



## Chapter 14

There was no challenge as they approached the quayside. No-one spared them a glance as they bumped alongside. In an open space back from the river stood a large dump of fuel drums. Half-lit figures were piling all sorts of military stores around and on top of them. Smith found the officer in charge. 'You are preparing to withdraw, *Herr Major*?'

'And what business is that of yours?'

Smith produced his Himmler pass. The major's attitude changed from suspicion to hostility. 'We are not disobeying the no-retreat order. It is no longer possible to disobey it. Three days ago the Twelfth Army was on the Elbe, facing the Americans. Today we are on the Havel, facing the Russians. Tonight, we go west again. Advancing on all fronts, you might say. Besides, your precious Reichsfuehrer himself is negotiating surrender with the Americans.'

'You mistake me, *Herr Major*. As you say, that is no business of mine. My orders also take me west.'

The major unbent, just a little. 'We're evacuating the Potsdam garrison by boat. How many can you fit on that one?'

'Thirty with equipment, fifty without, and they'll have to pump. She's been out of the water for a while, and the seams haven't closed properly yet.'

'We're taking them to the southern end of Lake Schwielow.'

'It's on my way, but I need fuel.'

The major actually smiled. 'You've come to the right place. In fact, you've come to the only place. We sat on the Elbe for so long waiting for the Americans that we accumulated some reserves. Couldn't even give it away. The minute we started moving east, of course, our transport attracted Russian aircraft like flies. Most of it's gone, so we're making bonfires of the fuel dumps, including this one.'

The launch's tanks took a hundred litres, and Smith loaded another hundred in jerrycans. The major saw an opportunity to save some of his weapons. The men that came aboard were armed to the teeth. Smith was about to protest about the weight of the machine gun tripod they were bringing aboard but the major anticipated him. 'That's personal. I've had quite enough of being shot up by Russian aircraft. Next time I intend to be able to shoot back.' As he boarded, he blew a whistle three times. 'Stand clear', he shouted in the direction of the dump. A few last figures ran away from it. The major loaded a *kampfpistole*. A bright ball of light



leapt gracefully from pistol to pile. Smith opened the throttle wide and the launch leaped away from the quay. Petrol drums began to explode in all directions. One dropped within a few metres of the launch, a falling star that did not extinguish on impact but spread its fiery mantle across the water.

The launch escorted the major's flotilla of boats down the chain of lakes. The major busied himself on the foredeck with his tripod. He dug its feet into the woodwork, doing considerable damage, but by the time he had finished it was solidly fixed, with an MG42 sitting on the anti-aircraft mount. The convoy proceeded at the pace of its tired rowers and the night was well advanced by the time they reached the Twelfth Army's outposts. The major jumped ashore but was quickly back. 'Can you take me on as far as Brandenburg? I have orders for 41 Panzer Corps and no other way of getting them there.'

'An escort! Most welcome.'

The Havel lakes were calm and deserted. Smith kept to the centre of the stream as the safest place to be running at speed at night, but its extreme windings continually surprised him. The major put a man at each bow to look for obstacles and their warnings gave Smith more confidence. The war seemed far away. Behind the launch, light on the horizon heralded the coming of daylight. Smith was pleased with their progress; by his reckoning, they would reach Brandenburg in about an hour. The riverbank awoke to the dawn chorus, a cheerful din that swamped their voices. It was Rani who first heard the discordant note. She stared astern, into the strengthening light. 'An aircraft, no, two. Very low.'

'Have they seen us?', asked Smith.

'If they haven't, they will. They're following the river.'

'Dawn patrol, and probably ground attack', Smith muttered, turning the wheel sharply. The launch swung in towards the bank, but Smith held the turn until they were heading upstream, running back the way they had come under the partial cover of the overhanging trees. The major was looking at him. 'We're going the wrong way.'

'Are you suggesting that we try to outrun them?'

The major grunted. 'So what do you have in mind?' Smith told him, but he was unconvinced. Rani's voice came from behind, low, reassuring and insistent. 'He knows what he's doing.' The major looked at her, handed Smith his signal pistol and turned to his men. 'Listen to the SS officer.' Smith held the *kampfpistole* aloft. 'I will fire a flare. It is your aiming mark. Do not, repeat not, fire at the aircraft. Keep firing in the direction



of the flare until you are ordered to stop. Clear?' The puzzlement on most of their faces indicated that it was not at all clear, but these were German soldiers and understood an order when they heard one.

'Man your weapons', the major ordered. They were a formidable enough array. Apart from the major's 'personal weapon', he had at his disposal four more of the same without tripod. Most of his other men had machine pistols. Timing was everything in deflection shooting, Smith knew, and the tendency was always to shoot too late. He held the pistol out sideways, at arm's length, while watching ahead. At least the aircraft would be silhouetted against the dawn. The engine noise grew rapidly. There was a flash of movement ahead, beyond the canopy. 'Now!', Smith screamed, and fired his flare across the river.

It takes very little time to utter a single syllable, but it takes even less for a plane travelling at 300 kilometres per hour to pass a point. The flare missed the tail of the Illushin Shturmovik by a good fifty metres. Tracer absolutely filled the space where the aircraft had been an instant before, but the aircraft itself was gone. The major's gun had been a fraction later than most but, unlike most, had kept firing as instructed. Less than a second later the second Shturmovik flew straight through his stream of fire. There was no doubt that the aircraft had been sprayed from end to end, but it broke to the right and receded rapidly, apparently unscathed. 'Those things are armoured like tanks', he shouted, waving his fist at it. Rani watched it keenly. 'It's trailing white smoke.'

'That'll be engine coolant', Smith said, 'I doubt that he'll come around again.'

The first aircraft joined the second and together they flew east, rather slower than they had come. The major accepted the congratulations of his men. 'It's just like duck shooting. You have to know how much to lead the target.' He caught Smith's eye. 'Damned quick ducks,' he whispered.

'I'd bet you any money you couldn't do that again.'

'I'm damned sure I couldn't, but don't tell them. They'll follow me anywhere after this.'

The sun was well up by the time they pulled into Brandenburg. Rani went down to the cabin and turned on the radio. Radio Hamburg was playing the slow movement from Bruckner's Seventh Symphony. At its conclusion there was an alert to stand by for a grave and important announcement. Rani turned up the volume and the cabin door filled with apprehensive faces. 'Germans', said a strained voice, 'it is Grand Admiral



Doenitz who speaks to you. Our Fuehrer, Adolf Hitler, died today fighting at the head of his troops in Berlin. He has appointed me as his successor, and as his successor I shall continue this war to an end worthy of the unique, heroic struggle of the German people. This is necessary to save Germany from destruction by the advancing Bolshevik enemy.' The broadcast ended to the strains of Wagner. The audience on the launch quietly drifted back to what they had been doing. The major's batman brought coffee down to the cabin.

'Doenitz, eh?', the major said. 'That's one in the eye for your Reichsfuehrer, and for Goering. The damned navy, though! They couldn't stop the Americans getting over here, and now they have the hide to tell the army that it's expected to keep fighting.'

'Will you?', asked Smith.

'Orders is orders. If a commander is killed in the field, the next senior takes his place. I'd better get across to corps HQ to see what's up.'

He strode off into the town and his men sat down on the quay to wait. When he returned it was in a hurry. He came straight back on board and straight to the point. 'Heroic death in action, my arse. Corps has a reliable report that Hitler committed suicide. Can you believe it? It's no better than desertion in the face of the enemy.'

'Poor Gustav. At least he was spared that,' Smith muttered.

'What?'

'Nothing. What will you do now?'

The major stared out the cabin window. 'The war was lost a year ago. Since then it's been fought by automata directed by a madman. Well, Dr. Frankenstein is dead and I'm going home. What about you?'

'I have orders. The Reichsfuehrer is still Reichsfuehrer. I suppose I go on.'

'Orders. Orders will be the undoing of we Germans, mark my words. It's unlucky for you that the canal between here and the Elbe is out. If it was open I'd commandeer this boat, and its crew, and we'd all be guests of the Americans quick as a wink. As it is, I'll settle for a lift to the other side of the Plausee. If we stay here I may get orders that I don't want.' The major looked at him shrewdly. 'It's my guess that you intend turning north from there.'

Smith nodded. 'I'll follow the Havel for as long as I can.'

'Corps intelligence is showing the Russians near the river at Rathenau already. It'll be hard to avoid them. And if you're heading for Hamburg - I know it's none of my business - you'll be on the Elbe eventually



anyway. How do you think you'll avoid the Americans then?' Smith told him.

The major laughed uproariously. 'I'm talking to a dead man. And such a waste of a remarkable young woman! Oh hell, let me see what I can do for you. Karl, where's my bag of tricks?' His batman brought a kitbag. The major rummaged around in it and extracted, first, a Soviet flag, and then, from the depths, the Stars and Stripes. He then found a Russian *budionovka* and an American officer's cap. Like a vaudeville quick-change artist, he alternated them on his head, back and forth. 'Thanks to these, the Twelfth Army has not been entirely resourceless this last fortnight. We should have some uniform jackets as well.'

One of his NCOs came into the cabin and whispered in his ear. The major sighed deeply. 'The word about Hitler is getting around. Three of my men have decamped. I don't blame them, but they'd have been safer staying with me until we reach the Americans. Can we go?' Within an hour Smith was disembarking them at the western end of the Plausee. The major made his men shed their heavier equipment. 'Lighten up soldiers, it's bootleather on dirt from here.' To Smith he said, 'My gun I leave you, with my compliments. I hope you don't need it.' Smith and Rani stood on the deck beside it and watched the party file into the woods. The last man to reach the edge of the trees turned and waved. They both waved back.