



Chapter 6

'Smithy! It's me, Gustav! What are you doing here?'

Smith thought desperately. 'Schmidt', he said, 'it's Schmidt, now. Saves explanations.'

The short, chubby figure before him was unchanged. Smith had not seen Gustav Kemp in twelve years, but the red hair and hot enthusiasm was unmistakable, even in an ill-fitting SS uniform.

'It's so good to see you,' said Gustav, emphasizing every word. 'What are you, British Legion?'

'What, Mosely's Masturbators? Give me a break.' Much too small to hide in, thought Smith, but where then? 'I've been in Norway, political duties. You've done well, *Hauptsturmfuehrer*', he said, fingering the Iron Cross, First Class, on Gustav's tunic. The interest, bordering on pleasure, was unfeigned: this was Augustus Kemp, his only friend during the miserable years they had spent as outsiders at a very good German high school. One was a foreigner, the other insignificant and clownish, but together they had been a match for most of their tormenters.

'It's nothing', said Gustav modestly, 'filled the quota, didn't I?'

'Quota?'

'Five thousand a month, three months in succession. Poles, Jews, Bolsheviks, gypsies. But you can't keep up that sort of effort indefinitely, even with an action commando. It's a killer. You have no idea of how much work there is in liquidating five thousand, month after month. It was very hard on the men, but worthwhile. We cleared a lot of rubbish. It was a shame there was no time to settle good Germanic stock.'

The words echoed inside Smith's head, devoid of meaning. How could they mean what they said, when they came from Gustav, the funniest, gentlest and most amiable person he had ever known? He felt ill, but went on to keep the conversation away from himself.

'But you're now with *Liebstandarte Adolf Hitler*', he said, pointing to Gustav's cuff band.

'Yes, the Lifeguard Division. It is a great honour. Took me months to wangle it.'

'And what brings you to Berlin?'

'We're attached to 6th SS Panzer Army. I brought despatches from Hungary and have been stranded here ever since'.

Sepp Dietrich's killers, thought Smith. The division that shot a hundred American prisoners during the Battle of the Bulge. 'How did the Hungarian offensive go.'



Gustav shifted his feet and dropped his voice. 'Not well. The Fuehrer's orders specified the date of attack. It turned out to be appalling weather, the tanks bogged and we did not get very far. But the men were magnificent. They asked no questions and died fighting like tigers.' 'I have to go', Smith said, 'but we must make sure we get together for a long talk before you go back'. Gustav beamed with pleasure. 'It is so good to see you again.'

The risks of staying in Berlin had just escalated hugely, but Smith was not sure what his options were. He urgently needed to speak with Walther. *Sturmbannfuehrer* Strauss did not demur when Smith asked to use the orderly room telephone, but nor did he leave the room. Berlin's communications were failing. It took a long time to get a line. 'Yes?' Walther's voice came from a great distance. '*Herr Brigadefuehrer*, I have encountered here an officer who remembers me from school. He tells me that he has orders to return to his headquarters, but is having difficulty leaving and may be here some time. I thought that I should ask if you wish me also to return while there is still time.'

There was a long pause. 'No. *Reichsfuehrer* Himmler himself will be in Berlin in a day or so, with the rest of the leadership, to celebrate the Fuehrer's birthday. I will be asking *Reichsminister* Speer to bring you fresh instructions. I am sure he will oblige me. Important decisions may be expected, and Fraulein Kalo may still be required to make an input. Let me speak to your commander.'

Smith could not hear what was being said by Walther, but he was somewhat unnerved by the way Strauss stared at him intently throughout the one-sided conversation. When he had hung up, he dismissed Smith without a word. So that was that.

Smith managed to avoid Gustav for the day, but the little man cornered him in the mess that evening. A great change had come over him; Gustave's bounce had gone, and in its place was bewilderment not far short of shock. 'I don't know what's going on', he said, clutching his left cuff as though it were a wound. 'What's going on?', he asked Smith. Smith lifted Gustav's hand. Where yesterday there had been a band lettered 'Adolf Hitler', now there was only a telltale darker stripe on the faded material.

'They've taken our armbands. The Fuehrer has ordered all of them removed. He's disgracing us for our failure in Hungary. He says we have



betrayed him - not failed him, betrayed him.' He shook his head. 'If anyone was betrayed it was men sent to attack in impossible conditions.' Smith knew he was expected to sympathize, but the words stuck in his throat. They sat in silence while Gustav all but emptied a bottle of cognac. Smith was relieved when he fell asleep in his chair.

When Smith reported to the orderly room for duty the following morning a strong and unpleasant odor met him at the door. For once, Strauss seemed pleased to see him. 'Thank God, you're here. Get rid of that, will you?' He pointed to something wrapped in a sheet, sitting on the desk next to a chamberpot full of military decorations. '6th Panzer Army have sent it to the Fuehrer, with their medals and their compliments.' Smith gingerly unwrapped the sheet. Out rolled a severed human arm, still clothed in SS green, and in an advanced state of decomposition. The cuffband read *Totemkopf*. 'Get someone to bury it', Strauss said. 'I know just the man', Smith replied.

Smith and Gustav took the offending items to a corner of the garden and found a crater. Smith rolled up his shirt sleeves. Gustav reverently placed the arm in the hole. Smith was about to begin shovelling when Gustav stopped him. 'Hold on, I want to think.' Smith rested on the shovel, watching the play of emotion on his friend's face.

'When we left school, you know, I could look forward to nothing. No job, no friends, no prospects. The SS gave me all that, and purpose too. Not purpose of my own, it's true, but higher purpose - folk and nation - and all wrapped up in the thought and person of one man, Adolf Hitler. To be accepted I was harder than the hardest, but it seemed a price worth paying'. He looked at Smith. 'I was in one of the execution squads during the party purge of '34, did you know that? It did wonders for my reputation. The baby-faced killer, that's what they called me. Killing is only really difficult the first time. The trick is to reduce it to routine, make it a habit. But it's a drug habit: the more you do it, the more you have to do it. You can only keep the ghosts at bay by making more of them, so many that the individual voices are lost. A gibbering mass has no power to reproach.'

He removed the Iron Cross from his tunic and tossed it into the chamber pot. "Our honour is our loyalty", he said, tapping the SS motto on his belt buckle, 'Isn't that right, Smithy? It's all we have left and now it's a one-way street. The Fuehrer thinks that he can afford to repudiate his side of the deal, but I can't. I've given up most of the decencies of life by



subordinating my instincts to his orders: I won't let him take away my last bit of self-respect. He has my loyalty, whether he deserves it or not.'

Gustav would not be separated from Smith after that. He had no duties of his own and dogged Smith like a shadow, even spending watches in the observation tower with him. It made Smith very uneasy at first, until he realized that Gustav was not at all curious about his history. When they were not talking about handguns, which to his dismay Smith found had become a particular hobby-horse of his friend, Gustav wanted to do nothing other than relive their school days together. 'I joined the SS because of you', he told Smith. 'You told me a story about an English professor in the last war who helped a colleague get back to Germany, knowing that he would join up to kill Englishmen. The professor said that his countrymen were strangers to him, but the German was his friend. That was the kind of loyalty you and I had to each other. After you left, I sought it again in a tight-knit group of comrades - the Fuehrer's SS bodyguard.' He laughed. 'And now there are hundreds of thousands of us, including you; and they are all strangers, except you.' He felt safe and untroubled in the past, which suited Smith. The Englishman had something else on his mind; how many nights in a row had the white dream come to Rani now, he wondered.