like grotesque corks.

Baum followed the Hauptmann’s gaze and grinned at the grisly scene. One of the American soldiers saw him and asked, “You see something funny, Kraut? Something amuse you?”

Baum’s eyes did not blink. He merely looked back at the officer with disdain and said something in German. Mundt had heard it and shouted a warning at the Gefreiter. “Shut up, Baum.”

“Hey, Kelly, you speak a little German, don’t you?” Brogan said. “Did you understand what this piece of shit just said?”

Kelly stepped forward. “I think he said he finds the sight of all those dead Yanks very satisfying and he wished he could have killed more.”

The Sergeant glared at Baum. “You sure about that, Kelly?”

Maybe, Sarge," Kelly began. "My German is kinda rusty. Maybe he was giving me a recipe for sauerkraut."

Billyboy snapped a fresh magazine into his rifle and said, "He wishes he could have killed more, does he? Sounds sure as hell like a threat to me, Bob. Is it possible he has a concealed weapon?"

Kelly spat on the ground and stared at the Germans. "It's a possibility, Billyboy. In all this confusion, ah don't remember searching these 'ere prisoners. Ah hear they got a bad habit o' hiding weapons and our lives could be in je-po-dee."

Mundt raised his hands and shouted, "We have no weapons. We have surrendered!"

Kelly smiled coldly and pulled out the luger pistol he'd taken off Mundt inside the bunker. "Well ah can remedy that oversight." He threw the pistol on to the sand close to Baum. "Whyn't you go ahead and show us all just how superior you are," he said, in his broken German. "Or are you just a piece of shit coward."

"Tell him that when we get through killing all his comrades on this beach," Billyboy said. "We gonna find where his mamma lives and take turns fucking her six ways from Sunday."

Kelly grinned and translated.

Mundt swallowed hard, a dry click in his throat. He saw Baum staring at the Iron Cross in his hand and then at the pistol lying in the sand and realised with a chilling certainty that they were all going to die.

Baum went for the gun. He barely got his fingers on the stock before Billyboy pulled the trigger, spraying the prisoners with a barrage of bullets. The other American soldiers joined in, wreaking a heartless vengeance on a soulless enemy.

When they stopped, the silence ached in their ears as the bodies lay on the sand. Ragged bullet holes riddled their uniforms and steam rose like a fine mist from their corpses. It was done. Brogan didn't feel good about what had just happened, but one look at the human decimation on the beach eased his conscience.

"You were right to warn us of the danger we were in, Kelly," Brogan said.

"Hell, Sarge. It's mah duty to protect my commanding officer. If we hadn't gotten him he might have shot you dead."

"Well, Kelly, I do appreciate your vigilance," Brogan said. "Now get your sorry asses together. We got more Germans to dispatch before we have that cool beer in Berlin."

Billyboy gestured at the bodies. "We leaving 'em like this?"

Brogan looked back at the swathes of his dead comrades on the beach. "Why the hell not. They are in excellent company."