

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 5

May 31, 1944 – Evening. Stuttgart, Germany.

Hauptmann Conrad Mundt

So, it was to be Normandy.

Conrad Mundt walked to the small window which overlooked the square grassy courtyard of the barracks. Night was closing in as the last strip of sun slid beneath the corrugated rooftops of the lower blocks, where the men were quartered. He was fortunate—an officer's privilege—to have a room to himself on the second floor of the main building, unlike the lower ranks having to squash into the overcrowded dormitories full of the pungent odours of confined living. Once, he had craved that closeness, the rough brotherhood of it. Now he preferred the solitude of his own company.

Mundt had passed through many shattered cities in Europe, places that the German army had cowed into submission, but seeing the devastation in the centre of Stuttgart shook him. Here the bomb-splintered façades were not foreign trophies, they were the bones of his own childhood. Streets he could have walked blind now opened like wounds, blackened and raw.

He had been guilty of arrogance, the conceit of the victor. Somewhere the war had turned, quietly at first, like a tide changing under a ship. It had begun with the many defeats of the Russian campaign, the landings in Italy and the whisper of an Allied invasion.

His thigh began to throb, a persistent drumbeat under the skin. It had been three months since he received the injury, but it had been slow in healing, and seem to bother him more in damp weather. He stretched out his leg and massaged the muscle above his knee, where a bullet

from a Russian sniper had carved out a sizeable chunk of his flesh. Luck, if that was the word, had lessened the severity of the wound. The high-powered round had spent some of its fury passing through the face of the soldier beside him. He could still see that moment sometimes, in quick flashes; the dull thud of impact, the shock and pain, the spray of blood and bone.

He picked up the crisp white pages containing his new orders from the bedside table and read them again. It said the same as it had before. He was to take over command of a section of the beach defenses on the French coast, and he was to be promoted to Hauptmann. He wanted to make sure he had missed nothing in the bold official script. He refolded the sheets with exaggerated care and let them fall back onto the table.

He wasn't sure if he was relieved or not. Some of his fellow soldiers were heading back to the Russian front, and while that posting held fear for most, the prospect of facing the full force of the Allied invasion in France was equally daunting. But having recently returned from Russia, he was not eager to revisit that dark bloody conflict.

A knock on the door interrupted his thoughts. He turned away from the window and said, "Enter."

Oberst Dieter Kriek strolled into the room. Mundt snapped to attention on instinct, boots clicking, spine rigid. Kriek lifted a hand, an indulgent gesture that dismissed the formality.

"Relax, Conrad. I hope I'm not disturbing you."

Kriek was Mundt's commanding officer, for the next forty eight hours at least, until his new posting became official. The Oberst looked carved from parade-ground perfection; tailored tunic, crisp shirt collar, boots polished to a depth that caught the room's thin light. Rumour said those boots had travelled farther through brothels than through mud, and Mundt could believe it. Kriek

carried himself with the ease of a man accustomed to deference, as though the war were a stage and he had been cast to play the part of authority.

The Oberst removed his hat and walked over to the small window that Mundt had just vacated.

“A private room,” Kriek observed. “Luxury, these days.”

“It is comfortable, sir,” Mundt said.

“The privileges of a Hauptmann,” Kriek said. “Congratulations by the way. Well earned, I am sure, as is your Iron Cross.”

Mundt relaxed slightly. “Thank you, sir.”

He was still adjusting to being addressed by the new rank. His new uniform felt stiff, like a corset, not in the cut or the cloth but in what it represented. Duty carried its own kind of weight, but this burden felt heavier.

He found himself, longing for the days when he had been a simple soldier with no decisions to make beyond keeping himself alive.

“How is the leg?” Kriek asked, not turning from the window.

“It is healed, sir,” Mundt said, after a beat. “It aches in the damp air sometimes but the limp has almost gone.”

“Good, good.” The Oberst noticed the folded pages on the table surface. “I see you've received your new posting. Where are you headed?”

“Normandy, Oberst.”

Kriek nodded slowly. “And I have been given the pleasure of serving our Führer in Russia. Following in your brave footsteps, Hauptmann.”

For a moment Mundt said nothing. Kriek was a difficult man to read. He came from old military stock, and yet Mundt had never sensed devotion in him so much as theatre and performance.

“I’m sure you will serve with distinction,” Mundt said, and heard how hollow it sounded even as it left his lips.

Kriek’s smile was nothing more than a formal stretching of the lips and held no warmth or pleasure.

“I’m sure I will,” the Oberst said. He turned and fixed Mundt with an unwavering stare. “Given a choice, would you not prefer to return to the Russian front with your comrades?”

Mundt had been career military. He had joined up in 1936 aged nineteen with a head full of tales of heroism and glory and now, aged twenty seven, he had fought in several theatres throughout Europe. Russia had been the most recent. But the Eastern Front had become the bogeyman. The place threatened in jest and meant in earnest.

Watch your step or you’ll be sent to the Russian front.

There was little glory waiting there. Only death. He swallowed hard as the unwelcome image of the bodies of comrades came to him; unceremoniously layered in the pits like felled timber, the ground frozen so hard the spades chimed against it.

“I go where my Führer orders,” he replied, finally, straightening his back and lifting his chin to emphasise the words.

Kriek offered a little, trite applause. “Well said, Hauptmann. Worthy of a recipient of the Iron Cross.”

Mundt unconsciously fingered the medal pinned to the left side of his uniform. The metal was cool, indifferent, and always felt more like a betrayal than a reward.

“You won the medal in Russia, I understand,” Kriek said.

“The Crimea,” Mundt said.

“And before that you fought in Africa?”

“I was at Tobruk when we captured the port. A glorious victory.” The words came out the way they were meant to, polished and rehearsed.

“And now you are to be reunited with your old commander, Rommel,” Kriek said.

“I will be stationed at Vierville sur Mer, in charge of a series of bunkers above the beaches.”

Part of him wanted to believe the Atlantic might cleanse the grime and blood of Russia.

“A little distance from where the action will be when they come,” Kriek said.

“You think they will come?” Mundt asked.

“Certainly, they will come, and soon,” Kriek said. “It is the next natural step in this conflict.”

“With Rommel in charge of the Atlantic defenses, they will fail,” Mundt said. The conviction came out too quickly, too loudly—faith as habit.

“Rommel dines on past glories, I think,” Kriek said. “The British eventually retook Tobruk.”

Mundt dipped his head slightly and said, “I had been reposted by then.”

Kriek slapped Mundt on his back and said, “Had you only been there, Hauptmann, we may have prevailed.”

Mundt remained silent. He could not tell whether Kriek was mocking him or congratulating him, and he disliked how little the difference mattered.

“I believe you are a child of Stuttgart,” Kriek asked. “Is it good to be home?”

“I was born here, sir,” Mundt said. “My parents have a farm a few miles outside the city.”

“Are they well?” Kriek asked.

“They are, thank you, sir,” Mundt said. “I also have a sister and brother. She is working at the Reichstag in Berlin and my brother is serving in the navy.”

“So, in a way, the fatherland is a family business like my own,” Kriek said. “We Krieks are from Salzberg just over the border in Austria. We own a castle there, you know.”

“I’ve heard it’s beautiful,” Mundt said. He imagined thick walls, soaring towers and cellars full of wine.

“A little more lavish than my quarters here,” Kriek said, laughing. “Before you head on out to your new posting, I have a small job for you today.”

“Of course, sir.”

The Oberst pulled out a sheet of paper with a column of printed names.

“I have the names of several individuals here in Stuttgart that are considered enemies of the Reich,” he said, handing the paper to the Hauptmann. “We need to apprehend them for interrogation and eventual transportation to the camps. I have sent a detachment of soldiers to find them. On the list is the last known location for each individual. You are familiar with the city so I want you to supervise their capture and transportation. My staff car and driver are at your disposal in the courtyard.”

Mundt quickly scanned the names on the list. “These are families, sir.”

“Jewish families,” Kriek replied, as if that was reason enough.

“We are soldiers, Oberst,” Mundt said. “Surely we would be better employed fighting our enemies instead of women and children.” He was struggling to hide the disapproval in his voice.

Kriek smiled coldly and said, "My superior hands the list to me and I hand it to you, Hauptmann. Soldiers fight but they also obey orders. And did you not just say that you go where the Führer directs. Who do you imagine sent out this command to round up the Jews? Are you now questioning the edicts of your Führer?"

Mundt stiffened and stared straight ahead. "Of course not, Oberst. I just thought..."

"Yes, Conrad, we all just thought." Kriek left the rest unsaid. "But as good little soldiers we do as we are bid."

"Yes, sir."

Kriek smiled and offered his arm in the customary salute. "Heil Hitler!"

Mundt reciprocated fervently. It was only after the Oberst had left that he realised Kriek had offered a limp salute that spoke of contempt and cynicism.