

PART 1

THE ONCOMING STORM

All the great things are simple,
and many can be expressed in
A single word: Freedom, justice,
Honour, duty, mercy, hope.

Winston Churchill

CHAPTER 1

May 30, 1944 – Morning. Côte d'Or, Normandy, France.

Mannschaften Albert Stein peered through the bunker's narrow viewing slits at the mist rolling in off the ocean, crawling across the beach like a living thing. The eerie silence was unnerving, broken only by the screech of an occasional seagull. The sun had been up for over thirty minutes, but the light was diffuse and weak. The mist had thickened, swallowing the beach in its suffocating embrace. Occasionally, the tops of the steel landing barriers buried in the sand were visible but he could not see the rolling sea lapping at their base.

As a fourteen year old, when the war was as young and naïve as him, he had watched the movie, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, and had marvelled at the creeping fog, thick, clinging and full of menace, hiding evils within its unfathomable depths. It felt like a malevolent force that had crept into his dreams, waking him in a panic and leaving him gasping for air. And now, five years later as a nineteen year old boy soldier on his first posting, the fog still made his skin crawl, his heart beat that little bit quicker.

This time the threat was the prospect of allied soldiers storming the beach and their small bunker. In his mind's eye he saw thousands of uniforms emerging from the grey haze, armed to the teeth and in a murderous fury, their eyes glowing red with hate. The rumours had become a litany, each one more gruesome than the last.

'Save a bullet for yourself. They don't take prisoners. They'll cut your balls off and then cut your throat.'

He suppressed a shiver of fear, his hands trembling as he adjusted his helmet. He hadn't wanted to be a soldier. He aspired to be a writer like his hero Arthur Conan Doyle. But the Third Reich was no place for Sherlock Holmes, no place for fancy words. Just bullets and bombs, death and glorious sacrifice to the fatherland. The recent conscription had taken many young boys from his village, and several too old to fight, men in their fourth decade. Stein had been reluctantly drafted and rushed through basic training and now, as a Mannschaften, a lowly foot soldier, he was standing here waiting for the invasion which he knew would surely come.

He turned away from the view, his head grazing the roof of the bunker. He had always been tall and lanky, even as a child. His face was gaunt, skin stretched tight across his skull, sunken hollows for eyes. He looked more like an extra from the horror movies he so loved. He had a nervous stammer and a twitch to his left eye when he became anxious, and these days he was anxious all the time. He felt the muscle spasm uncontrollably and massaged his face, trying to calm this unbecoming affectation.

The air in the bunker was thick with the scent of sweat and stale coffee. Sitting at a solitary table, polishing his boots, was Gefreiter Kurt Baum. He was two steps up in seniority to Stein and four years older. He was almost a foot smaller than his comrade and was slightly stockier with a thin mouth, cold, blue eyes and short cropped blond hair. He was everything Stein was not; confident, cruel, and carved from the propaganda posters of Arian perfection that littered the German cities.

"What's it like out there?" Baum asked, rubbing vigorously at the boots, coaxing a deep shine out of the leather.

"S-sir, I have t-to report, all c-clear," Stein responded, saluting formally.

“Y-you have to r-report,” Baum mocked the youth. “Relax, Albert, you don’t have to salute every time you speak.”

“Sorry s-sir.”

“Not as sorry as I am,” Baum lamented. The soldier’s bitterness was palpable. “Three years in the Hitler youth and then five years in the army. I can still hear the enlistment speech. They said I’d see the world serving as part of the Führer’s Glorious Schutzstaffel. A world that would be on its knees before German military might. And what have I seen?” The question was clearly rhetorical. He made a dismissive wave of his hand. “At the grand age of twenty three I’ve seen Belgium, chased retreating French and English soldiers onto the beaches at Dunkirk. And the rest of the time I’ve been here in France guarding shit and doing fuck all.”

Baum’s cynical laughter was hollow, echoing off the bunker walls. Stein liked to think that the Gefreiter’s bravado was just another mask, a shield against the terror that gnawed at them all, but he knew better. Baum wanted it all, the glory, the hero’s parade, the medals.

“Make some coffee, Albert,” Baum ordered. “Our leader will return soon from his stroll and he will expect his morning beverage.”

“A-at once, s-sir,” Stein said, reaching for the water can. He left the bunker and climbed the short dune to the water supply tap. Down the beach he could just make out a figure he recognised in the distance, resolving itself from the morning mist. He quickly returned to the bunker with the water.

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Feldwebel Hans Kupper could see the bunker ahead engulfed by the dense fog, a grey squatting beast sitting in the low dunes. From here he could make out the pockmarks scarring its surface

from the regular bombing raids. Nothing could get through those thick walls, even a direct hit from a bomb. He sucked in the final lungful of smoke from his cigarette and cast the smouldering stub onto the damp sand. Despite the season, the coolness of the air seeped through his uniform. It was supposed to be summer. The sun hadn't made an appearance for about five days, just constant black clouds and rain. His watch told him it was 6.30 a.m. but his body told him a different story. There had been little opportunity for restful slumber with the bombings and the constant alerts. His life had been too easy for too long, he mused. He had gotten out of the habit of existing on a couple of hours sleep like his days in Italy.

He turned away from the sea and made his way to the bunker. Through the open door he could hear the gently lilting voice of Gracie Fields coming from the radio. Then came, *'Roll out the barrel. We'll have a barrel of fun.'* He pushed open the heavy metal door and growled out an order. "Turn that English shit off."

Stein almost fell in his haste to get to the radio.

Kupper's eyes were sharp, scanning the faces of his men. He saw Stein's fear, Baum's frustration, and his own exhaustion reflected back at him.

"Mannschaften Stein, report!" Kupper barked.

"S-sir, I have t-to report no i-incidents," Stein spluttered.

Baum stood in his stocking feet, snapping his heels together in mock salute. He said, "S-sir, I have to report c-coffee's ready."

Kupper had to restrain his desire to laugh. He knew Stein was eager to please but terrified of his own shadow. Not necessarily a good combination of qualities in a soldier, especially in

action. Thankfully, he had not been called to fight yet. But that time was coming, he could feel it in his bones as inevitable as the damp morning air.

“Leave him alone, Baum,” he said. “You were a raw recruit once.”

“Never that raw,” Baum said. “Is it still raining outside?”

Kupper went to the metal pot and poured himself a mug of coffee, black and hot. He said, “It’s always raining. What do you expect this close to the Channel? It is always cold and wet in England. Like the people. I only asked for this posting so I could get away from the sun. I had a gutful of it in Italy.”

“You requested this posting?” Baum asked. “If I had a choice I’d be on the Russian front. I’ll never get an Iron Cross in this shit hole.”

“You’d w-willingly g-go to the Russian f-front?” Stein asked, incredulously.

“In a heartbeat,” Baum said.

Kupper shook his head. “Our brave soldier doesn’t know what he’s talking about. The Russian front is no place for any German soldier.”

Baum reached for his rifle and snapped open the breach. He said, “I’ve not fired this for weeks. Damn things going rusty.”

“Your rifle looks as new as the day it was made with the amount of time you spend cleaning it,” Kupper said. “And I could use those boots like a mirror to shave with.”

“Better than sitting here counting seagulls,” Baum complained.

“Be careful what you wish for, Baum,” Kupper warned. “The invasion will come soon enough and you’ll be up to your balls in enemy soldiers. You’ll get your fill of killing and the chance to earn that medal you so desire. Assuming you live long enough.”

The mention of invasion seemed to make Stein jittery. "D-do you think they w-will come, s-sir?" he asked

"I have no doubt they will come," Kupper said. "But not in this weather, and not here."

Baum laughed. "They might get their feet wet."

In the distance they could hear the dull throb of bombs resounding across the waterfront. Kupper tapped his watch and said, "Right on time. Predictable bastards, you can set your watch by them."

"Sounds l-like they're h-hitting C-caen again," Stein said. "You th-think that's where they'll l-land?"

Baum toyed with a shell he had extracted from his rifle. "Doesn't matter where they land," he said. "We'll kick them back across the channel like we did at Dunkirk."

"You shouldn't underestimate them," Kupper said. "They won't make the same mistake twice."

Baum snorted. "Coming at all would be a mistake. Rommel has made sure they won't even get off the beaches." He lifted his rifle and fired it towards the bunker slits. The firing pin clicked impotently. He said, "It will be like the Americans say, shooting chickens in a box."

"Turkeys in a barrel," Kupper corrected. "Except these turkeys will be shooting back."

Stein shook his head in bewilderment. He said, "The Americans w-would be c-crazy to invade."

The sound of the bombing came closer.

Kupper peered through the slits. "Sounds like it's coming our way," he said.

"I've h-heard that w-when they come there will be m-millions of them," Stein said.

Baum leaned his rifle against the table and said, "Let's hope we've got enough bullets then."

A bomb exploded close to the bunker sending Stein to his knees. His thoughts raced. In that moment he imagined his mother, her hands worn from work, her eyes bright with worry. He wondered if she was thinking of him now, praying for his safety.

Baum jerked upright in his chair. The bullet in his hand skipped off his palm and danced across the tabletop.

Kupper laughed. "Russian front, Baum? That was one bomb. When they come there will be thousands, all aimed right at us."