

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 10

June 3, 1944 – Morning. Côte d'Or, Normandy, France.

Hauptmann Conrad Mundt

The morning air lay cold and still across the dunes, the kind of damp, bone-deep chill Mundt had come to associate with the Channel coast. Each step through the soft, waterlogged sand sent a small shock up his injured leg. His limp was more pronounced this morning, an ache spreading up into his groin. He could hear the sea surging up the beach but could not see it for the dense mist drifting in. Beside him, his second in command, Feldwebel Hans Kupper trudged silently, boots sinking with muffled squelches.

Mundt kept his gaze fixed on the large operations map held open between his hands; a carefully inked topography of killing fields, defence lines, gun emplacements, and probable invasion vectors. His own thin red annotations threaded across the coastline like veins.

“How are the defences distributed?” Mundt asked.

Kupper lifted a gloved hand and traced a broad arc along the mist-choked horizon. “The beach is divided into fourteen primary defensive sectors. Eight bunkers with heavy machine guns. Several field artillery positions. Thirty-five pillboxes. Six mortar pits. Around eighty-five machine-gun nests.” He pointed seawards. “And thousands of hedgehogs, from the shallows to the high-tide mark.”

Mundt studied the ugly metal crosses protruding out of the sand. He nodded his approval and said, “Very good. Land mines?”

“Let’s just say I won’t be doing any sunbathing,” Kupper said, with a grin.

Mundt didn't return the smile. His eyes swept the coastline, a brutal necklace of fortifications. The Atlantic Wall. Hitler's fortress Europe. He doubted even the bravest invading army could cross its threshold.

"What is your command area, Hauptmann?" Kupper asked.

"I'm covering widerstandsnester 60, 61, 63, 64, and 65." Mundt said.

"It's all wasted, of course," Kupper said. "They won't land here. Most of the intelligence suggests Calais."

"The first thing I learned in Africa, Feldwebel, is never underestimate your adversary," Mundt said. "Rommel learned that lesson in the desert."

"You served with him in Africa," Kupper's voice softened with reverence.

Mundt smiled as the memories flooded back. He could still see Rommel in the desert heat, a commander whose presence demanded the respect of his men and the fear of his enemy. "A great man. I had the honour of meeting him twice. A great tactician. The kind of man soldiers follow willingly."

"And you were in Russia recently?" There was a hint of awe in the Feldwebel's voice.

Mundt had seen that look in the eyes of so many soldiers. He didn't want to encourage any hero worship. He never considered himself as such.

"Fifty degrees in Africa to minus thirty in Russia. From one extreme to another. I was at more risk of sunstroke or frost bite," Mundt said, trying to make light of it.

"Our Gefreiter would trade his teeth to go to Russia," Kupper said. "He's bored with France and desperate to get his Iron Cross. The only action he saw was at Dunkirk and a little in France. He hasn't seen the kind of fighting you and I have."

Mundt shook his head. "The only thing he'll get in Russia is a cold, hard grave."

Kupper nodded solemnly. "I have heard the stories, Hauptmann. It's not a place I'd be eager to serve, but Kurt is young and patriotic with a head filled with images of glory."

"Naive and stupid," Mundt said. "As I once was. Before I realised that glory is a lie told to recruits so they'll stand in front of the guns. There is no glory in war. That was the hard lesson Russia taught me."

"We were all naïve and stupid at the beginning, Hauptmann." Kupper said, soberly.

Mundt folded up the map and handed it back to the Feldwebel. "I'd better introduce myself to the men."

"We'll start with one of my bunkers," Kupper said. The two men started walking towards the nearest structure. "Where are you staying?"

"I have a room in Saint-Laurent-sur-Mer, about half a mile away," Mundt said.

"A room!" Kupper sounded impressed. "The perks of command."

"And this, of course, is a sort of currency," Mundt said, touching his medal. "It's about all it's good for."

The Feldwebel laughed not knowing if Mundt was joking or being serious. "I'm in the barracks with the rest of the men," he said. "They fart and snore all night."

Mundt smiled wistfully. "You know, I'd give anything to be sleeping on a mat under a halftrack again, like I did in the desert, with the stars above me."

They reached the bunker and Kupper rapped on the iron door. A metal bolt scraped back, and the heavy barrier squealed as it opened. A young, tall and gangly Mannschaften saw Mundt

and immediately snapped to attention like he'd seen Medusa and had been instantly turned to stone.

"S-s-sir," the soldier stammered, saluting.

"Your name?" Mundt demanded.

"M-mannschaften Albert S-stein, s-sir."

"Why did you not challenge me?" Mundt barked. "I could have been anybody and you'd now be a prisoner or dead."

"S-s-sorry, sir," Stein said. "It's just, w-we were expecting you, s-sir."

"That is no excuse," Mundt said. He delivered the reprimand sharply. He knew he was being overly harsh but he needed them to snap out of their —what did the French call it— *laissez faire* attitude.

"In future, Stein, you will challenge everyone who knocks on this door. Do you understand?" Mundt said.

"Yes, s-sir." The youth stiffened even more if that was even possible.

"At ease, Mannschaften," Mundt said. He stepped past the soldier into the bunker's cramped interior. The air smelled of sand, gun oil, sweat and coffee.

Standing at a single table was another soldier who snapped to attention like he was a cadet fresh out of basic training.

"Gefreiter Kurt Baum, Hauptmann," The soldier introduced himself. "I would just like to say it is a pleasure to finally meet you, sir."

Mundt granted him a brief nod. "At ease, Gefreiter."

Baum's eyes drifted instantly to the Iron Cross pinned to Mundt's tunic, the metal shining faintly in the dim light. An innocent hunger burned in the young man's eyes.

Kupper must have noticed and said, "Get the man some coffee, Kurt."

The barked order broke the soldier's trance, and he quickly went to the pot and poured out the dark liquid, offering it to Mundt like he was offering a cup of nectar to a god.

"Is t-there any n-news of the i-invasion, s-sir?" Stein asked.

"We've known for months they are preparing," Mundt said. "We know there will be many thousands that will come but we don't know where and we don't know when." He took a sip of the hot, bitter liquid.

"The expectation is that they will cross at the Pas de Calais," Baum said.

"We have all our best units there," Mundt said, noticing the tinge of disappointment in the Gefreiter's eyes. "However, we need to be ready for wherever they decide to cross because, if they succeed, be sure you'll get your fill of fighting. This will be the largest and hardest battle of the war so far."

"We will stop them, sir," Baum said, confidently, happy to be offered even the slightest chance of combat.

"I hope we do," Mundt said. "For Germany's sake."