



### Chapter 8

They had wandered, talking, for hours until they came across a park bench. There they were twice disturbed for their papers, but as dawn approached Rani fell asleep, leaning on Smith's shoulder. He let her sleep as long as he could, but as the sun came up he was forced to gently shake her. 'I have to get back, darling.'

She stirred, and smiled with relief. 'I did not dream. The cycle must begin again.'

Smith knew what to expect when he entered the orderly room and Strauss did not disappoint him. The air grew thick with barrack room smut and it took the arrival of a messenger to bring the *Sturmbannfuhrer* back to business. 'Couriers!', he exploded, 'what do they think this is, the post office? That fat friend of yours, has he still got nothing to do?'

'Not as far as I know, sir.'

'Well, from now on you and he are couriers. Report to Communications.'

Gustav was greatly relieved at the prospect of work. 'It keeps you from thinking,' was his view. Smith at first thought that he should perhaps try to stay near Rani, but on reflection he could see advantage in getting away temporarily from both Gustav and the guard detail; there was always the risk of an inadvertant remark by Gustav that might trigger suspicion in minds more devious than his. He scribbled a bland note to Rani saying that he might be away for a day or two. Strauss, with a snigger, undertook to give it to her if she called at the orderly room. At Communications they were told that both wireless and land line networks were rapidly degrading and that some orders would soon have to be conveyed by hand, if necessary through enemy lines. They were to be ready to leave at half an hour's notice.

The American bombers made their morning visit at 9.30. They had become so much a fact of life as well as death that few now bothered to go to the shelters unless it was an all-out raid, and this one hardly rated. Two hours later the explosions started again, but there was no air raid warning this time. The sound was different, too, a low thunder punctuated by dull crumps. People began running from cover to cover. The Russian guns were within range.



Gustav and Smith were summoned to the Wehrmacht situation room. Smith had never seen so much braid in one place before, and Gustav was plainly awestruck. The most highly-braided of all the officers addressed them slowly, as though they were deaf, or children. He stood at a wall map that showed red lines to the north-east and south-east of the city. There were reassuring blue lines within the city limits and to the north and south, but many bore labels that spoke of scratch units, like Operational Group Steiner. 'The Russians are attempting to encircle Berlin. The Fuehrer has ordered an all-out relief attack on their flanks by forces north and south of the city. He has spoken personally by telephone to *Obergruppenfuehrer* Steiner and General Busse, but you will take them their written orders and bring back their situation reports.'

He appeared to have finished. Even Gustav, overwhelmed as he was, felt that he and Smith might need a little more information. 'Where exactly are they, sir?'

The Most High chose his words carefully. 'The situation is...fluid. Two hours ago we knew where they were. Now it is up to you to find them.' Outside, in the corridor, they tossed a coin. Gustav won. 'I know Steiner; I'll take Busse.' He shook Smith's hand. 'Take care of yourself. I'd hate to lose you again.' Smith grabbed Gustav's cap and pulled it down over his eyes. 'If anyone's likely to get lost, it'll be you. Why do you think they're giving you an escort?'

The escorts were professionals, Himmler's Own. He had sent his SS Escort Battalion from Bavaria to defend Berlin, but it had proved more useful as an instrument of intimidation and terror. Its anti-deserter patrols, euphemistically called flying courts-martial, were already notorious, and Smith was attached to one of these. It would take him as far as the northern suburbs. After that he would be on his own. The superman in charge, an *untersturmfuehrer* named Hoener, was junior to Smith, but made free with his opinion that baby-sitting SS intelligence officers was a distraction from more useful functions. The dislike was instant and mutual. They sat together with the driver in the cab of a truck, six SS troopers in the open back behind them, and slowly headed north. The driver was a fresh-faced blond, on the pretty side of handsome. Hoener seemed to be sitting sat rather closer to him than was necessary, but perhaps it was just as far from Smith as he could get.

Hoener's mood went from bad to worse. There were few men about, and even fewer in uniform. They stopped two or three civilians of military



age, but all were foreign workers from factories in the area. The further north they went, the fewer people there were on the streets, and by the time they first heard the rattle of small arms fire there was not a soul in sight. From a side street ahead there was a clatter of something hard being dragged over the cobbles. A bareheaded man in a bloody army uniform ran into sight, trailing a rifle by the muzzle. Seeing the truck, he pulled up like a cornered animal and waited for the troopers to seize him. 'Where's your unit?', Hoener shouted into his face. The exhausted man waved a hand behind him. 'Why aren't you with them?'

'Dead. All dead. Too many Russians. No ammunition'. He was close to collapse. Hoener pulled the rifle from his hand and opened the breech. It was empty, like the bandolier slung over his shoulder.

'No ammunition? So what's this?' Hoener fairly shrieked, pulling a stick grenade from the man's belt. The soldier said nothing. 'I'll tell you what it is, it's half a dozen Russians still alive who should be dead.'

The soldier could see where the dialogue was heading. '...for me', he said desperately, 'The Russians...mutilate prisoners.'

'Are they? What a good idea. Let's give them a hand, shall we?' Hoener pointed to a lamppost. His troopers dragged the soldier across and tied him to it. He was beyond struggling, but tears streaked the dirt on his cheeks as he passed Smith. 'Please, sir!'

Smith knew that intervention would be both useless and dangerous, but felt that he must say something. 'This man's not a deserter.'

Hoener turned on him in a fury. 'How dare you interfere? He's a coward, that'll do. We're here to deter, and for that we need to advertise: corpses, preferably large numbers of them, in uniform, prominently displayed.' He turned to his men. 'Stand away', he ordered, stuffing the grenade back into the soldier's belt. The driver giggled. The other troopers scrambled to get behind the pole. Hoener pulled the pin and stepped aside. 'Heil Hitler.' The grenade had a five second fuse. They were longest five seconds of Smith's life. At the last instant the soldier jerked up his head. 'Heil Deutschland', he said, and then his life was gone in a sickening thud and a spray of blood and guts. The driver placed a pre-printed 'Deserter' placard over the slumped head. He walked across to Hoener and lit cigarettes for them both. The others troopers lit their own. Hoener had a dreamy look on his face of the kind more commonly associated with good sex.

'If you're finished, I have orders to deliver,' said Smith.

He knew that the orders he carried required Steiner to attack towards Berlin, but from where? Like everyone else, Steiner was in retreat. Two



days ago he had been in the Eberswalde. By now he could be as far as Oranienberg, forty kilometres further west. Smith decided that he would split the difference. It would be possible to go either way if he guessed wrongly, but to take the autobahn route to Bernau, the direct way to Eberswalde, would be just asking for trouble. Hoener's patrol had made its way to the city outskirts in the Pankow district. What had been desultory small arms fire heard from a distance now became brisker and closer. 'This patrol goes no further', said Hoener, to no-one in particular. 'I didn't imagine it would', said Smith, alighting from the truck. 'It might run into someone with ammunition.' He slammed the door and set off without a backward glance, but the hairs on his neck prickled until he turned the next corner.

He got on to the *Blankenfelder Chaussee*, which was all but deserted. A solitary cyclist offered to swap his dilapidated machine for a packet of cigarettes, but Smith had only money, and had to walk on. Night was falling by the time he reached the outermost of the improvised defence lines. The *Volkssturm* officer in charge had no transport, and said that if he had he would not let it go 'out there'. Two Russian columns had passed across his front during the day, well within range, but they had paid no attention to him and he had left well enough alone. Beside his barricade stood a much-repaired country cart filled with sacks. An old horse stood in the shafts and a greybeard dozed on the seat. 'What's the story there?', asked Smith.

'Something about potatoes. I've told him it's too dangerous and he can't go through, but he just sits there.'

Smith went up to the driver. 'If I can get you past this, granddad, will you give me a lift?' Granddad looked suspiciously at Smith's uniform.

'Depends where you're going.'

'North', said Smith. 'Near enough', was the reply.

Smith found that the horse was so ancient that he would have been faster afoot, but it was a deliciously crisp spring night and there was something hypnotic in sway of the cart and the clip-clop of hooves on the road. He suddenly became aware of how tired he was. 'You can rest in the back, if you want', the old man said. In a minute Smith was asleep among the potatoes. Three hours later he awoke with a guilty start, totally refreshed. He resumed his place on the seat and complained to his landlord. 'Those potatoes are so small they wouldn't even keep a princess awake. Can't you grow them to a less comfortable size?' Granddad looked at him with



total scorn. 'They're *seed* potatoes. Why would I be taking *marketable* potatoes from the city to the country?'

You're not very quick tonight, Smith told himself. 'Is that why you're taking the risk of crossing no-man's-land?' The old man nodded. 'If these aren't in the ground in the next week or so, what will there be to eat later this year, after those Austrians and Bavarians have finished ruining us? You're a Prussian, by your accent, what are you doing with that crowd?' Smith had never looked at it that way, but it was true. Hitler, Himmler, Kaltenbrunner - southerners to a man. Even Goering had a Bavarian mother. Goebbels was a Rhinelander, and therefore just as effete and unreliable to the eyes of this Pomeranian peasant. Smith wondered how far his confidence in a fellow Prussian would over-ride his fear. 'I'm a Brandenburger: we make our way in the world as we find it, as best we can.'

That was good enough for the old man. 'That's the trouble. We let others get us into trouble, and then they expect the Prussian army to get them out of it. My family worked on the Bismarck estates for generations, and I tell you the old man is spinning in his grave. Why did he not bring the Austrians into the Reich after defeating them at Sadowa? Because he knew they would suck Prussia east. Remember what he said about the Balkans? "Not worth the life of a single Pomeranian grenadier." As far as I'm concerned you could throw in Russia, Poland, Austria and Bavaria and I'd still want change.'

After this outburst he was silent, perhaps worried that he had gone too far. Smith wanted to reassure him. 'I wouldn't worry. If we're defeated, they'll probably separate Austria from Germany again, anyway.' The prospect cheered the old man up considerably, and he geed up his horse. 'Best we get out of this before the light comes.'

Shortly before dawn they came to crossroads. 'Go straight on for a couple of miles and you'll come to one of our posts. At least, that's where they were yesterday. I went through without permission, so I'd better turn off here and go round.'

'Thanks, Granddad, good luck with the potatoes.'

'Good luck with those blasted Austrians.'

Smith gave the horse a slap on the rump and watched the cart set off along the side road. Half an hour's walk took him to the post. The sentry who challenged was quite prepared to shoot him for not knowing the password, but his NCO was less excitable and called up a motorcycle with sidecar to take Smith to Steiner's headquarters.



It did not look much like a headquarters with offensive action in progress. To the contrary, what activity there was seemed to be more of the packing-up-to-leave variety. Steiner was staring intently at his wall map, as if willing it to tell him something other than it was.

Smith saluted and presented a large buff envelope. 'Heil Hitler. Your written orders for the attack, *Herr Obergruppenfuehrer*.'

Steiner did not even look at him, but tore open the envelope and quickly scanned its contents. A look of disbelief crossed his face, and a short laugh escaped him. 'Gentlemen', he said to his staff, 'here is the concluding paragraph of our orders. "It is expressly forbidden to fall back to the west. Officers who do not comply unconditionally with this order are to be arrested and shot right away. You, Steiner, are liable with your head for the execution of this order. The fate of the Reich Capital depends on the success of your mission.'" Signed, Adolf Hitler.' He turned on Smith. 'And you, *Obersturmfuehrer*, is it you who are to take back my head if these orders are not carried out?' Smith looked around the room. Most of the officers appeared to think that such indeed might be the case. 'No, sir', he said hastily, 'the only thing I am ordered to take back is your situation report.'

'My situation. Well, let us see.' He led Smith to the map and stuck his finger on a blue bit. 'What have we here? This says 7th Panzer. What is the situation of the 7th Panzer, Fritz?'

His Chief of Staff consulted his clip board. 'No tanks, trucks or artillery. Not even a machine gun.'

'Still, I imagine they'd make a highly effective bread line. Like the five thousand Luftwaffe pilots that turned up the other day for use as infantry. Or the 3rd Naval Division.' With a wild wave of his arm he scrawled in chinagraph pencil across the map. 'That's my situation, tell Berlin that. And if the Fuehrer is so worried about the fate of his precious capital, why do we keep hearing about the convoy ready to take him to the Obersalzberg?'

There is nothing more awkward than a rhetorical question directed at you by an angry superior, but Smith was spared the embarrassment of trying to find a reply. Steiner abruptly whirled out of the room, drawing his staff along in his wake. An SS adjutant paused just long enough to tell Smith, in a very unfriendly tone, that there was a patrol going towards Berlin shortly and that he had better be on it. One bad western too many, thought Smith.