



Chapter 10

On a low hill on the outskirts Smith paused and looked at the buildings half a mile ahead. He reached for his field glasses and smiled wryly as he remembered where they were. There was no smoke ahead and none of the sounds of war. He decided to take a chance and walked directly towards a wagon that had been laid on its side across the road.

The shot that greeted him was so close that Smith could not tell whether it was an accurate warning or a near miss. He threw his hands in the air and shouted 'Don't shoot!' There was an explosion of bad language from the barricade, in the midst of which Smith heard 'Idiot!', and 'Challenge first!' Two figures emerged from behind the barrier, the larger pulling the smaller by an ear. 'I'm sorry, sir, the children are very jumpy today.' The child in question, a Hitler Youth, protested that he had been trained on flak guns and would be much better employed if he were sent back to them. 'None of your backchat, you miserable insect', roared the ear-holder, who was wearing a uniform that must have been in mothballs since 1918. 'Get the officer a cup of coffee!' The old corporal was all apologies. He regretted that he had no transport to take the SS officer into Berlin, but the truck that had replaced the civilian bus would be leaving from the square in a few minutes and he was sure that he could make room on that. Smith thanked him, but said he was confident he could arrange it himself.

The crowd waiting at the stop looked far too large for any truck, so Smith stood aside until it arrived. Among the bodies and cargo it disgorged were bundles of newsprint. A small boy ran forward and cut the bundles open. 'Newspaper! Get your newspaper! All the latest!' Smith went up to him. 'Give me a *Volkischer Beobachter*.' 'Sorry sir, I've heard that it's closing down. I've only got *Panzerbar*.' Smith took the emergency newsheet. It was four pages, mainly of exhortations to fight, promises of succor, and threats. It called on the citizens to mark well a 'Grave Warning from the Fuehrer'; anything detrimental to resistance was treason, and perpetrators were to be shot or hanged immediately. There were no classified advertisements. He was about to throw it away when he saw a middle-aged woman, head sideways, trying to read the headline. He smiled and handed it to her. 'It's no use to me. I was looking for the In Memoriam section.'



She shook her head. 'They don't even print the casualty lists any more. Too many names, not enough paper.' She looked at the masthead. 'Armoured Bear! Poor Berlin! More like a caged one.' Smith was conscious that the people around them were edging away. The woman went pale and mumbled an apology.

'It's alright, mother, the same thought had crossed my mind', Smith said, and swung himself onto the truck. A very pregnant young woman tried to give up her place on the side bench for him, but he made her remain seated. 'So that is what it is to be one of the gods of the SS', he thought. There was hardly room for those standing to turn around, but they closed up further to give him space. 'Or to have a contagious disease', he added, under his breath.

Everywhere now were the signs of a city under siege. The intersections were chicanes of overturned vehicles filled with rubble. At every food shop there was a long queue of women, many with children in tow. And yet most of the people in Smith's truck were returning from work in the armaments factories. Berlin still functioned, and Berlin was still arming for the fight. He turned his mind to his own role in the drama. How was he to report Steiner? Was it preferable that the news should disappoint Hitler, or please him? If Steiner succeeded, presumably Hitler would stay in Berlin, but Steiner was not going to succeed. If Hitler were to be told that Steiner had failed, that might cause him to flee to the Obersalzberg, as Steiner suspected that he would anyway. This is not my concern, thought Smith. His own side - Dancer and the Americans - had asked nothing more of him than to learn and report. They had not, of course, in their wildest dreams expected him to be in a position to influence events, however marginally. But then there was Walther. Walther now seemed to regard him as more than just an escort for Rani. Why? It did not matter, he decided. Walther held their lives, his and Rani's, in his hands. Whatever Walther wanted, for the time being Walther must have; and Walther wanted Hitler trapped in Berlin. Smith suspected that he might be close to talking himself across the line between double agent and traitor but even this, he was disappointed to find, brought him no closer to deciding a course of action. He was so engrossed that he almost forgot to get off the truck at *Unter der Linden*. He walked the long block to the Chancellery as slowly as he could, but inspiration continued to elude him.

At Communications they would not let him even take off his cap. 'Your friend Kemp is not back from General Busse. Yours is the only news.'



They hurried him to the situation room. The Chief of Staff greeted him like a returned prodigal. 'At last! The Fuehrer has been asking about Steiner's attack all day. Where is his report?' There was consternation when Smith announced that there was no Steiner report. 'No report? There must be a report! The Fuehrer will have a report, or he will have someone's head.' Nervous though he was, Smith could see from the general uneasiness around the table that it was not necessarily his head that was being referred to. 'Tell us what you know.'

The debriefing was brisk and efficient, but Smith had the distinct impression that his statements were not being taken at face value. Then again, neither were they properly queried. It was form without substance, as though the renowned procedures of German General Staff were now as hollow as the armies they moved about on maps.

'When and where were you last in contact with the Steiner Operational Group?

'Five miles north of Reinickendorf.'

'What was the name of the unit?'

'The 7th...Panzer Group.'

The officer consulted a loose leaf folder. 'That is not an established formation.'

Smith agreed. 'It's a scratch outfit, built around elements of the 7th Panzer Division.' Out of the corner of his eye he could see a little blue square already being drawn on the map.

'Was it in contact with the enemy?'

'It had just taken in flank and totally destroyed an armoured column advancing from the east.' There was jubilation around the table.

'What were the intentions of the Group's commander?'

'He said that he would take the prisoners back to headquarters for interrogation.' The jubilation subsided but the Chief of Staff took charge.

'Let me summarise. The Steiner Operational Group has advanced to within five miles of the northern suburbs, as ordered by the Fuehrer. It has had a major local success and is gathering intelligence preparatory to a further advance.' He looked around him to see if any of his staff disagreed. 'I will inform the Fuehrer.'

So that's it, thought Smith. Even if he had taken the risk of reporting disaster they would still have done their best to find something positive in it.



The Chief of Staff disappeared behind a partition. For a minute or two all was quiet in the situation room, then, from the other side of the partition, came a sound that Smith could not relate to anything he had heard before. It was a cry of anguish, but it was hard to believe that it could have been made by a human being. It vibrated from the concrete walls like the note of a tuning fork. It hung in the air for a time and with an intensity that Smith would not have believed possible, and was succeeded by racking sobs. Then there were words, mostly unintelligible, but spittle-filled and charged with vehemence. It was only when they settled into a cadence that Smith understood what he was listening to. It was the same voice that had mesmerized him in newsreels for half of his life. The oratory had then been passionate and threatening, but compelling; now it vomited blood and despair, steeled with menace. On and on it went. Smith lost track of time. Anyone who had an excuse left the situation room. Those who had no excuse to make stood as far apart from each other as possible, ashen-faced or red as their complexions dictated, avoiding each others' eyes. Finally the Chief of Staff reappeared, a man destroyed. He trembled uncontrollably as he wiped tears from his eyes and perspiration from his brow. As soon as he had gathered some measure of self-control, he began briefing his staff. It was coherent but mechanical. It came from the subconscious: the higher faculties were elsewhere.

'The Fuehrer does not believe that Steiner has acted with vigor in pursuance of his orders. If he had, he would be in Berlin now. This treachery, only the most recent of a multitude, has been one too many for even the Fuehrer's great heart. He gives up the command of Germany's forces. The separate commands in the north and the south are activated. The Fuehrer himself stays in Berlin, to await whatever Fate has in store for him. He asks for Dr. Goebbels.' He was spent, and by giving form to what his audience had heard through the partition he had drained them also, Smith included. He desperately needed fresh air.

He again walked through the deserted marble gallery of the new Chancellery. Recent Russian shelling had torn gaping holes in the roof. The first stars were appearing overhead. A figure came towards him out of the gloom. 'More and better ruins, no? I hoped I might find you here.' It was Speer.

'I thought Berlin had seen the last of you, *Herr Reichsminister*.'

'That was my intention, but I find that I cannot escape myself so easily. I am here to confess to the Fuehrer my disobedience of his orders to destroy German industry.'



Smith was blunt. 'You'll be shot.'

'Perhaps. But I could not live with myself if he died without hearing it from me. I have done very well through his patronage: he is entitled to know what he bought. But that is not why I have come looking for you. I have been unable to speak to Walther. I presume that he still wishes the Fuehrer to remain in Berlin. What would he want me to say if the Fuehrer asks my opinion?'

Smith looked about him. The roof and the sky were becoming indistinguishable, as though parts of the roof were pierced with icy pinpricks of light. 'You could tell him that it is beneath the dignity of such a great builder to die in a weekend bungalow in the mountains.'

Speer was impressed. 'Good. Very good. It becomes clearer to me why Walther sets such store by you.' He seemed unwilling to leave, and looked to the darkening sky. 'If I'd known you were here a week ago I would have got you a ticket for the Berlin Philharmonic's last concert. I asked them to play the finale from Wagner's *Gotterdammerung*. Nostalgia for fallen gods: rather bathetic, don't you think? Gounod would have been more appropriate: *Faust*.' He turned abruptly and was gone.