



Chapter 7

The news from the western front was catastrophic. Model's forces, surrounded in the Ruhr, had surrendered - a third of a million men. The Americans had reached the Elbe opposite Magdeburg. In the east the long-threatened Russian offensive had erupted across the Oder in strength and was brushing aside resistance. A junction of the American and Russian forces could be no more than days away, but April the 20th was Hitler's birthday and his satraps gathered, for the last time as it happened, to pay homage. Goering, Goebbels, Himmler, Ribbentrop, Speer, and many lesser lights were received, gave presents and were thanked. Artur Axmann arranged a small parade of his Hitler Youth in the garden. From his post Smith saw them formed up but they were marched out of his sight. Their uniforms were ill-assorted, and hardly an item fitted. Some of them looked as young as twelve. 'The Fuehrer's going to award Iron Crosses', Gustav said, 'They've probably earned them.'

Strauss issued a routine order that required the guard detachment to have its kitbags packed, ready to move at short notice. 'Not you', he told Smith, 'if we're off to the Obersalzberg you can hop it back to where you came from.' That evening the leaders of the Reich began to take their departure, but there was no word from the bunker. Smith was near the end of his watch when he heard steps ascending the concrete steps of the tower. 'I wish to speak to *Obersturmfuehrer* Schmidt, privately', the stranger said. 'Of course, *Herr Reichsminister*', said Gustav, and made himself scarce. Albert Speer, Minister for Munitions, was unknown to Smith. He was only a little older than the Englishman, and had been a late rising star in the Nazi firmament. Hitler may have thought that it was his will that kept Germany going, but all who understood the economics of blood and iron were agreed that if Speer had not been there to galvanise German industry the war would already have been long over. 'Walther tells me that I can rely on your discretion', Speer said. 'I would rather not talk here. Will you walk with me as far as the Chancellery?' 'It is on my rounds, *Herr Reichsminister*.'

The central section of the Chancellery was in darkness, beyond the reach of the searchlights in the garden. Speer led Smith into the ruins with the confidence of a sleepwalker. 'Before the war I was the Fuehrer's architect. This is my greatest completed commission. Built in a single year. He was particularly fond of this gallery. It is twice as long as the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. Foreign emissaries had to walk over two hundred metres



through these halls before they reached the Fuehrer's presence. He even ordered that the floors be made particularly slippery. Can you appreciate how intimidating and unnerving that was?'

Smith nodded politely. Like a tour guide, Speer continued with his talk. 'Look at the walls. All marble and masonry. No concrete, no steel reinforcement. I designed it so that when the Reich's Thousand Years were up, these walls would make ruins that posterity would marvel at.' Smith could not restrain himself. 'They make very fine ruins', he agreed. 'But in the end, does it work? What is the overall effect?', Speer was asking.

Smith had never fancied himself as a person of taste or discernment. His mother had always refused to let him buy his own clothes. He struggled. 'It's very ... grand', he said.

Speer seized the word. 'Close. It's *too* grand. There is no human scale here. It says that people are insignificant, and when art says that it can become accessory to murder.' He was silent for a moment, and then looked Smith in the eye. 'You will think that I am foolish to say such a thing to you. I have said similar things to Walther and to many other colleagues throughout the Reich these last months. It is my way of encouraging them to save what of Germany, body and soul, they can from the ruin that is engulfing us. He asked me to give you this.' It was a plain envelope stamped in red ink.

They walked back to the garden in silence. Speer led them towards a slim column that rose three metres from the ground. 'This chimney was not here two months ago', he said. 'It covers the air intake for the *Fuehrerbunker*. Before it was built it would have been a simple matter to introduce poison gas. Now it is impossible, and Germany fights on.'

'I understand what you are saying.'

'I doubt that you do. When the chimney was built, I felt enormous relief. I had been spared a great responsibility. I had hoped that today's conference would also have relieved me of responsibility, but it was not to be. The Fuehrer was urged by many to go to Obersalzburg. He did not make a decision. The most he would do was to approve arrangements for separate administration of north and south should the Reich be divided, which must come soon. If he stays in Berlin, it will be destroyed, but perhaps more of Germany will be saved.'

'Thunder and lightning!', said Gustav, who appeared from nowhere as soon as Speer had gone, 'You intelligence people certainly move in exalted circles.' Smith was pleased to see him so impressed; it reinforced



his cover and gave him a good excuse for not answering questions. It was some time before he could free himself from Gustav and open the envelope. The red ink on the outside read Emergency Use Only. Inside there was a single slip of paper - a 'to whom it may concern' pass, requiring all to render whatever assistance the bearer was in need of 'in transit beyond the Reich via Hamburg'. The signature was large and bold, demanding attention - Heinrich Himmler. It must be Walther's idea of encouragement, Smith thought, in a form that doesn't directly compromise him. Don't worry about having to stay in Berlin - this will get you out when the time comes, and then come to Hamburg. But why was it so important that he stay? Smith wrestled with the conundrum for a while, but then realized that it was beside the point. He wasn't going anywhere without Rani, and Dancer was still waiting for word of Hitler's intentions. Just like everyone else, thought Smith.

His watch was up. The next detail appeared from the direction of the orderly room. Smith marched around the posts with it, relieving his men two by two. He dismissed them at the orderly room and stepped inside. Strauss did not look up from his desk. 'There's someone to see you,' he said, pointing to a corner. It was Rani, and as she stood up Smith thought that she had never looked lovelier. The gloss of her hair shamed the black drab of her uniform. Her colour was high and her dark eyes shone. 'How would you like to take a girl to the cinema?', she said. Smith looked at Strauss.

'You intelligence types. Here a week and already you've found a girl. All right, but mind you're back for first watch in the morning.' Smith almost thought he heard amusement in the voice, but he knew that it would not be visible on the face. Without a word he grabbed Rani's hand and hurried her out of the door.

'We have Dr. Goebbels to thank for tonight', she said as they strolled arm in arm down the Wilhelmstrasse. 'He is so proud of his latest film that he insists that everyone in his Ministry must see it. He gave me two tickets.' 'I can think of much better things to do with an evening', Smith replied. 'So can I, but film first, because in the morning the doctor will ask me my opinion of its value as propaganda.'

The cinema was one near the Potsdamer Platz reserved for military personnel. Smith was surprised to see it full. 'Is Goebbels going to ask all of these for their opinion as well?' Rani told him to hush. Smith braced himself for a black-and-white ordeal by boredom.



It was the most extraordinary cinema experience of Smith's life. He fancied himself as a good judge of film, having been raised on the German expressionism of the twenties as well as the Hollywood and English product, but this was something else. *Kolberg* told the story of Gneisenau's heroic defence of that city against Napoleon. The script and the acting were indifferent. It was in colour, which was a relief, and in spite of himself Smith was impressed by the scale of the spectacle, but what amazed him was the response of the audience. They cheered, they clapped, they exhorted each other like bobby-soxers at a Frank Sinatra concert. Some of the Wehrmacht's finest were in tears.

Afterwards Smith and Rani strolled around the Platz, once the busiest intersection in Europe, now derelict and almost deserted. 'What will you say to the Doctor?', Smith asked.

'If I were to be truthful, I'd say that I'm glad those hundreds of thousands of troops were kept from the front for so long.'

'The extras came from the Wehrmacht?'

'Whole divisions, corps, armies even. The truly remarkable thing though is Dr. Goebbels' foresight. It took two years to make, and yet it exactly fits Germany's circumstances now. You saw its effect in there. It's probably worth half a dozen divisions.'

'Fortunately, that won't be enough. Kolberg fell to the Russians last month.'

'I don't recall hearing that,' said Rani, 'but then I don't suppose that the Doctor made much of it at the time.'

They were passing a block of bombed and abandoned apartments. Smith pulled Rani into a blackened doorway. He gently fondled her breasts and then pulled her to him, his hands on her buttocks. 'I couldn't find anyone with a hay loft', he said.

'Then I suppose we'll just have to stand on our own two feet', said Rani, kissing him and hoisting her skirt.

'Do you mind if we sit for a while,' Smith said afterwards, 'I feel a bit weak at the knees.' They sat on the front step, hands held tight. 'Forgive me for spoiling the moment, but I've been thinking about the film.' Rani did not look at all forgiving, but Smith went on. 'You should tell Dr. Goebbels that the inspirational effect of the film cannot be over-estimated. The message received by the audience is that anything is possible with determined leadership, but in a siege that means sharing the hardships of the led. Leading from the rear is not an option.'



'I'll only tell him that if you fuck me again, and say nothing more about the war for the rest of the night'.
It was a deal.