



Chapter 4

Rani drove them across the city towards Wolf's house. This time Smith sat in the back with Walther as the latter gave him a crash course on the current state of Germany. After a few minutes he stopped, because Smith was not listening. They had passed through the Old Town, and were driving past block after block of ruins. Smith had taken vertical photographs of most of the bombed cities of Germany, including this part of Hamburg, but no picture from above could reveal the enormity of what had happened here. The five-storey facades of the workers' apartment blocks were intact. There was almost no evidence of blast damage, but behind the window frames there was nothing. It was as though Moloch himself had torn off the roofs and with white-hot hurricane breath had sucked all the life, and all evidence of its existence, out of the buildings. The windows gaped in astonishment at the magnitude of their loss.

Smith felt the German's gaze upon him, but could not suppress the colour that rose in his cheeks. Walther's voice was matter of fact, conversational. 'This is the area swept by your firestorm on the night of July 27th, two years ago. It is a date hard to forget. Our propaganda said a hundred thousand civilian dead. The city authorities later estimated forty thousand, but no-one will ever know for sure. Dresden is worse.' Smith could only stare stonily ahead. 'You started it', he muttered. 'Ah yes, so we did. And that makes it alright, of course.'

The car drew up before a neat suburban house. It was not long after noon, but Wolf had uncorked a bottle of schnapps sometime earlier, if the glaze in his eyes was any indication. Smith bathed and shaved, and by the time he rejoined the others Rani had not only brushed up his uniform but was sewing on a cuffband with the initials RFSS. '*Reichsfuehrer's* personal staff,' Walther explained. 'Think of it as repellent. It deters questions.'

Wolf was not happy at being left alone with Smith. They ate bread and sausage in silence. When Wolf placed a pot of coffee on the table, Smith looked at him. 'I don't like the ersatz much. You wouldn't have anything stronger, would you?'

Wolf brightened visibly and produced the bottle, which was half empty. One stiff drink was enough to relax him.

'Do you believe?', he asked.

'In the stars? I believe that there are things beyond our understanding.'



'Yes, yes, beyond the understanding of most men. And perhaps not to be spoken of by the few who do understand.' Wolf poured himself another glass. 'It is art as well as science, and I was a great artist. Now the charts no longer speak to me. I am a mechanic, nothing more.'

'What happened?'

'Pride. I became arrogant in my understanding of the *Reichsfuehrer's* destiny. My predictions became ever more confident. I turned my back on the Great Truth.'

'Which is?'

'That astrologers too have destinies. Mine is continually to over-reach myself. I can see now that my failure was inevitable. The *Reichsfuehrer* was offered an army command. I assured him that he would become famous among generals.' He sighed. 'His subsequent command of Army Group Vistula is spoken of as the most incompetent of the war.'

'So you were right.'

'And what good was that? I could hardly then say to him that what I meant was that he would become famous for incompetence!'

Wolf sank into gloomy silence. Smith decided to push his luck. 'And Fraulein Kalo now reads his charts?'

'Yes, an ignorant gypsy'. Wolf's bitterness was deep. 'She can only draw up the simplest of charts, but her intuition is powerful. She has never met Herr Himmler, but she understands him better than me, better than anyone.'

Smith allowed himself a nagging question that discretion would not have permitted. 'Is she Walther's mistress?'

'He might sleep with her occasionally, if that is what you mean, but that is his way of protecting an asset.'

'I don't understand.'

Wolf was no longer interested in a conversation that had turned to such idle gossip. 'Kaltenbrunner and his other enemies in the SS know how much he depends on her to manage Himmler. The personal relationship is his warning to them that they will not be able to remove her without a fight, *untermensch* or not.'

Smith digested this information. Kaltenbrunner was Walther's nominal superior, but clearly there was a contest between the two for Himmler's ear. He began to suspect that Walther's protection would be worth very little once he and Rani were out of his presence. The car returned in mid-afternoon. Walther announced that he and Wolf would be driving to



Hohenlychen to stiffen Himmler's resolve and renew the Swedish initiative. Himmler had taken refuge in the sanitorium there after the Vistula debacle. Smith and Rani would go with them as far as Rechlin, in Pomerania, where arrangements had been made for them to fly to Berlin. The kit that Walther had brought for Smith included a belt and holster. Walther saw Smith's glance. 'Don't get excited, it's empty, but you'd be undressed without it'.

In normal times the journey would have been accomplished in two or three hours. At first the Mercedes ate the kilometres. The military traffic was not heavy and the road was undamaged, but soon they began to come across refugees heading west. Isolated groups became a steady trickle, and by the time they had gone a hundred kilometres progress was a matter of leaning on the horn to part the mass ahead. 'Like migrating birds', said Walther, 'heralding the onset of a dark time for Germany. They anticipate a Russian breakthrough on the Oder front'. The car was slowed to walking pace for an hour, but in an instant the road ahead began to clear. The refugees were dividing before them like the Red Sea at the stroke of Moses' staff. Into the ditches on both sides they poured. 'Out of the car', bellowed Walther. It was not until he was into the open air that Smith heard the cause of the panic. From behind them a faint growl grew to a roar. A Typhoon fighter-bomber passed overhead at tree-top height, following the line of road. It deviated slightly as it reached the staff car, as if contemplating an attack, but after a momentary reduction in throttle roared on. Walther looked at Smith. 'He's loaded for bear', Smith said. 'He's not going to waste it on us if he can find some tanks or a nice, fat locomotive.'

'But if he can't he might come back', rejoined Walther. 'We'll get off the road until dark.'

Rani drove into the shelter of a small copse a few metres from the road. Walther took the opportunity to complete Smith's briefing. He took him through the innumerable pieces of paper spawned by the regime in its ever-tightening hold over the lives of its subjects. 'We have become a nation of bureaucrats', he said with some asperity, as he tried to remember the purpose of one particular card, 'Better even shopkeepers than that, eh? Anyhow, be careful. Your documentation is perfect, suspiciously so now that things are breaking down. Don't offer it all together.' With no sense of the incongruous, he then proceeded to give Smith instructions as though the Englishman were a member of his staff.



'Your orders are very explicit. You are to escort the fraulein to Dr. Goebbels, wait until their business is concluded, and then escort her back to me. I would not attempt any freelance activity if I were you. Security in Berlin is extreme. Any deviation from your written orders will be checked with me, and I will have no hesitation in denouncing you if I suspect that you are pursuing anyone's business but mine.'

The gathering dusk offered cover from air attack and they resumed their journey. The road became quieter as the refugees moved off it for the night, and fires began to mark their campsites. Their indistinct shadows, moving by the roadside, reminded Smith of inchoate figures from childish nightmares, always just beyond sight and just beyond comprehension. It was dark when they reached Rechlin and the Luftwaffe major in charge was in a bad mood. 'If you'd have been here when expected, I could have got you into Templehof', he said. 'Now it's under imminent threat of Russian air attack and the closest I can get you is Gatow. You take off at first light.'

Walther decided that Himmler could not be kept waiting. 'Look after her', he told Smith, 'she's valuable.' He gently ran a gloved finger down Rani's cheek, remembered himself, clicked his heels to her and drove off. The Luftwaffe major was not at all hospitable. 'There are bunks in the hanger office. Good night.' The hangar had taken bomb damage and there was no power, but Smith found a paraffin lamp and there was water from a tap. The gentle light was reflected from the tin cup as Rani drank and it played around the angles of her face. She removed her field cap and shook out her hair. The light was overwhelmed and retreated until her face was in darkness except for the tip of her nose, her chin and the brightness of her eyes.

There were things that Smith needed to know, and badly, but his first question was prompted by something more pressing than personal safety.

'You and Walther...'

'Yes?'

'Are you lovers?'

'Does it matter?'

'I don't know.'

'Then perhaps I should not answer until you do.' She raised her eyes to his. 'If I had taken comfort in his soft lies, as I did in yours, would you begrudge me that?'



Smith was covered in confusion. 'I have no right to...', he began. Rani took his face in both hands. 'But you do, kindly one. You wanted to know why I called you? I will tell you. We have a child.' Smith's expression was so ludicrous that Rani could not suppress a laugh. 'How? When?'

'In the usual way, nine months after we hid in the hay loft.' That had been only days before Smith escaped from Hamburg. 'Where is he...she...?'

'She. Sophie. Walther keeps her in the concentration camp at Neuengamme, a guarantee of my good behaviour. Don't be concerned, she is well looked after amongst the *prominenten*.'

'But you fear for her. Otherwise I would not be here.'

Rani paused. 'I do not fear for her *now*. In his own way Walther is an honourable man, or as honourable as his profession will allow. But he will soon lack any authority. Who knows what will happen in the camps at the end, and I will not be here.' There was no mistaking what she meant. 'Three years ago, on the day that Sophie was born - the same day that grandmother died - I had a dream. A white thing - a veil, a shroud - was being drawn over me. I could not see and I could not breathe. There was no one to help me. It overwhelmed me and everything went blank. It is my death.'

'And only last week I ran naked down the street chased by car that might have been a hearse', said Smith. 'Everyone dreams.'

'You do not understand. The dream comes again and again. At first it came once or twice a month, now it is almost every time I sleep. When it comes seven times in succession, I will die.'

Smith knew better than to argue. Rani was of the Sinte, and although two generations removed from the roads and the caravans she was still entirely Roma in culture and outlook. 'So I am here to save Sophie?'

'Yes'. She was suddenly very fierce. '*Beng* take you if you do not! You must swear.'

'I don't believe in the devil, Rani.'

'How can you not, when you look about you? But no matter. He believes in you. Swear you will look after her.'

Smith did as he was told.

A calm so serene came over the woman that Smith wondered if she had fallen into a trance, but she came to herself after a few minutes and held out her hands to him. Their lovemaking was nothing like Smith's embarrassed overture and Rani's amused response of four years earlier.



Smith felt that he was being drawn into a secret world, one beyond his comprehension. 'This is your place', Rani whispered, 'it is yours, and only yours. It belongs to the father of my child.'

They were roused out by a soldier with coffee at 4am. The Junkers tri-motor was in the air within minutes. It was in full passenger configuration but the seats were only sparsely filled. 'We'll be full coming out, you can bet,' the pilot grinned, 'every one of them with documentation saying the trip is essential war work.' He kept low and swung away to the west, giving the front a wide berth. He turned east near Potsdam and as the aircraft banked Smith saw a familiar landscape in the early light. The extensive park contained many grand palaces, but the grandest was the smallest. By some miracle, Sans Souci appeared to be intact. Smith felt a stab of grief for his father. How many afternoons had they sat on the terraces in the sunshine taking turns to read from Carlyle? 'Frederick the Second is an object lesson in what is wrong with the world', his father had said, 'The finery of civilization cloaking what one scholar described as moral insanity. The trouble is that when the finery survives, the world is inclined to overlook or, God help us, even admire the ambition and ruthlessness. I suppose that we should be grateful that he is remembered as the Great, not the Good. We can still differentiate between the two.'

Across the Wannsee, Gatow came into sight. There were some craters on the runway and a light aircraft had its nose in one of them, but the landing was straightforward. The pilot kept the Junkers' engines running as his passengers disembarked. In ten minutes the aircraft was filled from the patient line of people at the terminal and was off. Smith went to the commandant's office. The colonel was impressed by his papers and orders but could do nothing. 'The East-West Axis between the Victory Monument and the Brandenburg Tor has been cleared as an emergency landing strip for light aircraft, but there are none here, and if there were I have no pilots. They've all doing suicide flight training.'

'What about that Storch out on the runway. It doesn't look too badly damaged. I have a civilian licence. If I can get it going can I take that?' The colonel shrugged. 'Suit yourself. It's not going anywhere otherwise. I'll ask *Feldwebel* Grimm to give you a hand. Humour him, he's the only experienced mechanic I have left.' Grimm, there's a coincidence, thought Smith, but humouring non-commissioned officers? Germany *is* on the verge of collapse.



The *feldwebel* made it clear why he was out of humour. 'I was with the Condor Legion in Spain. Then Poland, France, North Africa, Italy. I've had two months' home leave in the last nine years. I have lost my wife and daughter in the bombing, and my son at the front. And you want me to help get you into Berlin so that you and your like can keep this madness going for a few days more?'

'That is defeatism, *feldwebel*', Smith reminded him, 'people are being shot for less'. He received a look that indicated plainly that the man was not impressed. He tried another tack. 'It is a pity to see a fine piece of machinery destroyed for want of a little work. You were in North Africa. You know how useful the Storch is'.

Grimm drew himself up. 'I had the honour to service *Feldmarschall* Rommel's personal observation machine. No serious mechanical failure in a thousand hours. He personally pinned me with this', tapping the ribbon on his chest.

Smith jumped through the opening. 'In memory of him, then, if not for me'.

Grimm found a truck with a little petrol in its tank and they pulled the Storch out of the crater. Remarkably, only the propeller was a write-off. Even the fragile, stilt-like undercarriage that gave the Stork its name was all but intact. 'There's a pile of cannibalized spares behind the hangars', Grimm said, 'I'll see what I can find'. He was soon back with a two-bladed propeller. 'Metal. Not exactly right, but it should do'. Smith contributed some muscle power but otherwise stood aside and admired, as the mechanically unskilled do, Grimm's brisk efficiency in changing and adjusting the propeller.

'Tell me about your son', said Smith.

'What is there to tell. Conscripted at eighteen, posted to Russia, two months later a telegram: "Regret to advise Grenadier A. Grimm killed in heroic defence of the Fatherland. Heil Hitler."

A. Grimm. How many could there be in the Wehrmacht? Half a dozen? Sixty? And Russia. How can something be a just a coincidence when the chances are one in a million? Smith's head buzzed. What did Rani say: 'We burn and are burnt in a world on fire. Why would nature not rebel?' 'Where does the family hail from?' said Smith, only half wondering why he was bothering to ask.

'A little village in the Alps that no one had heard of until a few years ago - Berchtesgarden.'



Smith could hear Rani telling him that his quest was over. Hitler would be making his last stand at Obersalzberg, within sight of Barbarossa's cave, where the Emperor sleeps until Germany needs him again. It was just the sort of overblown Wagnerism that would appeal to Hitler.

Grimm was speaking again. 'How happy we were then. Marta, Heidi and little Alois.'

'Little who?'

'Alois, my son.'

Smith suddenly felt very foolish.

'Very well. Now just pray that the bearings weren't damaged'. Grimm turned the engine over. It fired immediately and ran sweetly. Thank you, Rommel, thought Smith, and quickly fetched Rani. 'Keep the revs down and you should be alright', Grimm advised. He stood to attention and saluted as the aircraft moved away. It was the old military salute, forbidden since the 20 July plot. Smith returned the compliment. He had carefully watched Grimm's start-up drill, but it was hardly necessary. There was minimal instrumentation. The controls were no more complicated than those on an advanced trainer, and so beautifully laid out that a blind man could have felt his way around the cockpit.

The little plane was as good as its reputation; light and responsive to the controls, reassuring to the ear. Smith found himself enjoying the short flight. He had no need for altitude and little fuel, so he kept low. His navigation markers were the two huge flak towers near the Berlin zoo, antediluvian monsters that reared threateningly above the city skyline. Just to the north of them began the East-West Axis. The Storch was probably no more than two kilometres from the nearest of the towers, with the Brandenburg Tor in sight ahead, when light flak opened up. 'Are they shooting at us?', he shouted to Rani. She looked behind. 'No. There's another plane, coming towards us. Very fast.' Smith immediately pulled up the nose, dropped the flaps and throttled back. Airspeed plummeted. They had only been doing about 150 kph before, and now it seemed to Rani that the aircraft had stopped flying altogether and was somehow hanging in the sky. The impression had barely registered before it was replaced by another. The Storch was simultaneously struck by a violent slipstream and a thunderclap overhead. It was all Smith could do to avoid a stall, and by the time he could look ahead the other aircraft was already banking for another pass. It was a P-51 Mustang, in the livery of the USAAF. He immediately banked in the same direction and headed for the



protection of the flak tower. 'There's nothing harder to hit than a low, slow plane from a fast one', he reassured Rani. 'He'll need to keep speed up to avoid the flak, but this thing can hover in a 40 kilometre headwind.'

The Mustang pilot knew his stuff. On his second pass he throttled back as much as he dared under the attention of the 20mm cannon on the tower. He had a good line on the Storch but, with Rani calling the closing distance, Smith waited until he was committed to the attack and then threw a sudden quarter roll, putting the Storch's wings vertical. The port wing began clipping the tree tops. The Mustang fired but his aim had been disturbed. The cannon shells shredded the tip of the starboard wing, passing through the thin fabric of the Storch to dance down the street in a flurry of little explosions. The little plane lurched violently and only reluctantly levelled. The ailerons were hardly responding. 'I'll have to put her down', yelled Smith, and sideslipped onto the Axis, now beneath them. He turned the Storch towards the avenue of trees as soon as its wheels touched the pavement and within twenty metres it was at a halt under the canopy. The Mustang was turning to come again, the flak more insistent than ever. Smith grabbed Rani by the hand and ran further into the Tiergarten. The American flew very low along the Axis and past the Storch. As he passed Smith and Rani he dipped his wings, opened his throttle, and disappeared towards the west.

'How gallant', said Rani.

'Bloody fool', said Smith. 'If I get out of this he's on report. Risking himself and his plane for a silly gesture'.

Smith inspected the Storch. 'It's not flyable, but it's roadworthy'. He folded back the wings, started the engine, and in the fading light they taxied as far as the Victory Column, the start of the flare path. The Luftwaffe NCO in charge came up to them in bewilderment. He expected his traffic to be flying. 'I'm due', Smith told him, 'and I need light to get to the Tor.'

The *hauptgefreite* was dubious and telephoned for instructions. 'I have a Storch here, *Herr Leutnant*, should I light the path? He's on the list of arrivals.'

The reply was loud enough to have been heard without the telephone. 'If he's on the list of course you light the path, moron!'

The little line of red lights came on in sequence, winking its way east. 'Just like the pier at Brighton', Smith told Rani, as they trundled the last



two kilometres to the Brandenburg Tor. 'Let's hope that some of our bombers are about.'