

CHAPTER 6

Mundt put on his cap and descended to the courtyard and the waiting car, its engine quietly purring. A soldier stepped out of the driver seat and saluted. He opened the passenger door and waited for the hauptmann to climb in.

The car sped out of the courtyard, spitting out gravel from beneath the spinning wheels, and headed along the road towards the town. As night closed in, the downpour became heavier, drumming loudly on the taut material of the roof, the hiss of the tyres on the wet road. Mundt was acutely aware of the stale smell of cigar smoke, a sweet rot that clung to the upholstery.

Oberst Kriek's excesses were well known by his men. Some considered him all style and no substance, an aristocrat with power and reputation but no backbone. And if Kriek was aware of this condemnation, and Mundt doubted much got by the oberst, he showed no sign of shame or emotion.

The journey took them past buildings, gutted and open to the rain, rooms exposed like broken dollhouses; wallpaper, a slanted staircase, the ghost-outline of a hearth. Piles of brick and timber lay heaped in the roads as if the city had been chewed and spat out. Mundt had seen devastation in France and Russia, had learned to step around it, to treat it as scenery. Here it felt personal.

"How long has it been this bad?" he asked the driver, feeling as shell-shocked as the surroundings he now viewed.

The driver shrugged and said, "Months. They come most nights. Parts of Berlin are like this too."

“My sister is there,” Mundt said.

The driver cast a surreptitious glance sideways at the Iron Cross on Mundt’s chest. He asked, “Russia, sir?”

“Yes,” Mundt replied. “Am I now the local gossip?”

“The men in the barracks,” the driver said. “We don’t get many Iron Crosses here in Stuttgart.”

“I was born here. I’ve not been home for three years. I was posted back three months ago when I was wounded at the Crimea,” Mundt said. He slapped his leg. “Sniper bullet. The Russians are training women and children to be snipers these days.”

The driver kept his eyes forward on the road and asked, “What’s it like out there, sir? “I’ve heard...”

“It’s all you’ve heard, soldier,” Mundt said, abruptly. “And far more. Are you heading out there soon?”

The driver nodded.

“What is your name?” Mundt asked.

“Franz, sir.”

“Are you married, Franz?”

“No,” the driver replied. “You?”

Mundt smiled. “No I’m not, but while I was in hospital recuperating from my wound I met a nurse. Her name is Heidi. I think we might become close friends.”

The driver smiled and nodded. “You wouldn’t be the first to succumb to a hospital romance,” he said.

“I told myself I shouldn’t get involved, but there was just something about her,” Mundt said.

“I understand,” the driver said. After a moment he added, quieter, “I had a girl like that.” His hands tightened on the wheel. “She was killed in a bombing raid.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Mundt said.

“I always thought it would be Germany winning the battles, conquering the world,” the driver said. “I never imagined we might lose.”

“It’s not over yet,” Mundt said. “We will be victorious.” He heard the mantra in it, the trained response. In the silence that followed, the doubt he didn’t voice sat between them like a third passenger.

“I hope so,” the driver said. “And maybe, when this is all over, you can go back to your nurse.”

“Hopefully not as a patient this time,” Mundt said, grinning.

They fell silent as the car slipped through the quiet roads of the suburbs.

“Listen, Franz, when you go to Russia, don’t be a hero,” Mundt told him. “It’s Oberst Kriek’s first field command. He is untested in battle.”

The driver snorted. “He might actually get some mud and blood on those shiny boots of his.” He stiffened with fear when he realised it was an officer next to him and not one of his barrack comrades. “Forgive me, sir, I meant no disrespect.”

Mundt slapped the driver’s back, a kindness disguised as camaraderie. “Fear not, Franz. Like you, I was a lowly soldier once. Seems like a lifetime ago,” he added, absently. “I think the oberst will see more than the inside of a whore’s bedroom in Russia. The place has a way of stripping a man of... distractions.” He laughed, thankful he was steering the conversation away from its morose tone. The driver relaxed slightly and echoed the laugh.

The car reached the outskirts of the city and turned down a side street where there was a parked lorry with several German soldiers smoking at the back of the vehicle. Mundt stepped out of the car and they immediately snapped to attention.

“At ease,” Mundt said.

He stepped up to the back of the lorry and pulled aside the canvas flap. Faces stared back at him from the gloomy interior; men with hollow eyes, women clutching bundles, children pressed into whatever gaps the adults could make for them. They were soaked through, streaked with road grime, hair plastered to foreheads. The smell that rose from them was not filth so much as fear: sharp, animal, unmistakable. Mundt’s stomach tightened. He let the flap fall, not in disgust at them, but at the task, at the impersonal procedure of it all, a name with a neat tick by it. For a second he had to breathe through his nose to keep his expression steady.

“Damn, what are we doing here?” The words escaped him before he could stop them. He caught himself, glanced aside, and saw one of the soldiers watching him; young, tight-jawed, as if he too were feeling the Hauptmann’s own repugnance.

“Your list,” Mundt said, abruptly. “Let me see.”

The soldier produced a clipboard with the list of printed names. Mundt compared it to the one the oberst had given him.

“We have them all except one family,” the soldier said. “Two soldiers are chasing them down with dogs. They won’t evade us for long.” Somewhere farther down the streets, a barking started up, sharp and insistent,

“Come with me,” Mundt ordered. He strode off purposefully down the road. He wanted this over and done with so he could pack his stuff and get out of this place and head to France. The

soldier caught up with him and kept pace. They rounded the corner and met two more soldiers with dogs. They had a scrawny man with them, his face bloodied from a wound below his eye, probably caused by a rifle butt. The soldiers snapped to attention. The dogs, sensing their masters' supplication, sat and lowered their heads.

"Report," Mundt barked.

"Sir, we have captured the father. The mother and daughter are somewhere in this area, but we have them cornered. There are a few houses down this street, and an area with two bombed-out buildings."

"Very good," Mundt said. "One of you take the man back to the truck. The other can take the dogs and search those ruins. We will search these houses."

Three houses remained on the short street. Mundt and the soldier searched the first two quickly; small, airless homes with two rooms up and two down, kitchens that still smelled faintly of boiled cabbage beneath the damp and soot. There was nowhere to hide but the roof space, and neither house had a loft. Mundt took the upstairs while the soldier combed the downstairs. They spoke little, their boots loud on the bare boards. When they stepped back outside, the barking was closer now, reverberating between the ruined walls. At the third house, Mundt saw the curtain twitch, and a woman's face appear and vanish. He climbed the steps and knocked.