June 6th 1944  
Normandy, France

It was night, and clouds of smoke from all the explosions blanketed the stars. Jumping out of a perfectly good airplane had to be one of the dumbest ideas I’ve ever had. Upon landing, I yanked off my parachute and quickly patted my gear, making sure I hadn’t lost anything. As I started to pull my M1 Garand off my shoulder I heard a rustling behind me. The grass in the field was so tall you couldn’t see a damn thing until they were right on top of you.

I spun around with my weapon pressed into my shoulder, and recognized the uniform before I could make out the face in the darkness.

“Harris, is that you?” A familiar voice whispered harshly.
I lowered my weapon. “Yeah, where is everyone?”
The man came up next to me, crouched low. It was Private Ray Stewart from the same regiment, the 501st.
“I have no clue. I don’t think we even landed in the right place.”
Ray started to pull out his map when I stopped him.
“Not here. We need to find better cover than this. There’s a patch of trees over there.” I said pointing to our left. Ray nodded, and keeping as low as we could, we ran for the cover of the forest. The sound of bullets popping off never slowed down and ran my nerves raw. There was no telling where they were coming from except the occasional flash of light from their weapons. When we saw that, we instantly went the other way, not wanting any unwanted confrontation with the Germans since there was just the two of us.

We ducked into the safety of the brush when we noticed another soldier. He was hanging suspended by his parachute harness in the branches of a tree. As we neared, I didn’t recognize his face; he wasn’t from our regiment. Not wanting to call out to him in case someone was around to hear, I came up next to him and could just reach his combat boots. He wasn’t moving so I slung my weapon over my shoulder and
reached up, wiggling his leg to see if he would respond. He didn’t so much as twitch. My hand felt wet so I pulled it away to look at what I touched and was greeted with dark red blood.

“Is he dead?” Ray whispered hesitantly behind me.

I swallowed and nodded, keeping my hand suspended in front of me. I’d never seen so much blood in person before, and I’d never touched a dead guy. I felt my heart speeding up as I forced down my nausea.

“We should go.” Ray’s voice interrupted my thoughts.

Taking a breath I looked around and decided to wipe my hand on the bark of a nearby tree. After getting as much off as I could, I wiped any remnants on my pants and took up my weapon.

We trudged slowly through the shrubbery to making as little sound as we could. The occasional explosion from overhead as a plane went down and lit up the sky, giving us a glimpse of our surroundings. Every time, we would crouch down, alarmed as well as making sure we weren’t spotted by the enemy. Ray led the way; I was never very good at navigation.

We heard footsteps coming from somewhere in front of us. I grabbed Ray’s shoulder to stop him and we both knelt down, making the shadowed outline of our bodies as little as possible. I pulled out my brass Cricket and clicked it, my ears working extra hard to catch any sound in return. The footsteps stopped and I strained my eyes into the dark. I clicked the Cricket again. Just as my sound cut off there was an explosion overhead, lighting up the area.

My eyes instantly connected with a pair of blue eyes. I registered surprise on his face, probably mirroring my own. Just as fast as the light had shown, we were instantly cast into darkness again.

I quickly jumped behind a tree just as I heard the enemy fire his weapon. Bullets whizzed past my body and my eyes scrunched closed. I lifted my weapon to my shoulder, quickly came from behind the tree, squeezed off a few bullets into the darkness, and then hid again. I had no idea where Ray had gone. More bullets passed and thumped into the trunk informing me I hadn’t hit my target.

I spun around, fired into the darkness, and heard the German soldier let out a cry before crumpling to the ground. I stood with my back pressed up against the trunk for a few seconds. My heart pounded in my ears as I listened for any more movement. When I felt comfortable that the coast was clear, I narrowed my eyes to look into
the night.

“Ray?” I called into the dark quietly. “Ray, you there?”

I heard Ray groan and I came to my knees at his side. He sat on the ground clutching at his thigh.

“I already got shot! Can you believe it? It hasn’t even been 24 hours!” I saw blood trying to escape between Ray’s fingers as he held his wound.

We patched him up as well as we could with what we had. We both knew he needed a medic as soon as possible. Ray’s arm was slung around my neck as I helped him hobble along while keeping a good grip on my weapon in case we came up against some more Germans.

As soon as we saw daylight, Ray asked for a rest. I set him down gently so he could lean against a tree. Ray pulled out his canteen and took a swig of water, closing his bloodshot eyes and resting his head against the tree.

“What have we gotten ourselves into?” Ray said as I took a drink of my own canteen.

“You know what Colonel Johnson always says, ‘To command a parachute unit, you don’t have to be nuts, but it helps!’”

We both chuckled at the familiar memory.

“What does that say about us who are under his command?” Ray said smirking.

“It means we’re even nuttier.”

“Got that right.” Ray said and we laughed again.

My ears picked up on the soft sound of a Cricket and I quickly yanked mine out. I clicked it twice, looking around us wildly.

I heard some movement to our right as three guys from a different regiment came into view.

“Boy, are we glad to see you!” One of the guys said, taking his helmet off and roughly rubbing the top of his short cropped hair before replacing it.

We all introduced ourselves. The three new guys were from 506th.

“Are you injured, Private?” Sergeant Howard, who spoke before, asked looking at Ray.

“Yes Sergeant.” Ray replied but quickly added, “I’ll be fine though. Still fit for duty.”

Sergeant Howard scanned Ray one more time but didn’t reply. He turned to me.

“Private Harris, is it? We should check the perimeter. We can
take Bobby here.” He pointed to the man next to him who nodded. Sergeant Howard turned to his other team member. “You stay with Private Stewart. We’ll be back soon.”

Given our orders I shouldered my M1 Garand and followed after the Sergeant.

“We’ll just do a quick perimeter sweep. I wanted to give your friend some time to rest. This way he won’t feel the rush to get going again.”

I nodded, feeling grateful that we ran into the 506th. I was beginning to doubt anyone else made it.

“Where do you think everyone else is?” I asked as we slowly walked along.

Sergeant Howard’s eyes scanned the area as he answered, holding his weapon loosely in front of him. “There is a rendezvous point just outside the city of Carentan. That’s where everyone should be making their way.”

“How far away are we do you think?”

Sergeant Howard frowned as he thought about it. “I would say we’re about 17 klicks south from camp.”

I smiled. “Good, that’s not as far as I thought.”

“Yeah, but how fast we get there all depends on how fast your friend can move.” Private Bobby Clark said. I detected a slight tone of venom in his words. His attitude about Ray being injured made my blood boil but I kept my mouth shut.

We doubled back when we thought Ray would be ready to move again. I jumped when I heard someone fire in the same direction as Ray. Before Sergeant Howard could stop me, I burst into a sprint. Branches tugged and ripped on my uniform as I broke past some trees; just a few yards away stood five German soldiers. My eyes were drawn to the two crumpled figures on the ground. One of the enemy soldiers was pointing to his Luger then shot Ray’s body again as if demonstrating something.

My hands started to shake and without thinking I lifted my weapon to my shoulder, looked down the sight and started to fire. A man fell down as my bullet pierced his chest. The others looked up wildly and scattered while the man with the Luger started to fire back at me. I heard quick footsteps behind me as Howard and Clark flanked me. Bullets blew past me and I ducked for cover. I looked around the trunk, my eyes trained on the man holding the Luger. He hid behind a
tree as well. I fired relentlessly. Shooting anything that moved.

I pushed off of the tree and dashed for the tree shielding my enemy. I came around the corner and his head whipped up to look at me, his mouth hanging open in surprise. Before he could lift his pistol I shot him in the head. Then I did it again to make sure he was dead. Then again. And again.

“Private!”

I saw movement from the corner of my eye. I zeroed in on one of the Germans scrambling up from the ground. He must have pretended to be shot because I didn’t notice a wound on him.

I ran to the enemy and kicked him back down with my boot. I leveled my weapon to his head. Just as I was about to pull the trigger someone grabbed at my weapon and shoved it away. I growled and turned on whoever pushed me.

“That’s enough Private.”

I blinked; my breath came out in heavy puffs. Sergeant Howard watched me, his eyes careful and calculating. I looked to Clark who held his M1 Garand tightly, ready to pull it up and use it on me if need be.

I sucked in a ragged breath and took a step back, showing I was in control of myself once again.

Howard relaxed and looked down at the German cowering at our feet.

“We need to bring him with us to camp as a prisoner. They will want to talk to him.” Sergeant Howard said as he knelt down and dug through his pack. He pulled out a string of rope. As he came behind the German to tie his hands behind his back, I pointed my weapon at him again.

“Try something and I’ll kill you. Damn Nazis.” I cursed under my breath. I almost wanted him to try to get away so I could pop off a bullet in his skull. He sensed this and kept his eyes on me having the brains to not struggle.

“Up.” Private Clark motioned with tilting his weapon at the German soldier for him to stand. He looked up at me and slowly got to his knees and stood up. I glared at him but didn’t say anything.

“Let’s go boys.” Sergeant Howard said.

“Wait one second.” I said running to Ray’s body. I flipped him over and pulled the dog tags off of his neck. I stood there and looked at the metal in my hands before stuffing them in one of my pockets. I
found the German with the Luger and picked it up. As I holstered it, I looked up for any objections, but nobody seemed to care.

“Move.” Clark ordered, stabbing the prisoner in the back with his rifle and shoving him forward.

As soon as the sun was all the way up we stopped to take a short break. I did the best I could to pretend the soldier wasn’t in our presence.

“Where are you from Private?” Sergeant Howard asked as he messed with a fallen branch.

“Chicago Sergeant.” I replied as I rubbed my sleeve on the Luger, attempting to shine it.

“You must be a Cubs fan then, huh?” I smiled. “Sure am Sergeant.” I tilted the Luger so that the sun could reflect off of the surface. “What about you, Sergeant? Cubs fan?” He laughed and threw the stick into the woods. “No, I’m more of a Yankees man myself.” I nodded. It was great being able to talk about baseball. It was so normal. It teleported me from this hell hole I was in to back in the stadium. Cheers from fans vibrating the stands, hearing the crack of the bat hitting dead center of the ball, sending it sailing into the horizon.

“Cincinnati.” I nearly dropped my weapon. I looked up at the prisoner whose eyes were focused off in the distance.

“What did you say?” Clark demanded, hovering over the German.


“What could you possibly know about Cincinnati?” I shot back angrily.

His eyes slid to mine. They were blue, just like Ray’s. “I’m from Cincinnati. I lived there since I was a kid.”

This jolted me where I literally flinched. Hearing an American accent coming from someone in a German uniform didn’t fit together in my brain.

“What are you doing fighting for the Germans?” Sergeant Howard asked incredulously.

“I was born in Germany and most of my family lives there. All the citizens of Germany were ordered back to fight for the homeland. So, here I am.”
“I just don’t understand why you would fight for them. They’re monsters,” I said shaking my head trying to get it all straight.

The prisoner looked at me silently before saying, “I saw the way you killed the others. You’re as much of a monster as you say they were.”

Clark smacked the butt of his weapon into the prisoner’s side. He let out a grunt.

“Talk that way again, I don’t care if you lived in the US. You’re still wearing a German uniform, I will kill you,” Clark threatened.

But the damage was done. My brain had become infected by the image of me being equal to my enemy.

I always had this image of the enemy in my head. All Germans were heartless monsters who were killing my friends and innocent people for their own cause. What if I appeared the same way to them? What if there was other Germans like this guy? Was the enemy really who I thought they were?

June 10th 1944

Camp was just two miles from the city of Carentan. I sat on some crumbling cement steps as I cleaned my Luger.

“What I would give to have one of those,” Private Williams, from my same regiment, said in awe as he chewed on a bread roll.

I didn’t reply. He leaned back in thought. “I guess it’s not about what I need to give though,” he said finally. “It’s more about what I need to take, am I right?”

He smiled proud of his comment as if he told a really funny joke. I rubbed at my nose with my sleeve and began to shine the weapon some more. William shoved me playfully in the shoulder.

“Lighten up, Harris. Christ.”

“501st! On me!” We heard Captain Miller shout over the camp.

Colonel Howard R. Johnson stood right behind Captain Miller on some stairs so he could see over the sea of faces that was the 501st.

“The mission is to surround and seize Carentan. We will be coming in through the North while 506th will go through east, 502nd will take south and the 327th will take west.” He pointed to a map set up next to him and motioned in the directions of all the regiments. He turned to us and clasped his hands behind his back. “This is going to be a very important mission for the Allies. This is going to prove that we are a force to be feared. After this battle, all the Germans will know that
the 501st are deadly sons of bitches, and we are here to stay.”

The men around me all cheered and hooted in excitement.

Colonel Johnson nodded at us as his eyes took in each face. “Best of luck men. God be with you.”

As we dispersed I heard someone shout my name. I turned as Sergeant Howard came up to me.

“I just wanted to wish you luck, Private. If you are as ruthless in this battle as you were with the Germans I saw you fight the other day, we will win for sure.” He clapped me on the back before hurrying off.

We sat lined up in a ditch just outside the walls of Carentan. Everyone was dead silent. I looked at the men around me, their eyes huge but determined.

“Go!” I heard people start whispering harshly.

We all jumped into motion. Hurrying through the gates of Carentan, trying to crouched down low. It didn’t take long for the Germans to see us coming. Bullets rained down. A man to my right fell to the ground. I rushed behind a building with a handful of my platoon. I didn’t see a single German soldier in the streets as we entered. They must be in the buildings and shooting from the windows.

Everyone seemed to realize this at the same time as me. My platoon leader did a few hand motions to the rest of us telling us to break down the door to the building we were up against. The soldier in front of me turned to the door and kicked it in. I rushed in after him. I saw him fire his weapon in what looked like a living room. He turned the corner then crumpled to the floor as I heard a bullet pop off.

I spun around and pressed against the wall. I slowly looked around the corner before jumping out from behind it.

I found myself face to face with the enemy. We both had our weapons leveled at each other.

My finger rested on the trigger and I hesitated.