



Chapter 5

Between the checkpoints the Wilhelmstrasse was in darkness and they picked their way around the kerbside piles of rubble with difficulty. No building was untouched, but at least the Propaganda Ministry was still standing. As their papers were being checked outside, the heavy front doors swung wide and a diminutive man emerged, surrounded by minions. He walked with a pronounced limp, which was exaggerated by the steps. When the light from the open car door caught his face it revealed a sallow complexion and pinched features, but the uniform was well cut and the grooming impeccable. Rather like a fastidious goblin, thought Smith. The goblin caught sight of Rani.

'Gruenberg', he said jocularly, 'I was told to expect you yesterday. It does not matter, we can conduct our business in the car. I am going to visit the front. You will come with me'.

'My escort has orders not to leave me, *Herr Reichsminister*'.

'Make room for him in the staff car, then', Goebbels ordered, and the two vehicles set off gingerly down the street.

Goebbels tried to read Rani's documents in the car but soon gave up and asked her to give him the gist of them. She summarized the old horoscopes but recited from memory, word for word, her reinterpretations of them. His eyes narrowed and he looked at her with suspicion and not a little menace. Then a twisted smile began to play around the corners of the little man's mouth. 'So, the horoscopes are in agreement, you say. Our military affairs will look up in the latter half of this month. From May to July things will go downhill again, but hostilities will cease in mid-August. It gives the Fuehrer every reason to remain in Berlin.' He fixed Rani with his intense little eyes. 'You will give my thanks to *Brigadefuehrer* Walther, and tell him that although he plays a dangerous game, he is correct to think that the time for caution is past. As I think I told you when we invented Gruenberg, *fraulein*, crazy times call for crazy measures'.

It was not a long drive to the front. For the moment the Ninth Army was nervously containing the Oder bridgehead that the Russians had established in the Kuestrin sector. Goebbels was welcomed by the headquarters staff, and why not, for as usual he brought gifts of cognac and cigarettes. Smith and Rani pretended to be deep in conversation in a



corner, and were not disturbed. From time to time Smith stole a glance at Goebbels as he worked the room. He was using the nicotine and alcohol to loosen up his audience, but it was in the propagandist's choice of moment to begin speaking that Smith could see the hand of a true master. The hubbub of conversation had subsided but had not yet been replaced by the torpor of fatigue and overindulgence.

At first Smith found it hard to understand the point of the point of the speech. It harped on the significance of defending the capital, which was surely preaching to the converted given that these men were all that stood in a direct line between it and the Russians. It spoke of mobilizing the populace in support of the army, and the ruthless suppression of dissent in Berlin. Only a few days before bread-rioters had been beheaded as an example. Then the penny dropped for Smith. This was not the Propaganda Minister speaking, but the Gauleiter of Berlin. He was staking his claim for historical recognition. In the revolutionary days it had been his agitation and organization that had secured Red Berlin for National Socialism. Since 1933 he had made it the Nazi rock on which the movement's claim to national hegemony rested. If the army were to be defeated here it would not be because of lack of support or, like 1918, because of a stab in the back by the people of Berlin. Goebbels would see to that. Another theme was historical justice. If there were any, it must surely come to Germany now. The wheel of fortune must turn, as it had for Frederick the Great at the climax of the Seven Years' War. He, Goebbels, had only days before been reading to the Fuehrer, who had been inspired and uplifted by the Miracle of the House of Brandenburg, which had saved the King from suicide and Prussia from dismemberment. From just beside Smith, a colonel who seemed to have consumed rather more than his share of the cognac loudly enquired which czarina was going to die for them this time.

It was well after midnight before the cars began the return journey. There was no mistaking the direction of the capital. While they were still forty kilometres away the sky ahead was lit with target indicators, flares and the glow from bombs leaving their mark on Berlin. The raid was over by the time they reached the city and there was an agitated group of officials waiting outside the Ministry. An aide rushed forward and handed Goebbels a Reuters telegram. He turned to the person nearest, who happened to be Rani, with tears in his eyes. 'It is Friday the Thirteenth, the second half of April opens before us, and the czarina is dead. I must



speak to the Fuehrer'. He thrust the paper into her hands and almost ran into the building. Smith quietly took the paper from Rani and read the brief message. Franklin Roosevelt had died the previous afternoon.

'A great man', said Rani later, when they were alone.

'A good one. He knew that evil has to be destroyed, not accomodated.'

Smith turned the paper in his hands. News always seemed to be more authentic when committed to paper. The words were there before you read them, and they would still be there afterwards. You could never be sure of what you heard over the wireless, even if the broadcaster was not trying to interpret or mislead. It was all so transitory, a medium of impression as much as of facts. No wonder Dr. Goebbels valued it so highly.

In the morning, Goebbels sent for Rani. 'You will accompany me to the Fuehrer so that if he has questions on the horoscopes they can be answered authoritatively.' Smith accompanied them as far as the second last checkpoint, at the entrance to the Chancellery gardens. He would be permitted no further. The previous night's raid had devastated the new Chancellery, completed only in 1938, and it was no longer safe. A ant-like stream of people was taking files and furniture from the shattered building to the *fuehrerbunker* buried deep under the garden. Only a blockhouse sheltering an entrance staircase and the base of a circular observation tower betrayed its presence. They reminded Smith of a miniature medieval castle. It pleased him to think of Hitler being forced to live in a dungeon.

Rani sat in a waiting room on the lowest level of the bunker. Through the open door of the conference room she could hear voices in earnest discussion but could not make out what was being said. When Goebbels emerged the charts in his hands were in some confusion. Rani rearranged them. Goebbels started as if to return to the conference room but thought the better of it. He stood, lost in thought, muttering to himself. 'History turns to the will of men. The stronger the will, the greater the turn.' To Rani he said, 'The Fuehrer seems quite his old self today. Last night's news has been a tonic. He is not interested in the predictions of others this morning. This morning he makes history.' He was slightly less buoyant as they emerged into the open air, and even less so by the time they reached the checkpoint. 'I think that you had better stay in Berlin for a day or two. The Fuehrer may change his mind. I will clear it with your *brigadefuehrer*.'



Rani was disturbed. 'Goebbels has a very strong mind', she told Smith, 'but in the presence of Hitler it turned to jelly. What power over others that man must possess! And yet it seems that the spell needs his presence. I could feel his hold over Goebbels weakening, slipping away the further we got from the bunker.' She shuddered. '*Beng* has given him great powers: he must owe a terrible forfeit. Soon, please soon.'

Smith and Rani waited in Goebbels' outer office amid the ruins of his beloved Ministry building. He had lavished vast sums on the restoration of Schinkel's elaborate palace, only to see it devastated by a single blockbuster in March. The windows were boarded up and there was still glass in the carpet. A buzzer on the secretary's desk rang. She picked up a telephone, listened, pressed a button and held the handset out to Smith. '*Brigadefuehrer* Walther wishes to speak with you.'

'Schmidt here, *Herr Brigadefuehrer*'.

'You must stay in Berlin until the Fuehrer's intentions are clear. I will arrange for you to be temporarily assigned to his guard detachment. The duties are very sensitive and will require absolute discretion on your part, do you understand? Telephone me if there are developments of which I should be aware. Heil Hitler.'

Goebbels emerged from his office. 'Well, fraulein, we are to have the pleasure of your company for a while yet. I have work for you, so you will mess here. Your escort will report to the Reich Chancellery.'

Smith clicked his heels and left, without a glance at Rani.

'Intelligence eh?, well a fat lot of use that is to me', said *Sturmbannfuehrer* Strauss. He was in charge of external security. 'Still, I'm short a post commander with all this toing and froing. You've got a garden detail, one of three; eight men, two hours on, four off. Your command post is the observation tower, although there's not much of it. If you see anything that shouldn't be there, shoot first and ask questions afterwards. If *I* see anything that shouldn't be there, I'll shoot you. Clear?'

In fact, the garden was an easy billet. The remains of its central fountain were surrounded on three sides by buildings, namely the Old and New Chancelleries and a guard barracks. All were now more or less in ruins and their life had been driven underground. A network of bunkers, scarcely less extensive than the buildings, honeycombed the site. These were all linked by tunnels, one of which crossed under the



Wilhelmstrasse to the Propaganda Ministry. Once Hitler had been moved into the *fuehrerbunker* there was less traffic above ground, and it all had familiar faces. Most communication with the bunker was through the Chancellery, where Smith found himself quartered in very mixed company. There was a first aid post, civil and military staffers, and homeless from the bombed-out streets. 'Garden' was by now an honorary title. Excavation for the bunkers and Allied raids had between them reduced it to a bomb site. 'Observation tower' was also a considerable overstatement; it had been completed only to ground level, and steps led down directly into a guard room within the *fuehrerbunker*.

The hours in the tower passed slowly, but Smith spent most of his time there to keep contact with the men of his detail to a minimum. A brisk stroll around the posts every half hour satisfied the demands of duty. The remainder of his time he spent trying to think of a way to communicate with London. It kept him from thinking about having nothing to communicate.

Days drifted by. Smith preened himself on the way he had earned acceptance in the detachment as a reserved, even taciturn, but conscientious officer. He had seen Rani once at a distance, and had longed to know if she had any information, but he had been on duty and could not take the risk of absenting himself from his post. On the third evening he was walking down the corridor towards his billet, his thoughts in the land of the lonely, when he heard boots on the marble floor behind him. They paused, and were followed by a loud voice. 'Smith!', it echoed from the concrete of the corridor. There must have been a microsecond during which locomotion, breathing, and thought itself were frozen in Smith, but training triumphed over them all, and over panic too. He neither paused nor altered pace. Now the boots were running and the voice was insistent. 'Smith! Halt!' A heavy hand came down on his shoulder and spun him around.