

CHAPTER 24

1530 hours – Omaha Beach.

The landing area and up to a mile inland had finally been secured. Brogan slumped down onto a dune to grab a precious moment of respite. Below him, long columns of military vehicles crawled up the beach, engines growling, treads grinding over cratered terrain. Behind them came wave after wave of fresh troops, their uniforms still clean, stiff. They looked painfully naïve compared to the men who had fought for a day and aged a year in this crucible.

For the first time since dawn, Brogan allowed himself to breathe as he watched stretcher teams carefully gather the fallen. Now the fighting was over, his dead countrymen could be treated with the dignity they were owed for their sacrifice. Their bodies were lifted from the blackened, pockmarked sand and ferried back toward the great, grey ships anchored offshore. He wondered what passed through the minds of the newly arrived soldiers as they stepped over the remnants of the morning's slaughter.

Kowski would have been one of them, Brogan thought, and the ache he'd refused to feel all day finally pierced him. He had shot German soldiers and left them in a ditch without a second thought. He hadn't cared, not then and not now. The war had ground something out of him, replaced it with something unfeeling and mechanical. He understood that humans didn't fight wars. [Cold,](#)

calculating machines fought them, whether they were made of metal or flesh.

Here, sentiment wasn't just a luxury, it was a death sentence.

Beside him, Bob Kelly shifted, reading his Sergeant's silence.

"I know, Sarge," he murmured. "You're thinking of Kowski. I feel the same way."

"How's Billyboy holding up?" Brogan asked. In the final assault on the bunker, the Corporal had been hit, ironically, in his ass, as Kowski had foretold in the landing craft.

"He should be back on one of those ships by now," Kelly said. "Too bad his cream got lost in his backpack when he landed."

Brogan let out a genuine laugh. It felt like a pressure valve being released. At least Billyboy would be heading home, wounded but alive.

"Just you and me left now, Bob," Brogan said.

Their ragtag band of soldiers, who had clung to Brogan through hell that morning, were scattered around the dune, grabbing whatever scraps of normalcy they could. Some smoked with trembling hands. Others chewed through their rations in silence. Most just sat staring into the middle distance with that stunned, lost look that Brogan had seen on so many soldiers, this same tableau being played out across the whole beach.

Kelly produced a bottle of schnapps liberated from a bunker and poured a measure into a battered tin cup before handing it over. Then he poured one for himself.

“To the boys who didn’t make it,” he said, lifting the cup toward the broken shoreline. “The real heroes today.”

Brogan echoed the sentiment, then took a long swallow that burned all the way down. “Damn,” he choked. “Not bad.”

“I guess the Germans ain’t all bad,” Kelly said. “They be just misguided, yer know.”

Before Brogan could answer, movement on the slope below caught his attention, four figures approaching with purpose.

“Heads up, Bob,” he said. “We got ourselves some brass heading our way.” He quickly finished the schnapps and hid the bottle in the soft sand.

They both snapped to their feet as the first man crested the rise. A Major, arm in a blood-soaked sling, face streaked with grime.

“Sergeant Daniel Brogan and Corporal Robert Kelly, First Infantry, sir,” Brogan announced.

“At ease men,” the officer said. “I know who you guys are. Your reputation precedes you, gentlemen. I’ve been hearing the buzz all up and down the beach about your brave exploits today.”

“We had some damn good help, sir,” Brogan said.

“I am Major Barton, Twenty Ninth.” Barton’s gaze drifted to the schnapps bottle neck peeking from the sand. “Any more of that hooch left, soldier?”

Brogan grinned and lifted the bottle out of its hiding place and poured the Major a hefty slug. Barton downed the schnapps in one and winced. "Woah, that hits the spot. Prefer bourbon myself but this'll suffice for now."

"After the morning we've had, Major, this is like the finest champagne," Brogan said. The Sergeant offered the bottle to the Major but Barton waved it away. "You keep it boys. You're gonna need another slug after you hear what I have to tell you."

He made a gesture to the beach with his good arm. "We took a beating today, and we are taking stock of what we got left. It's a hell of a mess. We've set ourselves up in one of the bunkers over the other side of the beach. I see you got yourselves a mixed bag here, Sergeant, how are your men holding up?"

Brogan nodded toward the exhausted group behind him. "They're not really my men, sir," he said. "They are waifs and strays we kinda picked up on the way. They're all tired and a little shell shocked, sir, but nothing a little food and rest won't fix."

Kelly pointed to the bandage on Barton's arm, the stain of blood seeping through the filthy, ragged material. "I guess that's your ticket home, Major," he said.

"What, this lil ol' scratch? Just a piece of shrapnel," Barton said. "I got a medic to yank it out. He said it'd be as right as rain in about a week. They told me, if I joined the army, I'd see the world. I did not come thousands of miles just to spend one afternoon on a French beach. No sir, I will be having me an extended tour of

Europe ending with a visit to Berlin, God willing. And there ain't no way I'm going back to the ships after the shit storm we just had to wade through to get here."

"Does it hurt, sir?" Kelly asked.

Barton grinned. "Like hell, Corporal, but at least that means I'm still here."

"How did the other beaches fare, sir?" Brogan asked.

"Better than we had expected," Barton replied. "We had it the hardest here but the other beaches are secure and the plan is to consolidate and then begin the push inland as soon as possible."

"That's good news, Major," Brogan said. "When will we be getting a replacement commander?"

"I was real sorry to hear of Lieutenant Hannagan's death, he was a good man," Barton said. "but I'm afraid you ain't getting a replacement."

"How come, sir?" Brogan asked.

"Gentlemen," the Major began, "I have some very bad news for the both of you and as I said, you'll be needing another hit on that booze, soon enough." He pulled out a piece of paper from inside his tunic and his tone changed, becoming abruptly formal. "This here is a hastily drawn up field commission which says you, Daniel Brogan, are now a Lieutenant, and you, Robert Kelly, are a Sergeant. And the general will undoubtedly be pinning a couple of nice lil ol' purple stars on your tunics for your fine work today." He handed the two men their new uniform insignia. "You have my commiserations gentlemen."

"Aw, hell," Kelly grumbled.

“Don’t sweat it, soldier,” Barton said. “I’m sure you understand that we now have several vacant positions after this day’s events. I myself was a captain when I stepped on this beach. I suspect that by the time this is all over our career paths may be meteoric in nature.”

“Thank you, sir,” Brogan said, fingering the material of his new insignia. “I think.”

“Don’t thank me yet, Lieutenant Brogan.” Barton slapped him on the back. “Get these sewn onto your tunics. There is a meeting of commanding officers over yonder in one hour. And that sir means you.”

“Yes, sir,” Brogan said, saluting.

The Major left the two men receiving handshakes and backslaps from the other soldiers. Kelly stared at his new Sergeant’s stripes and shook his head. “Wherever Kowski is, I bet he’s laughing his ass off.”

Brogan poured out two more cups of schnapps and handed one to Kelly. They clinked the lips of the cups together and drank them in one pull.

“Hey, Lieutenant,” another soldier called out. “I heard them say we could be in Paris before the summer gives out. Gonna find me a sweet lil’ o Par-is-ian lady. What about you, sir?”

Brogan tapped his breast pocket. “I got me a sweet little Colorado lady waiting for me at home.” He turned to Kelly, grinning. “Sergeant Kelly. Make sure these men have eaten and rested and are ready if we need to head out.”

“Ah sure will do, Lieutenant Brogan, sir,” he said, snapping off an elaborate salute with a wink.

“Carry on, Sergeant,” Brogan said, returning the salute, enjoying the playful exchange.